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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the use of focus groups to investigate criteria used by college students to determine their satisfaction with higher education, and presents the results of a pilot study. It reviews research on the use of focus groups, discusses the development of a focus group guide for the current study, and examines problems associated with recruiting students to participate in focus groups, such as incentives for volunteers and no-shows at g. up sessions. The paper discusses the role of the rapporteur and the scribe in group sessions, as well as the actual conduct of the sessions. The pilot study found that the overall undergraduate student criterion for determining satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their college experience at a regional university included: (1) finding pride and inner satisfaction with accomplishments; (2) a flexible curriculum; (3) a university with status and prestige; (4) a university degree that opens the door to career opportunities; (5) the encouragement of student involvement; (6) a caring faculty; (7) an opportunity for independence; (8) a student-oriented university administration; and (9) a university experience that provides an opportunity for growth and development. An appendix contains a copy of the focus group guide. (Contains 21 references.) (MDM)

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# Using Focus Groups to Explore Student Opinion

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Abstract

Historically, student opinions about their education experience have been assessed using standardized surveys. At a time when there is both an increased emphasis on accountability and the "student as consumer" philosophy, higher education administrators and researchers are exploring data collection methods that provide in depth exploration of student opinion. Because of the richness of the data gathered, qualitative methods are of increasing utility. One such method is the focus group.

We used focus groups to investigate criteria used by college students to determine their satisfaction with higher education. Although there are mixed opinions in the literature, we used a panel of experts to critique the focus group script and a pilot study to help ensure validity. We also used auditors and scribes to ensure objectivity. Content analysis was used to analyze data. During the research process, we encountered many challenges, from ensuring student participation to planning the logistics of the focus groups.

In this paper, we share our experiences utilizing focus groups to explore student opinion. Recommendations are made to researchers considering the use of focus groups to collect data from a student population. Finally, we present preliminary findings from our pilot study on student satisfaction with higher education.



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Using Focus Groups to Explore Student Opinion

Historically, student opinions about their education experience have been assessed using standardized surveys. The practice of using standardized surveys is directly linked to the popularity of the standardized student outcomes test. Standardized testing has become the favored form of student outcomes assessment for three primary reasons; standardized tests are developed and tested by experts in student outcomes assessment; in general, standardized tests are field-tested and normed for comparison; and standardized instruments save the institution the time and expense of developing institution specific tests (Terenzini, 1989). However, according to Terenzini, there are several disadvantages to utilizing standardized testing. Standardized tests are general assessments that lack specificity, they generally focus on a limited number of objectives, and the questioning format of the test can restrict assessment exploration. As cautioned by Terenzini, standardized tests are used for ease in data collection and not because they are the best data collection tool. Even though these disadvantages specifically address the standardized outcomes assessment, it is reasonable to suggest that standardized student satisfaction surveys would have the same concerns.

Many of the more popular student satisfaction surveys currently in use by institutions of higher education are standardized. One example is the College Student Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSSQ) (Betz, Klingensmith, & Menne, 1970). The CSSQ has been used to investigate a wide variety of student satisfaction situations with the higher education experience over the past two decades. The CSSQ has been employed to investigate student satisfaction with an MBA program (Polcyn, 1986), student satisfaction of African-American students (Provost, 1989; Vaughn, 1991), student satisfaction with a community college (Stalnaker, 1994), and the satisfaction of older nontraditional students (Robinson, 1987). Keeping in mind the the lack of specificity disadvantage in standardized testing, it is reasonable to question the appropriateness of using a standardized student satisfaction survey to explore student opinion within such diverse situations.

A further concern with surveys in general, both standardized and institution specific, is the inability of quantitative results to explore the 'why' of the qualitative experience (Lederman, 1990). This problem has already been addressed by other disciplines interested in assessing constituency opinions. In marketing for example, the satisfaction survey was the chosen form of marketing research for many years because of its ease in data gathering and analysis. Because of the limited insight into the 'why' behind the satisfaction numbers of the quantitative instrument, marketing researchers have moved away from the uni-dimensional survey in favor of the exploration opportunities of qualitative research methods.

At a time when there is both an increased emphasis on accountability in higher education (Ewell, 1989), the "student as consumer" philosophy (Afrassiabi, 1987), and the increasing concerns with the standardized survey, higher education administrators and researchers are investigating data collection methods that provide in depth exploration of student opinion (Terenzini, 1989). Because of the richness of the data gathered, qualitative methods are of increasing utility. One such method is the focus group (Hendershott & Wright, 1993; Kaase & Harshbarger, 1993; Lederman, 1990).

The purpose of this paper is to share the focus group procedure used to collect data for a research study of satisfaction with a regional university located in Northeast Tennessee among students who attend day classes on the university's main campus. Furthermore, suggestions are provided for those interested in using the focus group method of inquiry. At the end of this paper is a brief presentation of the findings from the student satisfaction pilot study conducted during the 1995 spring and summer semesters at the regional university.

## Focus Group Method of Inquiry

The brainchild of the social sciences and the favored step-child of marketing research, focus group methodology is finding increasing favor in all areas of research. While social science and marketing research experts have perfected the use of focus groups in data collection and descriptive analysis over the past decade, the use of focus groups in educational and organizational settings has not been as commonplace (Lederman, 1990). However, one predicted trend is the increased use of focus groups in these areas. Focus group methodology has proven to be a useful tool in determining such issues as curriculum review (Hendershott & Wright, 1993), the effectiveness of education (Lederman, 1990), the recruitment of students (Sevier, 1989), and the assessment of student affairs programs and services (Kaase & Harshbarger, 1993).

Focus groups are increasing in popularity in the evaluation of student programs because of the unique opportunity for the researcher to personally experience the attitudes and opinions of respondents. No other data collection approach provides the same level of intimate conveyance of data as the focus group (Byers & Wilcox, 1991). During a focus group session, the researcher can match nonverbal and verbal cues to develop a true and accurate profile of a respondent's attitude. Because the interviewing process is a free flowing dialog between moderator and participants, the moderator can ask probing questions that may uncover some deep rooted attitudes that a simple questionnaire could not ascertain. Focus groups provide information in a timely manner to allow quick decision making response.

Just as with any qualitative research method, focus group methodology is not without its critics. The literature on the problems with focus groups tend to revolve around the issues of generalizability, objectivity, reliability, and validity (Bers, 1989). Within the construct of generalizability, many quantitative researchers point to the typically small size of focus group participation and argue that such a small sample from a total population can not be representative. The argument from supporters of focus group work, however, point to the phenomenological nature, "experiencing the experience", of focus groups (Byers & Wilcox, 1991). It is not the intent of focus groups to quantify reality, but instead the purpose is to understand perception, attitudes, and opinions.

Objectivity is always a concern when the research method puts the researcher in the role of observer and data analyst. Focus group methodology is ripe for this criticism because, in many instances, the researcher and the moderator of the group are one in the same. To avoid problems with objectivity it is advised that the moderator avoid interjecting their ideas into the group conversation and that the analysis of data be performed with the same exacting and skillful requirements of quantitative data analysis (Bers, 1989). To ensure objectivity, it is recommended that focus group researchers use a session scribe and data auditing process (Miles & Huberman, 1984)

As with any research method, the reliability and validity of the data collected is an issue for focus group researchers. Reliability is the assurance that a particular data collection method will have consistent results when repeatedly administered. Once again, the purpose of focus group methodology is not to quantify results to test reality, but to generate understanding of attitudes and opinions. In other words, the purpose of a focus group is not to ask "how many' but instead to ask "why"? In this situation, reliability is not a critical factor (Byer & Wilcox, 1991).

Validity is the appropriate match of the data collected to the research objectives. A well conducted focus group can ensure that there is little discrepancy between stated attitudes and actual behavior. A valid focus group session is one that has clearly defined objectives, good recruiting of quality participants, competent moderating, and exacting analysis of data (Bers, 1989). According to Templeton (1987), "...all people draw their responses from the same collection of possibilities. I need not ask, then, whether a given reaction which has appeared in one or two groups will or will not appear in the population at large. It has already appeared in several individuals, and if it is possible for them it is possible for everyone" (p. 111).

To summarize the arguments in favor of focus group methodology, Krueger (1988) stated.

> It is important to deep in mind that the intent of focus groups is not to infer but to understand, not to generalize but to determine the range, and not to make statements about the population but to provide insights about how people perceive a situation (p. 96).

## The Focus Group Procedure

The procedure for collecting data from college students employing the focus group method of inquiry can be divided into four distinct and hierarchical stages; planning, recruiting, executing, and analyzing. Within each of these stages there are important considerations and unique challenges that must be addressed by the researcher.

### Planning

At the outset of this discussion there is one important distinction that must be addressed; the difference between a moderator and the rapporteur. According to Templeton (1987), the moderator is the individual who simply conducts the interview and then summarizes what has been said for the researcher to interpret. The rapporteur is both interviewer and researcher. The distinction is critical to the understanding of the richness of the exploration experience for the researcher, the ability of the interviewer to 'ad lib' in certain situations, and researcher bias.

One of the primary advantages of focus group work is the opportunity for the researcher to 'experience the experience'. With that advantage in mind, it is obvious that the rapporteur is in a better position to explore the experience of the research than is the moderator. The moderator's job is to simply follow the focus group guide and to report the discussion to the researcher. The rapporteur, however, is the interviewer and the researcher. They have the unique opportunity to experience not only the content of the session but also the context (Krippendorff, 1980). Furthermore, because of the research link of the rapporteur, the rapporteur has the opportunity to 'ad lib' the focus group guide to keep the discussion moving during times of silence and to take advantage of new insights by participants that could not have been anticipated with the focus group guide.

The primary disadvantage of the rapporteur, of course, is the increased opportunity for bias in the interpretation of the data results (Templeton, 1987). The rapporteur has an investment in the findings of the focus group session. It is human nature for the rapporteur to view the data in a manner consistent with their personal slant on the research. However, with the use of a scribe in the session and an auditor of the transcript, this potential for bias can be reduced.

Similar to any research method, the first stage in designing and implementing a successful focus group session is the planning stage. It is within this stage that the researcher will begin to look at the important issues of developing the focus group guide, determining the sampling procedure, and finding an appropriate focus group location.

Developing the Focus Group Guide

In focus group work, the guide is the research instrument. It is the road map for a focused discussion. It is important for the rapporteur to understand that the focus group guide is just that: a guide. The rapporteur does not strictly follow the guide unless the focus group session is not producing enough discussion or if the discussion jumps the track and loses focus.

Regardless of the use of the guide during the actual session, the guide is a critical link for the rapporteur to the research question. Because of the important validity concerns for the focus group guide, we chose to employ a panel of experts to review and critique the guide before it was tested in a pilot study. To fully explore our research question, "What criteria do students use to determine satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the college experience at a regional university?", we did not believe it would be appropriate to ask students point blank about their criteria. Instead, we had to develop a focus group guide that would ask questions indirectly related to satisfaction and then analyze the data for specific satisfaction criteria. Even though the literature on focus group work



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does not address the use of a panel of experts for the development of the guide nor does the literature support the use of pilot studies with focus group methodology, with this indirect approach to questioning, the panel of experts and the pilot study were critical to the assurance of a valid guide.

We conducted two panels with individuals who are knowledgeable of higher education and the college student. The first panel included individuals from several different higher education institutions in Northeast Tennessee and who occupied several different administration and faculty positions at their respective institutions. The second panel was a group of administrators and faculty from the regional university under study. The panel experience was an invaluable process for the focus group guide. This process of review and critique helped to ensure a guide that was understandable, easy to administer by the rapporteur, and valid to the research question.

During the spring and summer semester 1995, we conducted a separate pilot focus group session with freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Because of this experience, there were several problem areas with the original guide that were identified and corrected. (The final focus group guide is presented in Appendix A.) Even though our research study was somewhat complex in the manner in which we approached the inquiry, we would highly recommend the use of a panel of experts and a pilot study for the design and development of any focus group guide. These processes go along way in ensuring the validity of the focus group experience.

The Sampling Procedure

As mentioned earlier, because of the 'exploration' nature of focus group work, the generalizability of focus group findings to the larger research population is not as critical as that discussion would be for a quantitative method. Whereas, the generalizability issue was not critical in our study, the representative nature of our focus group participants was an important component. For that reason, we spent a great deal of time developing a sampling plan that we believed would give us a representative sample.

With our research question, we wanted to investigate the student satisfaction criteria of the entire undergraduate student population of on-campus, day-time students. We were concerned that if we did not ensure a representative group of students both demographically and on the basis of chosen major we would run the risk of too much groupthink within each focus group session. For example, if a session had a higher percentage of white males majoring in education would that session have a different slant in information than a session with a higher percentage of white females majoring in nursing? This is an issue that must be taken into consideration with any research question that intends to collect data from an entire student body.

To ensure a representative group for each focus group session a purposive sample was employed to obtain a sample of 26 undergraduate classes. The sampling frame of all 1000, 2000, 3000, and 4000 classes was provided by the Office of Institutional Research of the regional university of study. Using the sampling frame, a representative number of classes were chosen in each of the four course levels to ensure a balanced participation in the focus group sessions of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Aside from the course level criterion, other criteria used in choosing courses were; courses with the largest enrollment to increase the probability of soliciting volunteers; courses with a tendency toward a culturally diverse enrollment to ensure minority participation in the focus groups; and, in 3000 and 4000 level courses, a representative sample was drawn from each university college to ensure that no one major was over represented in the focus group sessions.

A final issue in sampling is the issue of the homogeneous or the heterogeneous focus group. In focus group literature there is a wide berth on which type of group provides for the greatest diversity in response while allowing for group cohesion (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1980; Templeton, 1987). In our research design, we decided to combine both the heterogeneity of different demographics and majors with the homogeneity of class standing. We conducted four pilot sessions, one each of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, and eight focus group sessions during the actual data collection phase of the research with two sessions in each grade cohort. Because of our pilot study, we elected not to have heterogeneous groups based on class standing. In our pilot studies, we found that the experiences of each grade cohort were so diverse that to combine the cohorts together would not provide us with an opportunity to explore those differences. We conducted two sessions in each grade cohort for two primary reasons; more than two sessions was not temporally feasible and conducting only one session increased the risk of collecting data from a group that was not typical of our student population.

## The Focus Group Location

In choosing the location for each session, we were limited to using on campus facilities for the convenience of our participants. Even though an off-campus site might have separated the student from the academic environment and reduced the propensity of associating the focus group session with just another academic exercise, we decided that to ensure student volunteers the session location had to be convenient to the schedule of the student. In planning the focus group site, the following criteria were important: The first criterion was the ability to audio-record with a minimal amount of background noise interfering with the recording. Second, was the criterion of providing the students with a comfortable and private environment that was conducive to eliciting discussion. The third criterion was a location that allowed for a circular seating arrangement so that all participants would feel an equal part of the session.

## Recruiting

After selecting the classes to visit, a letter was sent to the instructor of each class requesting permission to visit with that class to solicit volunteers. A follow up phone call was made with each instructor to confirm their participation and the day and time of the class visit. Of the twenty-six classes selected only one instructor refused permission to visit the class.

In each class visit, we spent approximately 3 to 5 minutes explaining our research to the class. We did not give out the location of the focus group sessions to the class at the time of our presentation. We did this to control the number of students in each group. The students were told the location in a follow up phone call. Some of our class visits were scheduled at the beginning of the class time and some were scheduled at the end. We found that we had a higher volunteer rate from those classes that we visited at the beginning of the period. In fact in one or two of the classes that we visited at the end of the period, some of the students left the classroom before we had an opportunity to finish our presentation.

In the research explanation, we emphasized why their opinion was so important to us and to our research. We would encourage them to take this opportunity to voice their opinions. As a further incentive, we scheduled all focus group sessions for the lunch hour and offered student participants free pizza, soft drinks and dessert. In some of the classes that we visited, the faculty offered a further incentive by allowing students to participate for 1 to 2 bonus points on the next exam. After our presentation, we would distribute a sign up sheet that asked for the student's name, phone number, m. jr, and class standing.

As mentioned, three to four days before the volunteer's session, we would call the volunteer to confirm their participation, notify them of the focus group location, and to answer any questions they might have had. At no time did we reveal to the students the nature of the discussion of the focus group session. We simply told them that it was a discussion about their college experience. On the night before each session, we called the volunteers once again to remind them of their commitment.

In the twenty-five classes that we visited, we presented to a total of 1640 students. We had 78 volunteers for the freshmen focus group sessions, 45 sophomores, 74 juniors, and 71 senior volunteers or approximately 16% of those students who heard the presentation volunteered for a focus group session. Of the 268 volunteers for the eight focus group sessions, only 31% actually participated in a focus group session. Therefore, of the total number of students who heard the presentation only 6% participated. In a one case, we had more students than we needed show up for a session and were diplomatically asked by the rapporteur to leave. However, the discrepancy between the number who volunteered and the number who participated is largely explained by simple no-shows.

Two of our major problems with recruiting student volunteers for the focus group session were getting students to volunteer in the first place and then getting them to show up after they volunteered. The first problem was solved by those faculty willing to give bonus points. Not only did that incentive motivate them to sign up but it also motivated them to actually attend the session. Of all the volunteers, and of those who participated in the focus group sessions, approximately only 10% were from instructors who did not offer bonus points. Without the bonus point incentive we would not have had enough students in our sessions to collect viable data. The second problem of no-shows, even with the bonus point option, underscores the need of focus group researchers to solicit more volunteers for a session than needed. Even with our follow up phone calls to students the night before the session, only 31% of our volunteers showed up to participate.



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## Executing

With the planning stage and the recruiting stage completed, the next task is the execution of the focus group sessions. Within the executing stage of the focus group there are several important components that need to be discussed; the rapporteur, the scribe, and the group process and challenges.

### The Rapporteur

The rapporteur is the most important component of the focus group session. It is the responsibility of the rapporteur to ensure the continued and focused discussion of participants (Templeton, 1987). This is not an easy task, especially with college students. College students have become quite adept at sitting quietly and motionlessly while someone in the room is asking the group questions. They have had years of classroom experience to perfect the art of 'nonparticipation'. Unfortunately for those interested in employing focus group methodology to assess student opinions, the 'nonparticipative' behavior of students in the classroom does spill over into the focus group session. Perhaps it is unfair to blame the nonparticipation propensity, in toto, on the classroom socialization of students. According to Templeton, the communicative range of participants is directly related to the age of the participants; the older the group the increased opportunity for participation by all in the group. Nevertheless, the rapporteur of this study has had other experiences with focus group participants outside of the educational setting in the same age grouping that were not as difficult as these experiences to motivate in depth discussion. This is not to say that it is a hopeless situation for the rapporteur of a student session to get the discussion moving. We found several strategies to enhance the opportunity for discussion.

The first strategy was the inclusion of nontraditional age students in the session. Whereas it was still true that, just like the traditional age student, the nontraditional age student was quieter than other individuals in the same age group away from an educational environment, it was obvious from listening to the tapes of the sessions that those sessions with older students were the sessions with a heightened level of discussion. Without exception, the inclusion of at least two nontraditional age students encouraged group discussion. The reason for this remains unclear, but the outcome was consistent for all of the groups.

A second strategy was the size of the group. According to Templeton (1987) the ideal size of a focus group session is 10 to 12 participants. She prefers this size because of the opportunity for a rich discourse among participants. However, based on our experience with student focus groups, the ideal session is 8 to 10 students. Anything greater than 10 participants was just too many to conduct an in depth discussion. The focus group session discussed by many researchers, such as Templeton, are primarily sessions that last 2 to 3 hours with adult participants who are compensated well for their time. There are two issues in this concept that differ with students. First, we did not feel it would be appropriate, nor could we afford, to compensate students with a monetary reward for their time. Furthermore, we discovered early in the pilot studies that the length of the focus group session was inversely related to the number of students who volunteered to participate. For those two reasons, we felt that our sessions must be limited to one and a-half hours. Second, with that limit of time, it became extremely difficult to allow 10 or more students the time it takes for them to become involved in the process. Adult participants in a focus group session generally do not require individual attention from the rapporteur to motivate them to become involved in the discussion. However, students do require individual attention. With groups of greater than 10 there simply was not enough time to engage each student individually to ensure even participation. In our research, the most successful groups were those with less than 10 students.

The third strategy for improving the discussion in a session with students was directly related to the individual attention mention in the last paragraph. Typically, the job of the rapporteur is to 'facilitate' discussion. In most focus group sessions, the rapporteur can ask a few focused questions that will keep the discussion moving and on track. However, in our student sessions the rapporteur became much more than just a 'facilitator'. To ensure a rich discussion in those sessions, the rapporteur had to spend time making eye contact with each participant to encourage participation; watch students for nonverbal cues that would give the rapporteur an opportunity to engage them in discussion, i.e. an affirmative head shake when someone else was talking; and periodically, call each participant by name and direct a question toward them. Without these interventions, the student participant had a greater propensity to remain silent throughout the session.

The Scribe

The primary purpose of the scribe is to ensure the validity of the focus group session. To accomplish this purpose, the scribe is instructed to quietly observe the group process and take notes on the verbal and nonverbal cues that are indicative of important group and individual behavior, or both. The scribe is charged with the specific task of being cognizant of evidence of groupthink, groupshift, group mood, and any individual behavior that might have an influence on these three group concepts. A secondary purpose of the scribe is to offer a sense of security for focus group participants. In our sessions, the rapporteur would introduce the scribe to the group at the beginning of each session as the person in the room responsible for monitoring the ethical implementation of the session.

The scribes in our research study were volunteers who were interested in participating in and observing a focus group session. We had one faculty member from the College of Education serve as a scribe and eleven scribes who were graduate students from educational leadership, business administration, and counseling programs. For all the focus group sessions, the four pilot study sessions and the eight data collection sessions, we had a different scribe for each session. There were advantages and disadvantages to using a scribe only once. The primary advantage was that each scribe came to the experience fresh and with a heightened sense of interest. By not using the same scribe over and over again, we avoided the possibility of the scribe becoming disinterested in the process and therefore losing attentiveness. The primary disadvantage of using a different scribe each session was the lost research opportunity of comparing, from the scribe's perspective, the nuances of different groups.

At the beginning of each session we would visit with the scribe to discuss their responsibilities during the session. During the session, the scribe would sit at a table away from the main group, but situated in a fashion so that the scribe could easily see the majority of the participants. Immediately following the session, the scribe and the rapporteur would meet to discuss and compare their notes on the mood of the group and on individual behavior.

Initially, we were concerned that the scribe might affect the mood of the group simply by their presence in the room and bias the data collected. In fact, once the scribe was introduced as an objective third party who was there to protect the participants from unethical behavior, the presence of the scribe did appear to have a calming influence on the group. However, after that initial mood adjustment the participants seemed to become unaware of the scribe's presence.

The Process and the Challenges

The group process typically follows a four stage life cycle; initial stage, transition stage, working stage, and final stage (Corey, Corey, Callahan, & Russell, 1992). Regardless of the length of time spent with the group, 1 to 3 hours or 1 to 3 months, the group process will evolve through each of these stages. Indicative to each stage are unique characteristics and challenges, and important responsibilities for the group leader or rapporteur.

The initial stage. The initial stage for our focus group sessions began when the students entered the room and concluded approximately 5 minutes into the session with the completion of participant introductions to the group. As is typical with the characteristics of the initial stage, the participants in our focus group sessions experienced anxiety, confusion, and frustration during this stage. These feelings were driven primarily by the novice nature of the participants to focus group work and their unease with the unknown expectations for their involvement. It is also in this initial stage that the participants were finding a niche for themselves within the group environment.

In this initial stage it is important for the rapporteur to build an environment of trust for group participants. According to Corey et al. (1992) this trust environment is crucial to the cohesiveness of the group which, in turn, is crucial to the success of the group discussion. We employed several strategies during the initial stage of the focus group session to build trust. First, as the students entered the room they were invited in by the rapporteur and shown to a seat at a circular table. The students were left alone with each other for a few minutes with the intention of giving the students time to talk with each other informally and share their anxieties without the intervention of the rapporteur.

Second, the pizza lunch was served as soon as all the students had arrived to the session. The intent was to allow students the opportunity to continue their socialization over food. Third in each session, at some point after the pizza was served there was a lull in conversation. During this lull, the rapporteur introduced herself and the scribe and spoke briefly to the students about the expectations of the group in an attempt to reduce their anxiety about their participation. One point that was continually stressed was the understanding that at any time if a student did not want to participate in the group, they had the permission of the rapporteur to remain silent. Consistent among groups, by this point in the session, typically the rapporteur and the scribe could sense an ease within the group. Also, during this time, the rapporteur used the quiet time to have all the participants complete the paperwork for the session which included the consent form and the demographic response form.

A final strategy at the conclusion of the initial stage was the introduction of the student participants. Each student was asked to give themselves a name using an adjective that best described their mood at that moment. The rapporteur then gave each student a blank piece of paper and asked that each participant make a table tent with their adjective name. They were also asked at that time to place their adjective name on the demographic response form. The adjective name procedure was done for two reasons; to protect the anonymity of the students and to give them a humor release for their anxiety. Without exception, all of the groups in the research had a good initial stage. The strategies were successful in helping the students to feel more relaxed and at ease with their involvement.

During the initial stage, the rapporteur will begin to notice clues given by two types of potentially dangerous student participants; the monopolizer and the silent one. The monopolizer is the student who tries to, either consciously or subconsciously, monopolize the entire discussion. This behavior is damaging to the group because it gives the other students permission not to participate in the discussion and makes the data collected uni-dimensional. The silent one, on the other hand, chooses to remain in the background never saying a word. This individual is equally damaging to the process because the researcher does not benefit from their insight and they are also, indirectly, giving permission to others in the group to remain silent. If the rapporteur does not quickly address the silent one, then others in the group who are borderline with their participation might follow the lead of the silent one and back away from involvement. It is important to the remainder of the session that the rapporteur start early in engaging the silent one and limiting the monopolizer.

Transition stage. The transition stage for our focus group session was very short. This stage typically included the word association question on the focus group guide and the question asking students to describe 'college' (Refer to Appendix A for the focus group guide).

It is during the transition stage that participants are deciding if they want to be involved in the session, they are learning about the safety level of the group, and they are becoming more aware of special relationships within the group. It is during this stage that the participants are keenly aware of the rapporteur and are monitoring the behavior of the rapporteur for consistencies between what is being said and nonverbal cues. They are looking for signs of trust, both verbally and nonverbally from the rapporteur and the group. During this stage, the primary responsibility of the rapporteur is to develop interventions that encourage the group to bond quickly. It is imperative that the rapporteur ensure that the group is prepared for the next stage by eliminating any distractions.

It is during the transition stage that the rapporteur will become aware of preexisting relationships that exist in the group. For example, good friends, significant others, or roommates who came together. It is imperative that the rapporteur pay close attention to these relationships and make an early determination if these relationships are detrimental to the safety of the group (Templeton, 1987). With any focus group sessions, participants who know each other very well can have a dampening effect on the group discussion. This phenomenon is particularly intrusive on a group of students. In our focus group sessions, the rapporteur always regretted the decision not to separate those students who had a special bond. In almost every case, the nonverbal behavior between those participants, i.e. hand-holding, eyes-rolling, making faces at other comments, etc., had an adverse affect on the mood of the group.

The literature on focus group work suggests that the rapporteur remove anyone who is vaguely acquainted with another in the group (Templeton, 1987). However we found when working with students, if we removed participants from the group who were acquainted with each other we would quickly eliminate the entire group. Therefore, it became an important responsibility of the rapporteur to be sensitive to the relationship of the students and if a special bond was observed, diplomatically, ask those students to leave.

Working stage. The working stage for our focus group session encompassed the focus group questions on explaining benefits of college, describing the ideal college, and defining student satisfaction. These questions were the core of the focus group session with approximately 45 minutes spent in this stage alone.



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In the working stage, participants are finally ready to engage in meaningful conversation. By this point in the session, everyone should feel comfortable talking with each other and comfortable with their role in the group. The anxiety level should have dropped because participants know what is expected of them and how much they are willing to give. Hopefully, the rapporteur and the group have built a bond of understanding, trust, and safety. In a successful working stage, the job of the rapporteur is limited to keeping the group discussion focused. The group takes over the responsibility for keeping the discussion going.

It is in this stage that the rapporteur discovers, almost for the first time, what type of group is in the room. The 'ideal' group is the group that manages their own discussion. For the rapporteur, hitting this stage is similar to moving from the trot of a horse to a full gallop; everything to this point was bumpy but now it is smooth riding. In our twelve sessions total, we had two groups that we would classify as the 'ideal'. The experience was wonderful. The group personalities clicked in such as way that even the confrontations were enjoyable. The session was exciting and the data collected was invaluable.

On the other hand, there are the less than ideal groups; the silent group, the talkative group, and the distracted group. The silent group never picks up steam. The rapporteur finds that the only way to elicit the slightest bit of information is to remain continuously engaged with the group. The talkative group, on the other hand, is the group that is very enthusiastic about being together and the process of socializing, but they couldn't remain focused on a topic even if they were physically tied to it. The job of the rapporteur in this situation is to continually redirect the conversation back to the topic at hand. The rapporteur can not afford the luxury of one moment of lapse time for fear of losing control of the group.

The final group, the distracted group, is the group that comes to the table with tunnel vision. It does not matter what question the rapporteur asks of the participants all of the responses lead back to one single topic. One of our sophomore groups was a distracted group. Regardless of the question asked, the group inevitably shifted the discussion to the extracurricular activities of their college education. By the end of the session, the rapporteur was exhausted and the scribe was dismayed by the lack of interest of college students with their academic experience. Unlike the silent group and the talkative group where there are strategies for intervention, the distracted group



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is a tough nut to crack. The rapporteur would be well advised to anticipate this type of group and develop interventions for moving the group to other topics of discussion.

Finally, in the working stage there are two individual challenges for the rapporteur; the antagonizer and the observer. Both the antagonizer and the observer come to the table with an agenda different from the agenda of the rapporteur. The antagonizer is there to engage in conflict and enjoy the process of destroying the trust of the group. The observer is there to simply observe and learn. They have no intention of participating; never did and never will.

These individuals require two different strategies of intervention. For the antagonizer, the rapporteur must stop the behavior immediately to protect the trust of the group. If the behavior continues, the rapporteur should diplomatically ask the student to leave the group. The observer, on the other hand, should just be left alone. The observer is not the typical participant. They are there because they enjoy watching the group process. If they are forced to engage, the rapporteur runs the risk that they will bias the results of the study with 'pretend' data.

Final stage. In the final stage, the rapporteur has a responsibility to participants to allow for closure to the process. It is important that the rapporteur keep in mind that these focused questions are most likely questions that have never before been asked of these student participants. The primary job of the rapporteur in the final stage is to provide the students with an opportunity to summarize what has been said and to have a sense of finality with the discussion.

In the final stage of our sessions, we ended the group with a series of simple questions that helped to summarize the group mood and to allow students to feel closure. Questions 6 through 9 on the focus group guide were designed to elicit brief, summary responses from student participants. For example question 6, "What is the one thing you will remember about your college education?, was included to allow students the opportunity to summarize their feelings about college. These questions provided us with valuable information about our research question, but more importantly, they helped the student leave the group.

The only challenge that remains in this stage is the one participant who has remained silent throughout the session, and now, speaks. It was our experience that this student had something of value to say, but we were generally out of time and the students were out of patience. Unfortunately, in most of these situations we were forced to 'cut the student off'. However, we would encourage the now talkative student to remain after the session so that they could vent all these pent-up feelings realizing, of course, that we could not use this one-on-one interview to collect data.

One final note on the handling of the challenges in all the stages. The literature on focus groups encourage the rapporteur to handle the challenge in any way that will eliminate the inappropriate behavior, diplomatically or not (Templeton, 1987). However, when working with students, especially students who are not being paid to participate in the session, we believe that the rapporteur has an increased level of responsibility to the mental and emotional well-being of all the students in the group even the challenging student. The rapporteur should not ask a student to leave a session, ask a monopolizing student to remain quiet, nor berate a silent student for not participating unless all other interventions have failed Whereas our first priority is to the research, a close second priority must be to the welfare of the student.

## Analyzing

Because of the phenomenological nature of the focus group, the analysis of focus group data becomes vitally important. To better 'understand' the attitudes and opinions of focus group participants, the researcher must employ a data analysis technique that will enhance their ability to uncover attitude patterns and trends. These patterns and trends are embedded in the often capricious language of human subjects. Content analysis is a popular technique used to explore and understand the meaning of the focus group data.

Content analysis is used by focus group rapporteurs to excavate the attitude patterns and trends of focus group participants from the vast and diverse scripts of focus group discussions (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1980). Content analysis is systematic, in that, it "follows a prescribed, sequential process" (Krueger, 1988, p. 111). By reason of this sequential process, content analysis improves the verifiability of the research findings. Furthermore, content analysis improves the validity of focus group findings by the use of an auditing procedure to verify the interpretations of the rapporteur. Included in the following section is a discussion of the responsibilities of the auditor and a presentation of the content analysis procedure used for the analysis of data in this study.



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Auditor

The primary objective of the content analysis process is to uncover the 'coding categories' hidden in the focus group data. The first job of the rapporteur is to review each focus group transcript and flesh out all the coding categories that are applicable to the research question. Because of the nature of the rapporteur, intimately involved in both data collection and data analysis, it is imperative to the validity of the research to include an auditing process in the data analysis phase. Therefore, the primary purpose of the auditor is to verify the coding categories of the rapporteur (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

In our study we used one auditor for all the pilot sessions and a separate auditor for each of the focus group sessions in the actual data collection phase of the research. All auditors were employed by the regional university of study in administrator or faculty positions. It is important to note, that all auditors were aware of the research process and the research question, but none of them had an investment in the findings of the study. Before the auditing process began, each auditor was given detailed instructions on the auditing procedure.

After each session, the rapporteur would deliver the transcript of the focus group session to the auditor. The auditor was asked to read the transcript in toto, at first, for a general impression of the session. On the second reading, the auditor was instructed to find the coding categories appropriate to the research question and highlight those categories directly on the transcript. Simultaneous to the auditor's study of the transcript, the rapporteur was following the same procedure. Approximately one week after the delivery of the transcript to the auditor, the auditor and the rapporteur would meet and discuss the congruency or incongruency in coding categories. If an incongruency was found between coding categories, the auditor and rapporteur would discuss the incongruency until a consensus was reached on the validity of that category to the research question. The coding categories agreed to by the rapporteur and the auditors were the categories used in the final data analysis.

Content Analysis

The first step in the content analysis process as used in this study was the debriefing meeting between the rapporteur and the scribe immediately following the focus group session (Krueger, 1988). During this debriefing, the rapporteur and scribe compared notes to match the



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verbal interactions of the group with individual nonverbal cues and behavior trends. They also compared notes on the mood of the group and any evidence of groupthink or groupshift. This first step in the process provided the rapporteur with an early verification of the focus group data.

Immediately following the session, in the second step of content analysis, the rapporteur transcribed the audio-tape. Special care was taken in the transcription to ensure that the transcription was an accurate account of the focus group session (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1980). Furthermore, extra care was taken to correlate the participant with their comments utilizing the adjective name. With this accomplished, and the use of the demographic sheet using the adjective names, the rapporteur could track the satisfaction criteria of a variety of constituents in the focus group sessions, i.e. satisfaction differences based on gender, age, full-time versus part-time student, and those students who live on campus versus those who commute. After the transcripts were completed, the rapporteur would meet with the scribe for a second time if there were additional questions about the data. With a final transcript ready for analysis, the rapporteur would deliver the transcript to the auditor.

In the third step of the content analysis procedure, the rapporteur and the auditor read the transcript to identify the coding categories. With an agreement on the coding categories, the rapporteur moved on to the fourth stage of content analysis; detailed analysis of the transcripts. Using a computer software package designed to identify and sort qualitative data, the researcher read each transcript in detail and categorized the data units into the predetermined codes (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1980).

Pattern coding was the fifth step in the content analysis process (Miles & Huberman, 1984). With the coding of all the data, the rapporteur combined individual codes into larger categories that helped to portray the criteria used by students to determine satisfaction/dissatisfaction. In the sixth step, the rapporteur wrote an informal summary of each of these criteria codes. This process of memoing was an ongoing summary that allowed the rapporteur the opportunity to informally reflect on the interrelationships of the pattern codes during the data analysis process. Once the rapporteur had a complete understanding of the criteria codes and the interrelationships between them, in the seventh and final stage of the content analysis process, the rapporteur converted the informal memoing into formal proposition statements.

## Findings from the Pilot Study

In conclusion, the memoing statements from the pilot study are presented in this section. It is important to keep in mind that these memoing statements are, only, the informal statement of findings from the data analysis and are not the final proposition statements. We offer these memos to exhibit the data analysis result of the focus group method of inquiry. These statements are not intended as a final report on our findings on student satisfaction criteria.

The following are the memo statements that were typical of the data collected in all of the focus group sessions combined; freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. The overall undergraduate student criterion for determining satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their college experience at a regional university is:

1. finding pride and an inner satisfaction with accomplishments.
2. a university with a flexible curriculum in which the student can design their own program.
3. a university with status and prestige.
4. a university degree that opens the door to career opportunity.
5. a university that encourages student involvement in the whole education experience; the college scene.
6. a university with teachers who really care about their students.
7. an opportunity for independence.
8. a university with a student-oriented administration and procedures.
9. a university experience that provides an opportunity for growth and development.

Of secondary importance to the understanding of the criteria students use to determine satisfaction was the exploration of criteria trends within each grade cohort. This research did find trends that were unique to each cohort. For the Freshmen cohort, the primary criterion that was addressed was the desire to have a university that hired teachers who really wanted to teach and enjoyed the teaching process. These Freshmen indicated that the most important motivator for their educational experience was an enthusiastic and engaged faculty.

The Sophomore cohort, on the other hand, discussed education as a 'survival' tool. From their perspective, higher education is a necessity to survive in today's world and therefore their



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primary criterion to satisfaction was the feeling that they were learning 'survival' techniques. The Junior cohort focused on the satisfaction criteria of receiving an education that would ensure upward mobility within a career; a university that employs effective channels of communication for all levels of the university but primarily with the student; and a university with a friendly and competent support staff. Juniors were also motivated to satisfaction by a university with the flexibility to respond to the special needs of nontraditional age students. Finally, the satisfaction criteria for the Senior cohort included the concern for a pay-off on their education investment, a university that employs teachers with 'real world' experience, and a university that provides the student with a central information location that would have all the answers to all student questions. As one Senior stated, "Students ask the same questions year after year. Why don't they write this stuff down?"

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Appendix A



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## Focus Group Guide

**I. Introduction:** As students enter the room, request that they complete a demographic sheet with age, gender, race, student rank, commuter or resident, transfer student, and working status. Students will use their adjective 'name' to code the demographic sheet.

Thank you for taking the time to join us in this group discussion on student experiences. My name is Kathy Franklin. I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Education. At the present time, I am working on my dissertation. This group discussion is a part of my dissertation work. Please take this opportunity to share your thoughts and opinions freely. I will spend the next hour and a half asking questions designed to encourage a discussion about a college student's experiences. The only ground rules to remember here are that there are no right or wrong answers to anything I ask -- only your honest opinions. I ask that you speak one at a time and to regard this tape recorder as simply an extension of my memory so that I can accurately report what is said here today. **Everything you say is confidential. In the transcription of the tape and in the final research report your names will not be used.**

### II. Ice-breaking question

Ask students to introduce themselves with their adjective name. Have each participant make a table tent using the adjective in place of their names. Turn on the recorder and introduce the group by their adjective 'names'.

1. Word association game. I will give you a word and you tell me the first word that comes to your mind. Word association:Cold....money....happiness....education.... college....university....ETSU.

### III. Discussion Questions

2. Everyone take a deep breath and relax. Imagine that you are no longer a student at ETSU. Please think back to the time before you made the decision to attend college. I am not familiar with this idea of 'college' or 'university'. Explain this idea of 'college' to me.

3. Now, fast forward in time to the point where you decided to attend college. Tell the group about your decision to attend college. What benefits did you hope to gain by attending college?

4. Now that you have made the decision to attend college, describe the 'ideal' college to the group.

5. What does student satisfaction mean to you?

### IV. Closure

6. What is the one thing you will remember about your college education?

7. Please complete this sentence -- In my opinion, ETSU is (is not)_______________.

8. Would you recommend ETSU to a friend?

9. Show of hands -- How many of you are more satisfied than dissatisfied with ETSU? How many of you are more dissatisfied than satisfied?