How to Conduct Effective Student Focus Groups

Module 3.3

Contents

This resource will be most useful for technology procurement teams, student success initiative leaders, and/or steering committees engaged in student success technology strategy

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The Ada Center

ADVISING **SUCCESS** NETWORK

Introduction

In Module 3.1 and 3.2, we learned that student feedback is highly valuable in evaluating a variety of technology tools and throughout the entire technology planning, implementation, and adoption lifecycle. Often, students can surface surprising insights about which technology features and capabilities are most – and least – impactful.

For example, as we saw in Module 3.2, The Ada Center's interviews with students nationwide found insights such as:

💡 Students, including adult learners, highly value the ability to view their course syllabi, assignment grades, and course schedule within a mobile-optimized Learning Management System (LMS), and may even base course add/drop decisions on the availability of this information on a course page

💡 Most students will expect to be able to locate critical information from an institution's website within two clicks

💡 If institution-sanctioned technology tools remain outdated or underdeveloped, students can (and have) adopt alternative technology tools (e.g., WhatsApp, Discord).

Although The Ada Center's findings offer valuable insights and patterns drawn from many institutions, there's nothing quite like gathering more nuanced and contextualized feedback through conducting focus groups with your own students. These personalized discussions will provide invaluable information to better understand the unique needs and perspectives of your own college community. And while student feedback shouldn't be the only prerequisite for setting technology priorities, it is an immensely important perspective that helps predicts if a technology will be effectively adopted.

The Ada Center recommends that institutions conduct focus groups with students about technology preferences in parallel to traditional IT surveys, **ideally once every two to three years.** This module will provide a series of guidelines and resources to help your team plan for and make the most of student focus groups and interviews. While you will want to adjust this material to fit your institution's needs, the next few pages can serve as a strong launchpad for your next focus group and/or a tool to audit and augment your current interview practices.

Articulating Student Interview Objectives: Example

Given the time and effort it requires to conduct student focus groups, it can be disheartening when interviews fail to generate robust, actionable insights. There are many reasons why this can happen, ranging from complex interpersonal dynamics to ill-informed scheduling decisions. Your 18-year-old student, for example, may be significantly less chatty at 8:00 AM before their morning coffee!

While we can't control every variable that may affect student feedback, there are approaches that can help maximize our chances of generating quality insights. A crucial first step for successful institutions is to define precisely what they aim to learn from their students. Or, in other words, to articulate clear student interview objectives.

Certainly, focus groups can help guide resource allocation decisions. However, they can also offer an opportunity to learn more deeply about specific student preferences for the technologies used within a certain phase of the student journey. Discussions may also explore student reactions and behaviors ahead of a specific product purchase. Focus group objectives can also shift depending on the stage of the technology lifecycle, from planning and procurement through implementation and finally, scaling and continuous improvement.

Sample Objectives

Type	Objective
General	Learn about which technologies are highly used and valued by current students along with what technology-related offerings might be missing to inform areas of investment and divestment in our Technology Strategy Plan.
Student Journey Pillar/Phase	Explore how students are currently using technologies related to teaching and learning (e.g., LMS, testing tools, courseware) to adjust LMS configuration and prioritize application upgrades/scaling.
Product	Gather student input on two of our top-choice vendors for a student mobile application to help guide procurement decision.

Broad ↑ ... ↓ *Targeted*

Note that these objectives proactively allude to the use-cases for student feedback. This action-oriented objective structure provides a useful "North Star" for everything from developing interview guides to streamlining insight aggregation.

Articulating Student Interview Objectives: Worksheet

In addition to gathering global, general feedback, The Ada Center recommends clearly identifying **one to three more targeted technology areas** in which your institution would benefit from specific student feedback.

> **HINT:** *If one of these discrete areas pertains to technology that currently exists at your institution, make sure that members of the focus groups can access and provide live feedback about that technology. For example, if your institution is hoping to redesign the student portal, ensure that students can pull up a current version of their student portal to provide feedback.*

Consider the major technology initiatives currently at your institution. This may include strategic planning efforts, ongoing implementations, and/or post-implementation upgrades/continuous improvement projects. Which of these would benefit most from student input? Jot these down.

For each of the ideas above, consider how, specifically, you would want to use student feedback to inform technology decision-making. With this in mind, draft your focus group objective statements below.

Setting Up Interviews for Success – Participant Inclusion

To move from our wish-list of learning objectives to insights from our students, we need to plan effectively for our focus groups. As one Vice President of Student Success noted, "This can be one of the toughest parts. Our students are busy. Often, the voices we need to hear the most are the ones that are least likely to sign up [for our focus groups]. Maybe they're intimidated, maybe they work part-time, maybe they've had past experiences within the education system that were not positive. Instead, we get a lot of students with similar profiles – traditional full-time students, often the ones involved in the Honors programs or Student Government, the ones already comfortable with how higher ed works. We know they can't represent everyone, but how do we reach the rest?"

While it is nearly impossible to guarantee excellent focus group attendance and engagement from a perfect, diverse sampling of representative students, there are steps that institutions can take to proactively make focus group participation more accessible, inclusive, and ultimately, more impactful. The following section provides practical advice and guiding questions to support your team in setting up your interviews for success.

Channeling Our Students: Whose Voices Are We Missing?

Successful focus groups include a diversity of perspectives. Consider your objectives from the previous page. How might the following variables impact whether students sign up for your focus group or how students might respond to your interview questions?

Sample Variables That Can Impact the Student Perspectives On Technology Tools

- Age/Life Stage
- First-Generation Status
- Major/Program of Study
- Part-Time/Full-Time Status
- # Terms Completed at Institution
- Access to Hardware (e.g., Computer, Smartphone, Tablet, etc.)

- Race/Ethnicity
- Gender
- Extracurricular Involvement
- Academic Pathway Experience (e.g., Transfer, Virtual/Hybrid)
- Accessibility and Support Needs
- Availability of Stable Internet

Consider: *Are there other variables that you believe would be important to consider for your student interviews or focus groups?*

Setting Up Interviews for Success - Logistics

Focus Group Logistics Impact Student Participation and Inclusion

Across 2021 – 2022, The Ada Center interviewed students and practitioners about the best methods for including students in technology decision-making and feedback sessions. The following insights showcase how seemingly small decisions about interview structures and logistics can deeply impact focus group diversity and overall participation.

Where? Not all locations are equally accessible to or trafficked by all students, particularly on larger campuses. Consider conducting focus groups in more than one place and/or offering a virtual participation option.

"I was glad I could do the virtual session. I usually take the bus 40 minutes to class and back, so if I'm not on campus, I can't do that round trip again just for that."

When? Students are more likely to participate if an interview is held on days when they are already on campus. Also, students with obligations outside of class (e.g., parents, work) may have more limited availability. Consider which students are typically left out of interviews. What days or times might work best for them?

"I have to pick up my kid from school in the afternoons. So, when they asked me for mid-morning Tuesday after English, I was like, oh okay, that actually works this time."

For What? Students are valuable consultants to our work, and their time is often scarce. An hour spent traveling to, from and participating in a focus group may represent an hour of lost wages, the cost of extended childcare, or lost study time. Meanwhile, student interviews save institutions thousands of dollars by ensuring expensive technology tools are effective. Therefore, excellent institutions often offer some form of compensation (e.g., equivalent to area hourly wage work at a minimum) for focus group participation and ensure that students understand how their input will be used to guide institution actions.

"The gift cards were great. Every dollar matters right now. It makes me feel like they actually value what I have to say enough to make some budget for it. And it also shows that they get that I'm giving up my time for this. Like, I gave up an hour of my shift, but this more than pays for that, you know? And I'm helping out the college and other students, so that's good."

Setting Up Interviews for Success - Recruitment

Strategic Outreach and Recruitment Attract a Diversity of Perspectives

For one Dean of Advising, it was about tapping STEM faculty to hand out flyers about a focus group in class. For another VP of Student Success, it was a popping into a meeting at the Black Student Union and staying after for potential interviewees to join a focus group right then and there. In both cases, these leaders understood that to gather input from a wide range of students, they would need to think creatively about how to reach those students. "In the end, it wasn't about working harder [to get diverse and robust participation], it was about working smarter and thinking through a student lens," noted one community college advising lead.

While thinking about your focus group recruitment strategy, consider:

Message: Note how the specific technology is relevant to the students you are trying to recruit, emphasize the ease of participation in the focus group, list compensation, and ensure that sign-up is clear and easy for students to complete.

Channel: Students may miss calls for interview participants if they are buried in one of hundreds of emails students receive. Consider using alternative channels and messengers that your target populations interact with the most often and are most comfortable with (e.g., club bulletins, physical flyers in strategic locations, direct outreach from trusted faculty or advisors).

Reminders: Students note that they appreciate quick, limited but timely reminders about the focus group. "After confirming the initial sign-up, I aim for 1:1:1…one week, one day, and one hour before the meeting," advises one California community college faculty member who frequently manages student interviews.

Follow-Up: Students like to know that their contributions matter. After the focus group, consider reaching back out to students to share insights, implications, and opportunities, when relevant, for those students to continue advising on technology decisions via future focus groups, student advisory board positions, etc.

Setting Up Interviews for Success – Plan of Action

Are there certain student perspectives that will be particularly important to gather and/or have been historically missing from previous student feedback gathering efforts? Write these down.

Consider the needs of the student groups you listed above. How might you need to adjust your focus group or interview logistics (e.g., location, time, date, compensation) for these students? What do we know about their backgrounds, perspectives, and needs?

What communication and outreach strategies might be most effective for the students you hope to engage? What information about focus group topics, anticipated impact, and logistics might be most important to share?

Focus Group and Student Interview Question Bank

The following pages include a list of sample questions that you or your team may use in student focus groups. The Ada Center recommends assigning two staff to facilitate each focus group, with one individual focused on student dialogue and the other focused on note-taking (or you may choose to use a transcription AI service). We also recommend conducting focus groups with roughly two to four students in each group, creating a comfortable environment but ensuring that all voices can be heard.

Getting to Know You Questions
I'd love to start by hearing your story. What brought you to our college and how are things going so far?
What do you like most about being here?
I'm curious to hear about some of your goals and how you decided on them. Any sense of what you hope to do after you graduate?
Tell me about how you use technology in your everyday life. What are some of the applications and gadgets you rely on?

General Technology Use
What types of technology do you use here at our college? Walk me through the tools that you use most often.
Why do you use those particular tools? How did you learn and discover them?
How do the capabilities in the tool help you meet your goals? How could they be improved?
We're thinking about making some additional investments in technology. From your perspective, what would be most helpful for us to think about in terms of additional tools or resources?

Focus Group and Student Interview Question Bank

Targeted Technology Use Example
I'd like to get your thoughts on a student onboarding technology that we're hoping to roll out this fall. Can you start by telling me about your experience as a new student here?
Would you mind looking through the tool and telling me which elements of the tool would have been most helpful when you were a new student (and why)? Anything on here not helpful (and why)?
If our goal is to help new students select a major and get connected with the community here, do you think this tool will help? Anything we should add to improve the tool?
How would you suggest we introduce new students to a tool like this?

What other questions might you want to include given your focus group or student interview objectives?

Next Steps

This module is designed to provide guidance around the tenets of impactful student focus groups and interviews. By the end of this module, you should have a sense of how to plan for, conduct, and debrief insights from student focus groups. Of course, there are many other ways to engage students in our work (e.g., student advisory groups, surveys). Regardless of your approach, it's important to remember that engaging diverse student voices requires recognizing that our methods for engagement often need to evolve beyond one-size-fits-all to be truly inclusive.

☑ *Read* Module 3.1 What Do Students Think About Our Technology?
⧗ <1 hour

☑ *Watch* Module 3.2 What Do Students Have to Say About Student Success Technology? – Webinar
⧗ <1 hour

☑ *Read and Plan* Module 3.3 How to Conduct Effective Student Focus Groups
⧗ <1 hour

☐ *Read and Discuss* Module 3.4 Examining Student Success & Technology Strategy Through a Student Lens Discussion Guide
⧗ <1 hour

Module 3.3 Individual Reflection:

1) How might your team adjust how you conduct focus groups or student interviews to include more diverse student voices in technology decisions?

2) Gathering student insights is the first step to creating a student-centric technology strategy. The next step involves ensuring student inputs are integrated into ongoing technology strategies and initiatives. How might your team ensure that your students' voices are not only heard, but acted upon?

About This Series

This five-part instructional series on Student Success Technology is designed for minority serving institutions (MSIs) and their friends. Taken together, these instructional resources aim to provide practitioners with the tools to establish and maintain a technology ecosystem that effectively supports the institution's broader student success and equity goals. The exercises and resources within these modules are also widely applicable across the higher education field.

For additional curriculum modules, please visit:
www.completecollege.org/navigating-student-success-technology

For questions about this resource, or to explore additional higher education technology research and tools, please visit
www.theadacenter.org/resources.

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