Collecting & Reporting Feedback to Improve Learners' Academic & Employment Outcomes

Megan Elyse Williams and Rachel K. Whilby

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Today's Presenters

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Today's Objectives

1. Identify where qualitative feedback could strengthen your program planning and strategy
2. Discuss ways to collect feedback and ensure meaningful responses
3. Explore best practices for reporting feedback to your intended audiences

What type of qualitative data do you collect, if any (e.g., student focus groups, employer conversations, etc.)?

Qualitative Data and Its Benefits

Types of Data

Quantitative Data

Quantitative data are data that can be represented by numbers, counted, or measured.

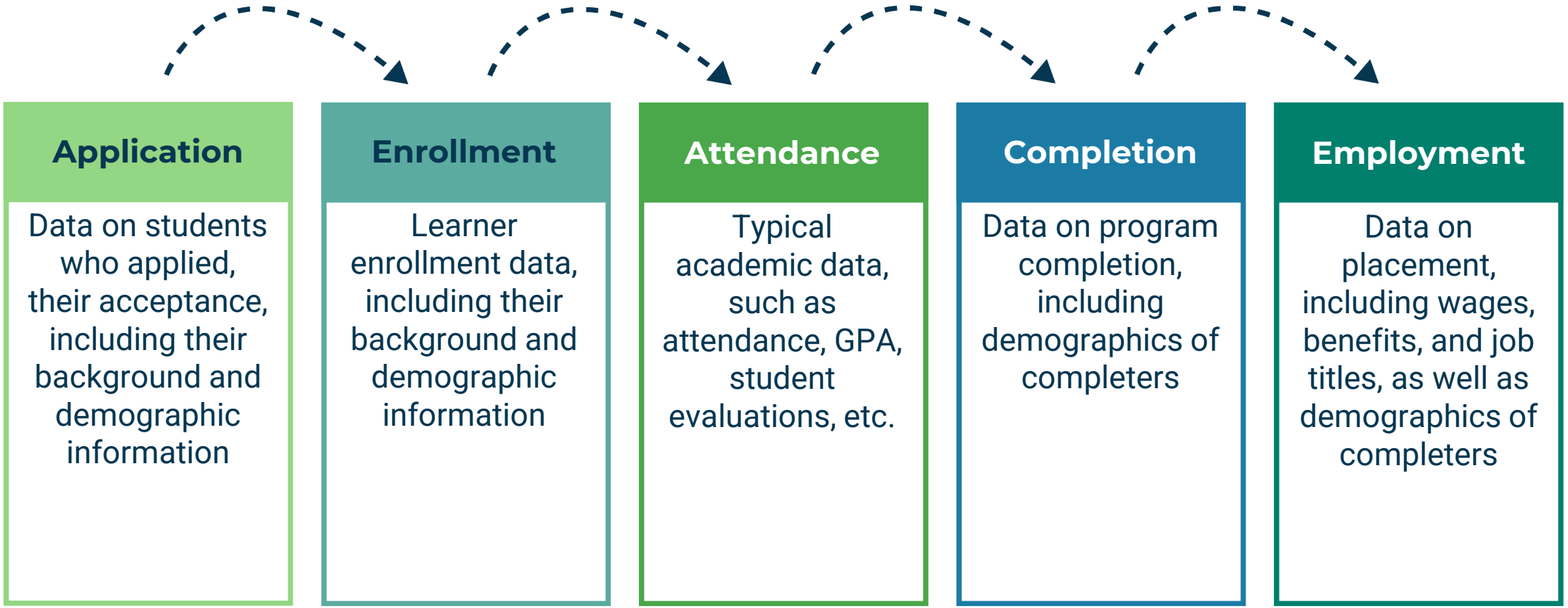
- Data are usually secondary (data that are already available) — e.g., from the State's LMI Office, Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Census, etc.
- Methodology/ limitations for quantitative data are important to understand.
- Data need to be cited, especially if secondary.

Qualitative Data

Qualitative data are data that include descriptive information based on interpretation and language. It is often used to understand *why* or *how*.

- Data are often primary data– data that you collect firsthand, e.g., surveys, interviews, focus groups, or meetings/ roundtables.
- Qualitative data take more time and skill to analyze.
- You must let those participating know the purpose and uses of data and follow best research practices.
- You must ensure data are protected.

We typically have access to quantitative data for learners.



Why should we consider including qualitative data?

- Necessary for meaning making
- “can reveal nuances of experiences that quantitative analysis alone cannot.” – Ford & Goger, 2021
- Can lead to future quantitative data collection
- Tells a story that engages multiple parts of the brain
- Hearing directly from those with lived experience will greatly advance your understanding of the issue at hand.

Using **data storytelling**, you can evoke an **emotional response** on a neural level that can help your points be remembered and **acted upon**.

https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/data-storytelling

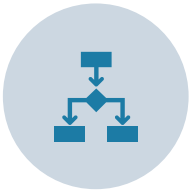
#STORIESMATTER

WE EACH HAVE A STORY.

OUR STORY FRAMES HOW WE SEE THE WORLD.

NO TWO STORIES ARE THE SAME.

HEARING MORE STORIES LEAD TO CREATING A BALANCED STORY.



SOMETIMES WE STEP UP, SOMETIMES WE STEP BACK.

WE'RE MORE THAN A DATA POINT OR A STATISTIC.

WE'RE HERE TO CHALLENGE STORIES THAT START IN THE MIDDLE.

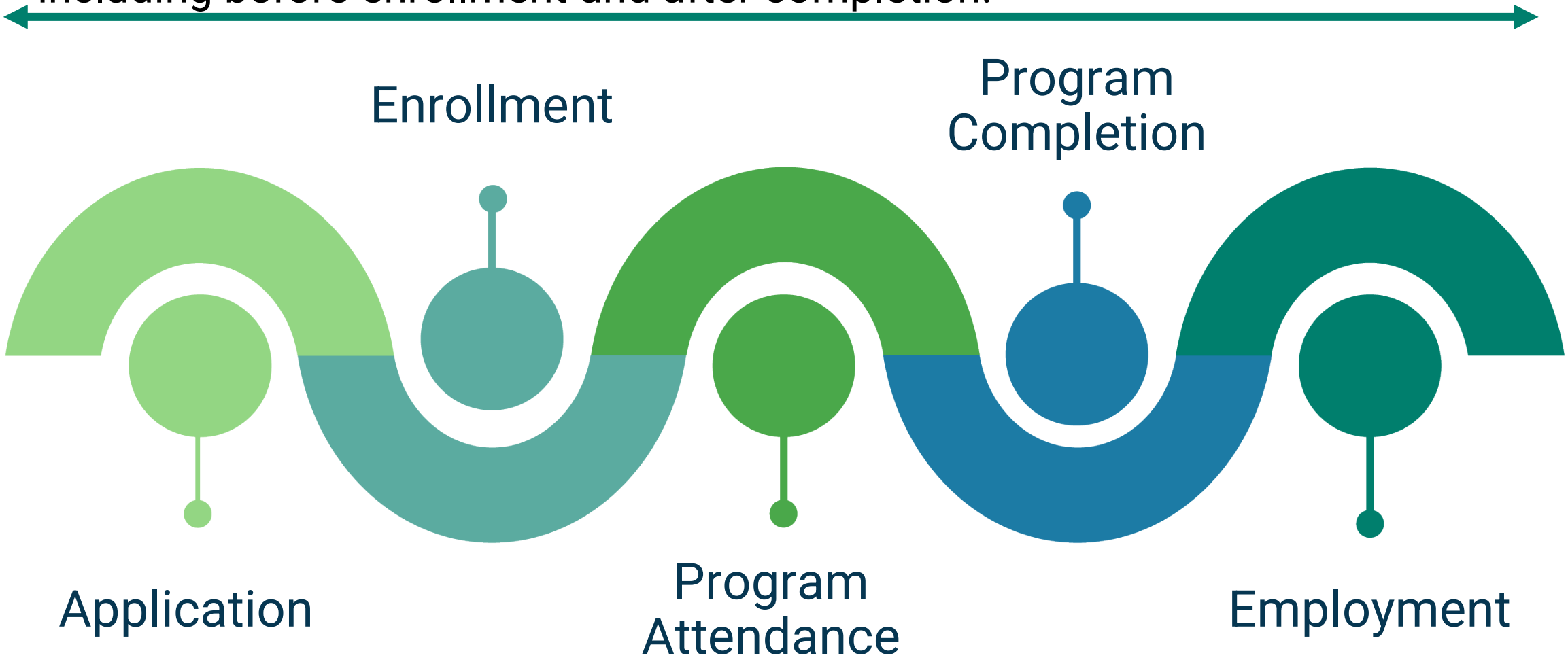
Common Types of Qualitative Data

- Interviews or 1:1 conversations
- Focus groups or community roundtables
- Open-ended surveys

What qualitative data should we consider collecting?

- Feedback to explain questions you have about your quantitative data or explain and contextualize challenges
- Feedback to confirm or challenge current programming and strategy
- Constituent feedback to support the co-creation of strategies to address any challenges and gaps
- Qualitative data to expand on your organization’s metrics, including equity
- Baseline data across all learner engagement points to understand experiences

Feedback can be collected across the spectrum of learner engagement, including before enrollment and after completion.

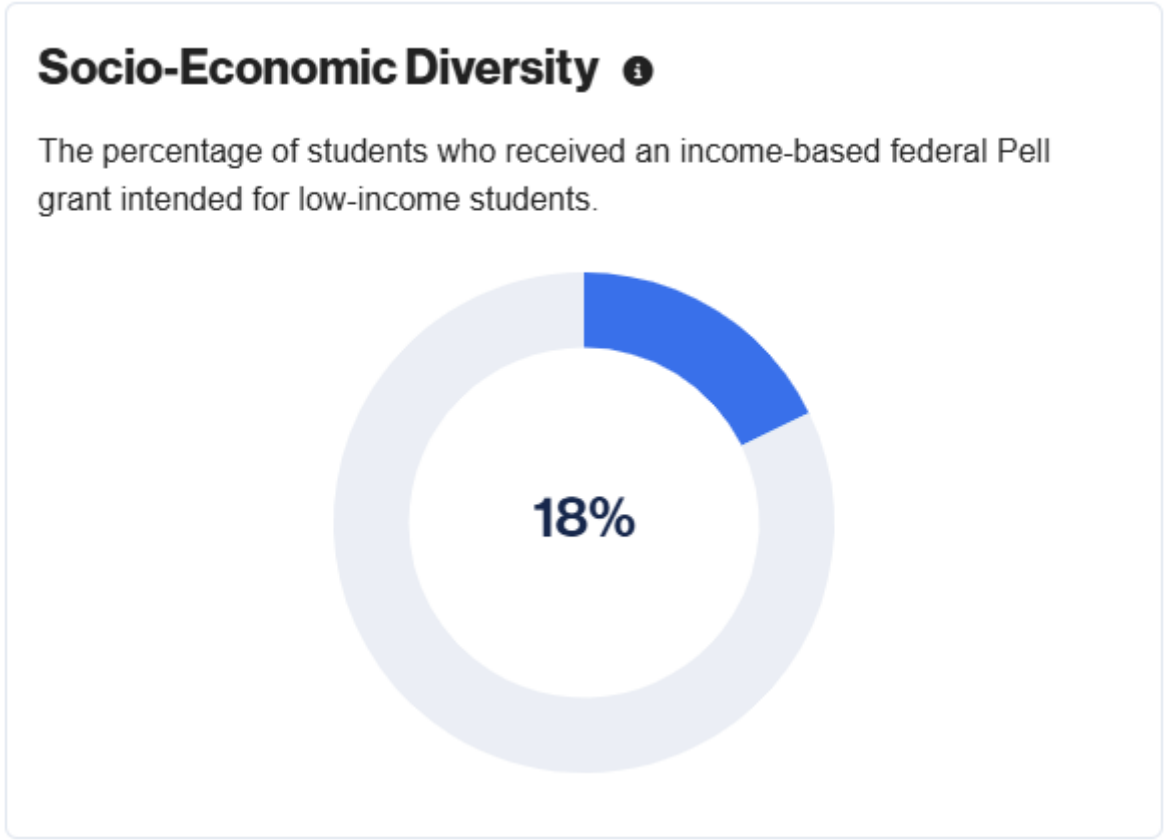


Who should we collect feedback from?

- Learners, prospective learners, alumni, learners who did not complete, instructors
- Employers (partners, key regional employers, employers in new or growing industries)
- Community members or constituents
- Partner community organizations and nonprofits

Let’s practice!

College Scorecard Data from a Sample School



Please take five minutes to think through and write down:

- What questions does this chart raise for you?
- Who might you want to talk to in order to understand more about this school’s socio-economic diversity?
- What activity would you use to collect feedback?

How to Strengthen Qualitative Data Collection

Use Culturally Responsive Best Practices

Representation

Use regional and institutional demographic data to ensure representative feedback

Ensure chosen methods reflect the community's cultures and values

Protocol Design

Ensure accessible and inclusive research protocols and consent processes if needed

Co-develop questions with learners and other partners and test when able

Facilitation

Identify appropriate facilitators

Be careful of how you present yourself and ensure that you are being respectful/ mitigating biases

Compensate if able

Analysis

Identify needed cultural context when interpreting data

Involve the community in interpretation and analysis when possible

Reporting

Ensure accessible reporting, using appropriate language. Cite necessary context.

Disseminate findings to the community that participated if able

Ensure findings are used

Ways to Increase Response Rates

- Compensate informants for their time and contributions
- Provide food and beverage
- Conduct outreach through partners or other trusted entities
- Explain how data will be used and ensure those participating can access results
- Choose accessible feedback formats, locations, and times

Other Data Collection Considerations

These are best practices for collecting *qualitative feedback to strengthen your work*, there are more considerable protections/practices needed for traditional *qualitative research*.

Be clear up front with those you are speaking with about:

- Data collection purposes
- Data uses/ reporting
- Confidentiality

Make time and prepare for how you will:

- Develop comprehensive protocols
- Conduct outreach
- Document feedback
- Recognize contributions

Survey or Questionnaire Development

- Identify what topics will be covered in the survey
- Be collaborative and iterate
- Use open-ended questions sparingly
- Be thoughtful about closed-ended questions (e.g. number of choices offered, order of choices offer, work to ensure inclusivity)
- Ask what you mean by being clear and specific
- Only ask 1 question at a time

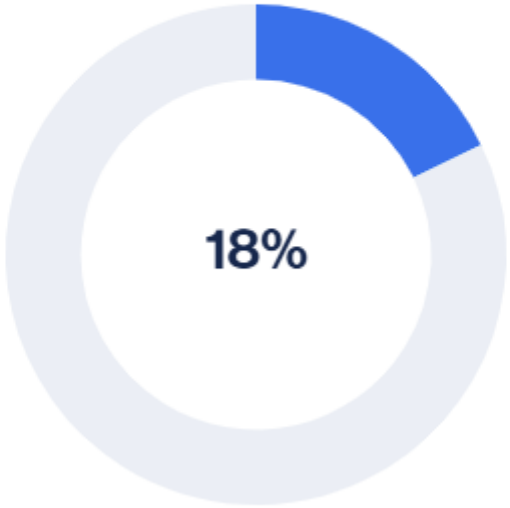
https://www.pewresearch.org/writing-survey-questions

Let’s practice!

College Scorecard Data from a Sample School

Socio-Economic Diversity

The percentage of students who received an income-based federal Pell grant intended for low-income students.



Please take a few minutes to draft a survey item that could answer a question about this data.

- Yes/No
- Agree/Disagree
- Satisfied/Unsatisfied
- “Select all that apply”

Effective Questioning for Interviews and Focus Groups

generates curiosity in the listener

stimulates reflective conversation

is thought-provoking

surfaces underlying assumptions

invites creativity and new possibilities

evokes more questions

QUESTION TYPES

Open
gather information and facts

Probing
gain additional detail

Hypothetical
suggest an approach or introduce new ideas

Reflective
check understanding

EXAMPLES

Open

gather information and facts

Probing

gain additional detail

1. Please share more with us about implementation so far and what has been achieved in your region.
   a. What have been the biggest successes so far with implementation?
   b. What have been the biggest hurdles or challenges from your perspective?
   c. Are there any other areas of implementation that have not gone as planned?

Let’s practice!

College Scorecard Data from a Sample School

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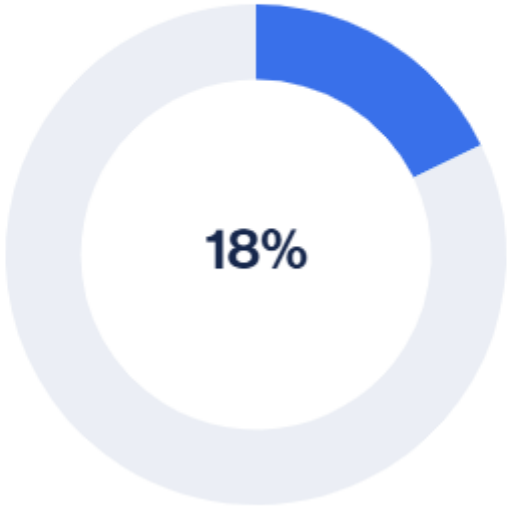

Please take a few minutes to draft an interview or focus group Open and Probing question that could answer a question about this data.

- How?
- Why?
- Describe

EXAMPLES

Hypothetical

suggest an approach or introduce new ideas

2. If you could get additional funding or resources, how might that help?

Let’s practice!

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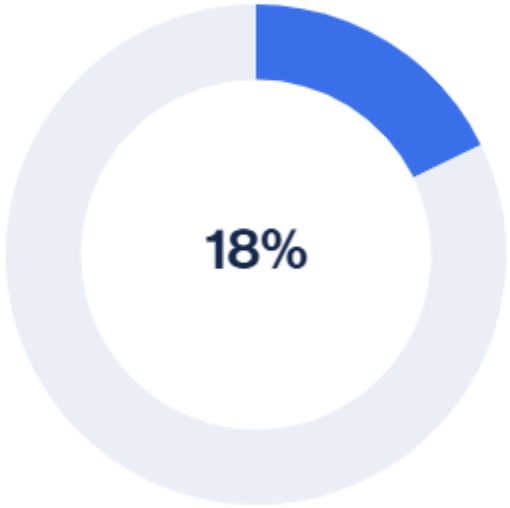


Please take a few minutes to draft an interview or focus group Hypothetical question that could answer a question about this data.

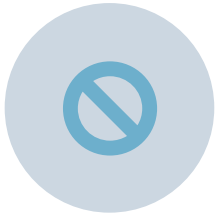
EXAMPLES

Reflective

check understanding

3. So would you prioritize the most critical areas for attention first and make sure that everyone knew what was most important?

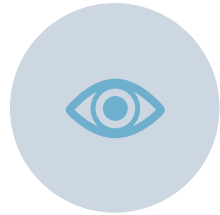
IMPROVING OUR ACTIVE LISTENING



AVOID INTERRUPTING SPEAKERS

LISTEN TO UNDERSTAND, NOT TO JUDGE

FOCUS ON IMPROVING POSITIVE NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR



MAINTAIN EYE CONTACT

ASK QUESTIONS

AVOID DISTRACTIONS

PROVIDE FEEDBACK

https://teambuilding.com/blog/active-listening-activities

How to Strengthen Qualitative Data Analysis and Reporting

Data Analysis Considerations

- Do self-reflection throughout the process to recognize and try to mitigate your bias.
- When reporting (sharing results), articulate your position and subjectivities (world view, perspectives, biases), so the audience can “better understand the filters through which questions were asked, data were gathered and analyzed, and findings were reported.”
- Start to think about things that could be pursued in subsequent interviews or focus groups.
- Identify topics, issues, similarities, and differences that are revealed through the participants’ narratives and interpreted by the researcher, then identify themes.
- Any conclusions drawn should be supported by direct quotations from the participants.

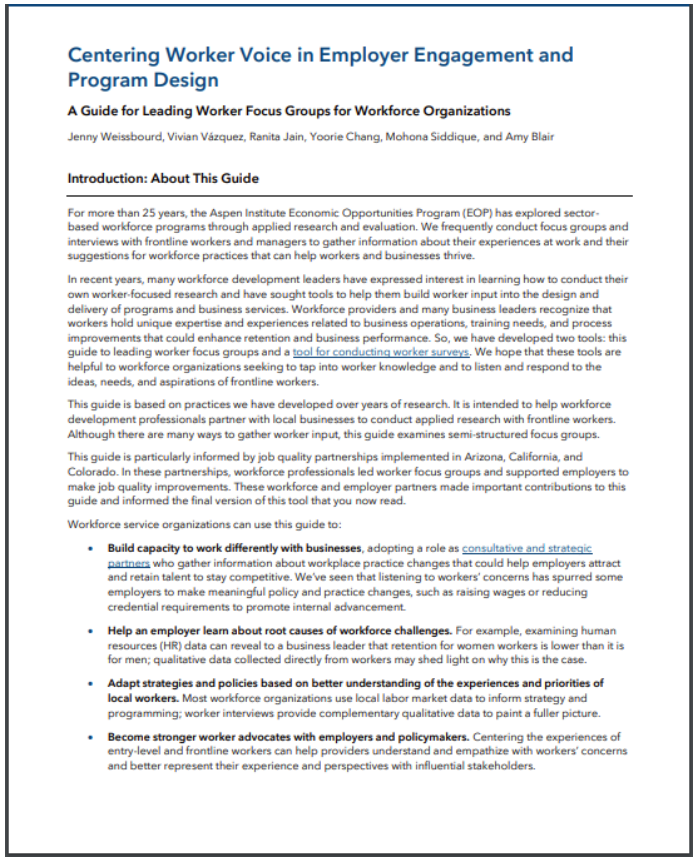
Meaningful Reporting

- Revisit the purpose for gathering feedback and center it.
- Remember your audience(s) and tailor your reporting to be accessible to varied constituencies.
- Present your methodology by clearly stating who is included in this report and how.
- Present your limitations and areas for future investigation.
- Provide action steps for carrying this information forward.

Remember: This is for internal/practical application and is not “capital R Research”.

Resources

Related Resources



Centering Worker Voice in Employer Engagement and Program Design

A Guide for Leading Worker Focus Groups for Workforce Organizations

Jenny Weissbourd, Vivian Vázquez, Ranita Jain, Yoorie Chang, Mohona Siddique, and Amy Blair

Introduction: About This Guide

For more than 25 years, the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program (EOP) has explored sector-based workforce programs through applied research and evaluation. We frequently conduct focus groups and interviews with frontline workers and managers to gather information about their experiences at work and their suggestions for workforce practices that can help workers and businesses thrive.

In recent years, many workforce development leaders have expressed interest in learning how to conduct their own worker-focused research and have sought tools to help them build worker input into the design and delivery of programs and business services. Workforce providers and many business leaders recognize that workers hold unique expertise and experiences related to business operations, training needs, and process improvements that could enhance retention and business performance. So, we have developed two tools: this guide to leading worker focus groups and a tool for conducting worker surveys. We hope that these tools are helpful to workforce organizations seeking to tap into worker knowledge and to listen and respond to the ideas, needs, and aspirations of frontline workers.

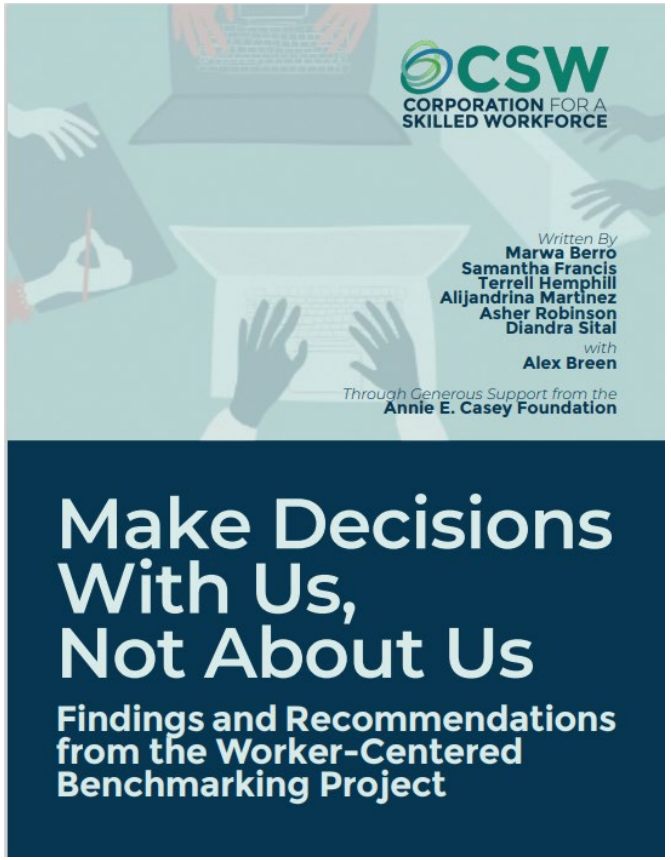
This guide is based on practices we have developed over years of research. It is intended to help workforce development professionals partner with local businesses to conduct applied research with frontline workers. Although there are many ways to gather worker input, this guide examines semi-structured focus groups.

This guide is particularly informed by job quality partnerships implemented in Arizona, California, and Colorado. In these partnerships, workforce professionals led worker focus groups and supported employers to make job quality improvements. These workforce and employer partners made important contributions to this guide and informed the final version of this tool that you now read.

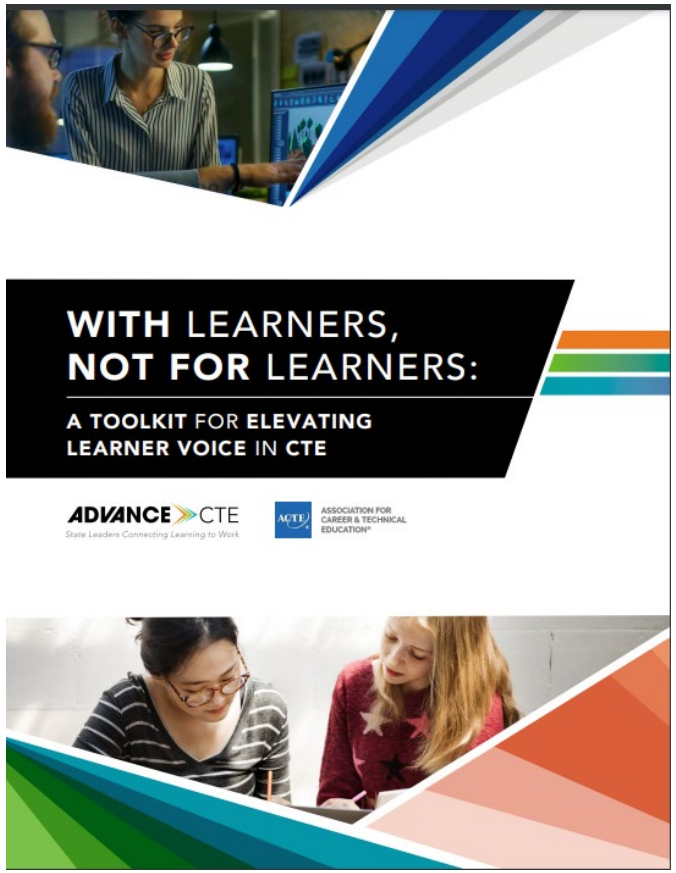
Workforce service organizations can use this guide to:

- **Build capacity to work differently with businesses**, adopting a role as consultative and strategic partners who gather information about workplace practice changes that could help employers attract and retain talent to stay competitive. We've seen that listening to workers' concerns has spurred some employers to make meaningful policy and practice changes, such as raising wages or reducing credential requirements to promote internal advancement.
- **Help an employer learn about root causes of workforce challenges.** For example, examining human resources (HR) data can reveal to a business leader that retention for women workers is lower than it is for men; qualitative data collected directly from workers may shed light on why this is the case.
- **Adapt strategies and policies based on better understanding of the experiences and priorities of local workers.** Most workforce organizations use local labor market data to inform strategy and programming; worker interviews provide complementary qualitative data to paint a fuller picture.
- **Become stronger worker advocates with employers and policymakers.** Centering the experiences of entry-level and frontline workers can help providers understand and empathize with workers' concerns and better represent their experience and perspectives with influential stakeholders.

[Centering Worker Voice in Program Design, Aspen Institute]

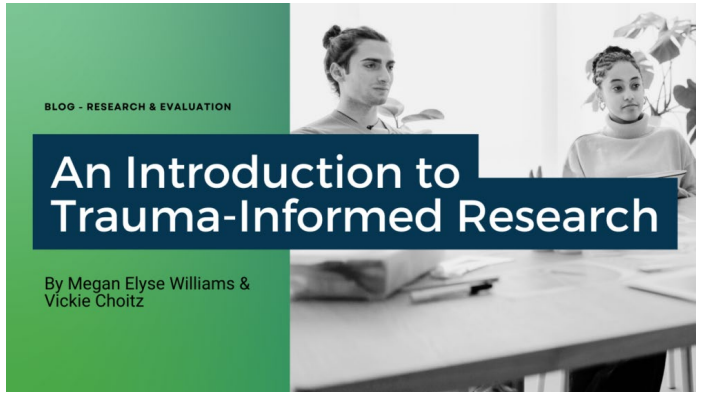


[Worker Centered Benchmarking Project Final Report]

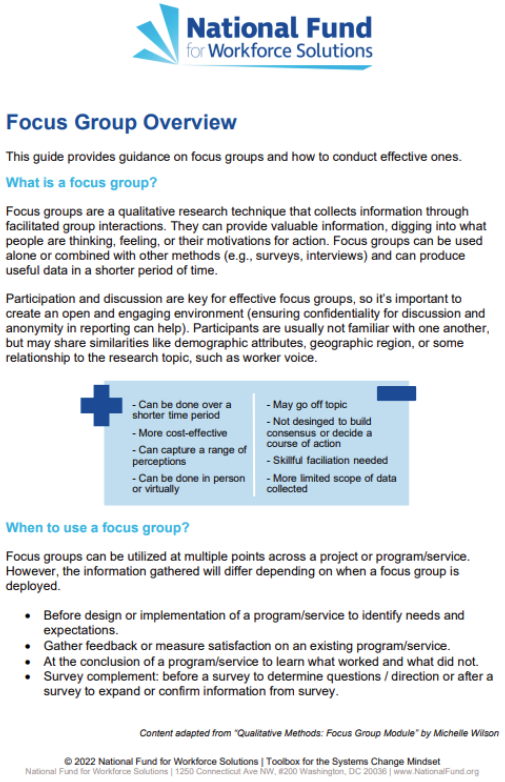


[With Learners, Not For Learners]

Related Resources



[CSW's Blog on "An Introduction to Trauma-Informed Research"]



National Fund for Workforce Solutions

Focus Group Overview

This guide provides guidance on focus groups and how to conduct effective ones.

What is a focus group?

Focus groups are a qualitative research technique that collects information through facilitated group interactions. They can provide valuable information, digging into what people are thinking, feeling, or their motivations for action. Focus groups can be used alone or combined with other methods (e.g., surveys, interviews) and can produce useful data in a shorter period of time.

Participation and discussion are key for effective focus groups, so it's important to create an open and engaging environment (ensuring confidentiality for discussion and anonymity in reporting can help). Participants are usually not familiar with one another, but may share similarities like demographic attributes, geographic region, or some relationship to the research topic, such as worker voice.

- Can be done over a shorter time period	- May go off topic
- More cost-effective	- Not designed to build consensus or decide a course of action
- Can capture a range of perceptions	- Skillful faciliation needed
- Can be done in person or virtually	- More limited scope of data collected

When to use a focus group?

Focus groups can be utilized at multiple points across a project or program/service. However, the information gathered will differ depending on when a focus group is deployed.

- Before design or implementation of a program/service to identify needs and expectations.
- Gather feedback or measure satisfaction on an existing program/service.
- At the conclusion of a program/service to learn what worked and what did not.
- Survey complement: before a survey to determine questions / direction or after a survey to expand or confirm information from survey.

Content adapted from "Qualitative Methods: Focus Group Module" by Michelle Wilson

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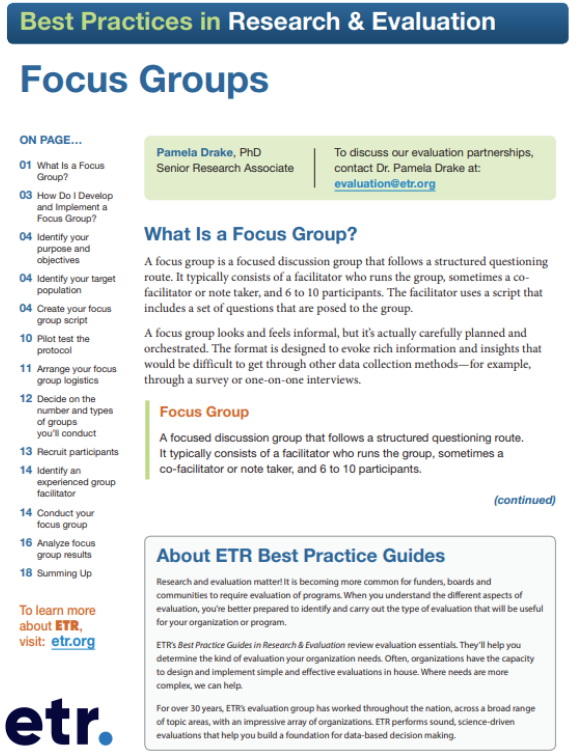
[Focus Group Overview (National Fund)]



Best Practices in Research & Evaluation

Focus Groups

ON PAGE...

01 What Is a Focus Group?
03 How Do I Develop and Implement a Focus Group?
04 Identify your purpose and objectives
04 Identify your target population
04 Create your focus group script
10 Pilot test the protocol
11 Arrange your focus group logistics
12 Decide on the number and types of groups you'll conduct
13 Recruit participants
14 Identify an experienced group facilitator
14 Conduct your focus group
16 Analyze focus group results
18 Summing Up

To learn more about ETR, visit: etr.org

Pamela Drake, PhD
Senior Research Associate

To discuss our evaluation partnerships, contact Dr. Pamela Drake at: evaluation@etr.org

What Is a Focus Group?

A focus group is a focused discussion group that follows a structured questioning route. It typically consists of a facilitator who runs the group, sometimes a co-facilitator or note taker, and 6 to 10 participants. The facilitator uses a script that includes a set of questions that are posed to the group.

A focus group looks and feels informal, but it's actually carefully planned and orchestrated. The format is designed to evoke rich information and insights that would be difficult to get through other data collection methods—for example, through a survey or one-on-one interviews.

Focus Group

A focused discussion group that follows a structured questioning route. It typically consists of a facilitator who runs the group, sometimes a co-facilitator or note taker, and 6 to 10 participants.

(continued)

About ETR Best Practice Guides

Research and evaluation matter! It is becoming more common for funders, boards and communities to require evaluation of programs. When you understand the different aspects of evaluation, you're better prepared to identify and carry out the type of evaluation that will be useful for your organization or program.

ETR's *Best Practice Guides in Research & Evaluation* review evaluation essentials. They'll help you determine the kind of evaluation your organization needs. Often, organizations have the capacity to design and implement simple and effective evaluations in house. Where needs are more complex, we can help.

For over 30 years, ETR's evaluation group has worked throughout the nation, across a broad range of topic areas, with an impressive array of organizations. ETR performs sound, science-driven evaluations that help you build a foundation for data-based decision making.

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[Focus Group Best Practice Guide (ETR)]

Culturally Responsive Research Resources

Guides to Incorporating an REI Lens

- Urban Institute Guide for Racial Equity in the Research Process
- A Guide to Incorporating a Racial and Ethnic Equity Perspective throughout the Research Process (ChildTrends)
- Confronting Structural Racism in Research and Policy Analysis (Urban Institute)
- Making Racial Equity Real in Research (The Greenlining Institute)

Language

- APA Style Guide on Racial and Ethnic Identity
- APA Style Guide on Gender
- Recognizing Race in Language: Why We Capitalize “Black” and “White” | Center for the Study of Social Policy
- Diversity Style Guide
- Capitalizing Black and White: Grammatical Justice and Equity - MacArthur Foundation

Data Collection and Analysis

- A Human Rights-Based Approach to Data
- Measuring DEI Outcomes (UCDavis)

Questions?

THANK YOU!

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