

# NC STATE EXTENSION

## NC State Extension 2017-2018 Needs Assessment Stakeholder Focus Groups

Each County Extension Office will conduct a series of focus groups/facilitated discussions with Extension stakeholders, collaborators, political entities, and clients between November 15, 2017 and March 31, 2018. Electronic data summaries are to be completed and submitted online by **April 6, 2018**. Submit notes from each session at: <https://goo.gl/forms/23Obkj4vKEQnqPd03>  
Plan for about 1.5 hours for each focus group. You should have a facilitator and a note taker at each focus group.

One of your focus groups is to be conducted with your County Advisory Council. In addition to the focus group with your Advisory Council you should also conduct 2-6 additional focus groups composed of approximately 5-10 participants each. Counties should determine the appropriate number of focus groups and focus group size based on the number and variety of Extension stakeholders and partners in your county and the number of people necessary to have representative participation from groups such as:

- County Advisory Council (\*required)
- Program Committees
- County Commissioners/Officials
- City/Municipal Councils/Officials
- School System
- Community College
- Colleges
- Economic Development Groups
- Chambers of Commerce
- Small Business Center
- Farm Service Agency
- NRCS
- NCDA&CS
- Commodity Groups
- Agribusiness Groups and Leaders
- Food Service Industries
- Civic Groups
- Health Department
- Department of Social Services
- Non-Profit Organizations
- Program Participants
- Farm Operators
- Hispanic/Latino Population
- Other Selected by County

Counties may schedule focus groups based on Extension program areas and utilize your Program Committees; however, you may need to invite additional participants to ensure representation from all stakeholder groups. You may also decide to hold general focus groups with a mixture of stakeholders and partners across program areas. You can also use existing groups, committees, and prescheduled meetings within your County to form the focus groups. Counties with large Hispanic populations will be contacted with additional information about the possibility of scheduling a focus group in Spanish (a facilitator will be provided).

# CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS

## WHAT IS A FOCUS GROUP?

A focus group is a small-group discussion guided by a trained leader. It is used to learn about opinions on a designated topic, and to guide future action.

Examples:

- A focus group of parents of preschoolers meets to discuss child care needs. Parents share their views on local child care programs, and on what could be done to improve them.
- A focus group of senior citizens meets at the new senior center. What do they think of the programs being offered? What are their own suggestions and ideas?
- An agency wants to open a group home for developmentally disabled adults in a quiet residential area. It convenes a group of prospective neighbors. What are their concerns? Can this work?

## HOW ARE FOCUS GROUPS DIFFERENT FROM REGULAR "GROUPS"?

A focus group is different in three basic ways:

- The main difference is the group has a specific, focused discussion topic.
- The group has a trained leader, or facilitator.
- The group's composition and the group discussion are carefully planned to create a nonthreatening environment in which people are free to talk openly. Members are actively encouraged to express their opinions.

Because focus groups are structured and directed, but also expressive, they can yield a lot of information in a relatively short time.

## WHY ARE FOCUS GROUPS USED?

Focus groups help people learn more about group or community opinions and needs. In this respect, they are similar to needs assessment surveys.

But needs assessment surveys typically have written, closed-ended, relatively narrow questions which are quantitatively scored. The person being surveyed often responds with a numerical rating, rather than with a verbal statement. Such surveys can be very useful; but they usually can't capture all that a person is thinking or feeling.

Responses in a focus group, on the other hand, are typically spoken, open-ended, relatively broad, and qualitative. They have more depth, nuance, and variety. Nonverbal communications and group interactions can also be observed. Focus groups can therefore get closer to what people are really thinking and feeling, even though their responses may be harder -- or impossible -- to score on a scale.

Which is better? Both of these methods are useful. And both can be used together, to complement each other. Which should you use in a specific situation? That depends upon your own needs and purposes, and the resources available to you.

## **WHEN SHOULD YOU USE A FOCUS GROUP?**

- When you are considering the introduction of a new program or service.
- When you want to ask questions that can't easily be asked or answered on a written survey.
- When you want to supplement the knowledge you can gain from written surveys.
- When you know, or can find someone, who is an experienced and skilled group leader.
- When you have the time, knowledge, and resources to recruit a willing group of focus group participants.

Here are several situations when you might want to know more about community opinions before taking action. How useful would a focus group be in each case?

- A new strain of flu is going around. Half the town seems to be catching it. What should be done about it?
- A wave of break-ins has hit a nearby neighborhood. How can this be stopped?
- A new playground is being planned. What features should go into it?

Our viewpoints:

- Controlling the flu is not a matter of citizen opinion, but rather of medical facts, and of public health prevention and treatment. A focus group is probably not helpful here.
- Increased police presence may help; but a structured discussion among neighbors might hit upon other useful solutions. A focus group could be quite worthwhile.
- Citizen input is definitely called for here. A focus group could be an ideal way for finding it out.

A focus group is not for every social situation. But it can be useful in many situations where action should be guided by public opinion.

## **THE PROS AND CONS OF GROUPS**

Should you collect your opinions from groups, or from individuals? The focus groups are, of course, groups. Most surveys, though, cover one person at a time.

One advantage of focus groups is depth and complexity of response, as mentioned before. And group members can often stimulate new thoughts for each other, which might not have otherwise occurred.

But there are some downsides, too.

For example, focus groups usually take more time per respondent than individual surveys -- because the group has to be recruited, and because the group itself takes time. Some group members might feel hesitant about speaking openly. And the focus group leader may sometimes need to be paid.

Of course, it's also possible to combine the advantages of both methods, and interview one person at a time in depth. But this can be time-consuming, and take more resources than you have on hand.

Consider your own situation. How do these factors trade off? What is the best solution for you?

## **HOW DO YOU RUN A FOCUS GROUP?**

### **BEFORE YOU BEGIN**

A focus group is a small-group discussion guided by a trained leader. It is used to learn more about opinions on a designated topic, and then to guide future action. The group's composition and the group discussion should be carefully planned to create a nonthreatening environment, so that participants feel free to talk openly and give honest opinions. Since participants are actively encouraged to not only express their own opinions, but also respond to other members and questions posed by the leader, focus groups offer a depth, nuance, and variety to the discussion that would not be available through surveys. Additionally, because focus groups are structured and directed, but also expressive, they can yield a lot of information in a relatively short time. In short, focus groups are a good way to gather in-depth information about a community's thoughts and opinions on a topic.

*Recheck your goals. Ask:*

- "Why do I want to conduct a focus group?"
- "Why am I doing this?"
- "What do I hope to learn?"

*Consider other methods.*

Are you planning to use other methods for learning about opinions as well?

In other words, so far: Think before you start, look before you leap.

- If yes, which ones, and why?
- If no, is this the single best method to use to find out what you want?

*Find a good leader.*

This is not a casual matter: Your leader will determine the success of your group. What kind of leader do you want? Probably someone who:

Take a careful look around. Perhaps you can find the right leader within your own organization. It's possible you can do the job yourself (but don't overestimate [or underestimate] your own abilities.) Depending on the situation, you might consider looking for someone outside your organization, someone that specializes in facilitating these kinds of groups.

- Has experience facilitating groups
- Knows something about the topic
- Will relate well to the focus group participants
- Will work together with you to give you the outcomes you want

*Find a recorder.*

A small but important point, often neglected. You want to make sure people's ideas don't get lost. Someone should be writing down what is said, in the same way as taking minutes at a meeting. Arrange for this in advance. (Alternatively, you can tape-record, with the group's permission. This will take more time -- to transcribe the tape, and interpret the transcription-- but you will have a more complete, accurate, and permanent record.)

*Decide who should be invited.*

Ideally, those invited should be a representative sample of those whose opinions you are concerned about.

Suppose you're concerned about the opinions of public housing tenants. You would then want to spread your invitations across the different public housing facilities in your community -- not just the best, or the worst, or the most vocal.

Or suppose you are concerned about the opinions of Main Street shopkeepers. Get a complete list. Select a representative group, for example by size, type, or whether they have local or outside ownership. You probably want to hear from all kinds of businesses; so make sure you do.

You could even pull the names out of a hat. (This approaches a "random sample.") Or, better yet, if you had time, you could run several different groups, to include more people, and more different kinds of people.

*Decide about incentives.*

That is, should you offer an incentive for people to participate? Maybe not. In that case, why should people come? What's in it for them?

Possibly people will come just because they want to help. Or because they think they will meet other interesting people, or learn something, or just have fun. Maybe the novelty of the experience itself will be a motivator. And maybe all these reasons are true. (Or at least people believe them.)

But maybe those reasons aren't enough, and some other incentive is called for. Money is one; sometimes focus group members get paid, even a small amount. (Focus group leaders may get paid, too.) If you can afford this, consider it. If you can't, then think about other possible incentives: food and drink (more than chips and soda?); public recognition; something to take home; a later training opportunity. What will do the job?

*Decide on the meeting particulars.*

Specifically:

Pin these down before you start signing people up.

- What day?
- What place?
- What time?
- How long?
- How many groups?

*Prepare your questions.*

Go in prepared. Write out in advance a list of topics and questions you want to ask. This will serve as your guide.

Below are some examples of general questions. These apply largely to groups discussing a current program or service, but they can be adjusted for planned programs, as well as for groups dealing with other concerns. The precise language and order of presentation will depend on your topic and group, but some of these questions may be adapted to your own needs.

- "What are some of your thoughts about what's going on now?"
- "Would you say you are satisfied with the current situation, with the way things are going on?"
- (If so) "What are you satisfied about? Why is that?" (Or, "What's going well...?")
- "Are there things you are dissatisfied with, that you would like to see changed?" (Or, "What's not going well...?")
- (If so) "What are they? Why is that? How should they change? What kinds of things would you like to see happen?"
- "How about this particular aspect (of the topic). What do you think about that?"

- Repeat for different aspects of the topic, with variations in style. For example, if the main focus group topic was "community policing," some key aspects to cover might be visibility, sensitivity, interaction, respect, etc.
- "Some people have said that one way to improve X is to do Y."
- Do you agree with this? (Or, "How do you feel about that?")
- "Are there other recommendations that you have, or suggestions you would like to make?"
- "Are there other things you would like to say before we wind up?"
- Some "probes" or follow-ups" designed to get more information on a given question:
- "Can you say more about that?"
- "Can you give an example?"
- "Jane says X. How about others of you. What do you think?"
- "How about you, Joe. [Or, "you folks in the corner over there...."] Do you have some thoughts on this?"
- "Does anyone else have some thoughts on that?"

*Recruit your members.*

Call them up. Email them. Or find them.

Remember:

- Other things equal, personal contact works best.
- Stress your benefits. Why should people come?

*Double-check.*

Review the arrangements. Is everything ready to go?

### ***WHEN THE GROUP MEETS***

*Conduct the group*

A common sequence of events for many focus groups goes something like this: (The leader usually takes responsibility for carrying them out.)

- Thank people for coming.
- Review the purpose of the group, and the goals of the meeting. Set the stage.
- Go over the flow of the meeting -- how it will proceed, and how the members can contribute. Lay out the ground rules. Encourage open participation.
- Set the tone. This is important, because probably few of your members will have been in a focus group before.
- Ask an opening question. This could be a very general question ("What are your general thoughts about X?"), or something more specific. Both choices are justifiable; and both types of questions might be asked before the group ends.

Make sure that all opinions on that question get a chance to be heard. How do you do this?

*Some common techniques*

- Summarize what you think you have heard, and ask if the group agrees
- Phrase the same question in a different way
- Ask if anyone else has any comments on that question
- Ask a follow-up question
- Look around the room, and make brief eye contact, especially with those who may not have spoken

Reminder #1: Be sure to record. If the group is not being tape-recorded, someone should be writing the key points down.

Reminder #2: Of course, the leader's job is to elicit opinion, and not judge it. All opinions should be respected.

- Ask your next question -- and proceed with other questions in the same general manner. The phrasing of the questions, the follow-ups, the ordering of the questions, and how much time to spend on each one are points that the leader will have to decide -- sometimes on the spot. An experienced leader will be able to do this. This is why you have spent time looking for one!
- When all your questions have been asked, and before the group ends, ask if anyone has any other comments to make. This can be an effective way of gathering other opinions that have not yet been voiced.
- Tell the members about any next steps that will occur, and what they can expect to happen now.
- Don't forget to thank the group for coming!

## AFTER THE MEETING

### *Look at the data*

If you have tape-recorded, make a transcript. If not, make a written summary from the group notes. But in any case, look closely at the information you have collected.

In some cases, you can devise and use a coding system to "score" the data and count the number of times a particular theme is expressed. Experience helps here. But whether you do this or not, try to have more than one person review the results independently. (Because even the best of us have our biases.) Then come together to compare your interpretations and conclusions.

- What patterns emerge?
- What are the common themes?
- What new questions arise?
- What conclusions seem true?

### *Share results with the group.*

They gave you their time. The least you can do is to give them some feedback -- it's an obligation that you have. This can be done by mail, phone, or email if you'd like. Sometimes it's even possible to bring the group back for a second session, to review results, verify their accuracy, and/or explore other themes.

And note: Perhaps members have now become more interested in the issue, and would like to get more involved. Consider offering them an opportunity to do so. A focus group, indirectly, can be a recruiting tool.

### *Use the results.*

Collecting useful information was the reason you wanted to do a focus group in the first place. Now you have the opportunity, and perhaps also the responsibility, to put it to use. You can improve the situation that originally motivated you, and made you think about a focus group at the very beginning.

## **IN SUMMARY**

A focus group is a small-group discussion guided by a trained leader. It is used to learn more about opinions on a designated topic, and then to guide future action. The group's composition and the group discussion should be carefully planned to create a nonthreatening environment, so that participants feel free to talk openly and give honest opinions. Since participants are actively encouraged to not only express their own opinions, but also respond to other members and questions posed by the leader, focus groups offer a depth, nuance, and variety to the discussion that would not be available through surveys. Additionally, because focus groups are structured and directed, but also expressive, they can yield a lot of information in a relatively short time. In short, focus groups are a good way to gather in-depth information about a community's thoughts and opinions on a topic.

## **NC State Extension 2017-2018 Needs Assessment Stakeholder Focus Group Script & Questions**

*NOTE: Facilitator and note taker should arrive at site 1 hour in advance of scheduled focus group. Arrange chairs and tables in a square/rectangle or around a large conference table. Set up registration table with participant name tents, set up refreshment table and set out refreshments (if refreshments will be provided), locate restrooms, and place signs on doors identifying focus group room. Welcome participants by name as they enter and introduce yourself.*

Hello! We appreciate you taking your time to be here. Let me invite you to get some refreshments before we begin, and to make yourself comfortable (if refreshments are provided). The restrooms are.....

First, let me welcome you here today! My name is [insert] and I am [professional title] with NC Cooperative Extension here in [insert] county. Assisting me is [insert name and title] also from Extension. As part of our ongoing efforts to implement educational programs and services that directly address the current and most important needs and resources of our county's citizens and local communities, Cooperative Extension agents are conducting small focus groups, just like this one, across our entire state.

We are excited that you have accepted our invitation to come share with us about what you think of the important issues and opportunities facing [insert county name] County both today, and in the years ahead.

Let me say that there are no right or wrong answers but rather differing points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said.

Before we begin, I would like to share a few ground rules that will help our discussion. Please speak openly and only one person should talk at a time. If several people are talking at the same time, we may miss your comments. Please silence all cell phones. We will be on a first name basis tonight, and in our later reports there will not be any names attached to comments. Please keep in mind that we're just as interested in negative comments as positive comments, and at times the negative comments could be the most helpful.

Our session will last about an hour and a half, and we will not be taking a formal break so if you need to use the restroom or take a break please do so as needed. Are there any questions you have at this time?

Place your name card on the table in front of you to help us remember each other's names. Let's find out some more about each other by going around the room one at a time. Tell us your name, something about yourself, and what first comes to mind when you hear the words, "North Carolina Cooperative Extension".

**Question 1:** Now that we know a little about each other, let's begin by talking about the most important challenges facing our county today. What do you believe is the most important issue or challenge facing our county and why is this such an important issue or challenge?

**Question 2:** Let's focus on those challenges and issues related directly to our county's youth. From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges currently facing the youth in our community and what do you consider to be some of the gaps in programming that exist to address these issues?

**Question 3:** Let's now talk about those challenges and issues related directly to promoting a healthy lifestyle and preventing obesity and other nutrition related diseases. What are the most important healthy lifestyle related issues or challenges facing our county and what gaps in programming exist within our county to address these issues?

**Question 4:** Let's move on and talk about community challenges and issues related to agriculture. What agricultural or food supply chain challenges or issues are facing the county and what do you consider as major areas of unmet educational needs related to agriculture, farming, food, and agri-business?

**Question 5:** What other challenges or issues are members of the community facing that you believe Extension should provide programming to address?

**Question 6:** How can Cooperative Extension in [insert name of County] improve its future program offerings to better meet the needs of the community?

**Question 7:** Before we adjourn our session, let me ask if there is anything else you'd like to share with us about our discussion today?

Thanks again for making the time to be with us, and have a safe trip home!

Please submit final notes online at: <https://goo.gl/forms/23Obkj4vKEQnqPd03>

Optional Stakeholder Focus Group Note-taking Template (original notes can also be handwritten, typed into blank document, or directly entered into the google submission form during time of focus group).

Date of Focus Group	
Location of Focus Group (County)	
Number of Participants (by Ethnicity Race Gender)	
Moderator Name	
Asst. Moderator Name	
Brief Participant Summary (Agencies, Organizations, Committees, Stakeholders represented)	

**Tell us your name, something about yourself, and what first comes to mind when you hear the words, "North Carolina Cooperative Extension".**

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS	
NOTEABLE QUOTES	

**What do you believe is the most important issue or challenge facing our county and why is this such an important issue or challenge?**

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS	
QUOTES	

**What are the biggest challenges currently facing the youth in our community?**

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS	
QUOTES	

**What do you consider to be some of the gaps in programming that exist to address the youth issues identified?**

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS	
QUOTES	

**What are the most important healthy lifestyle related issues or challenges facing our county?**

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS	
QUOTES	

**What gaps in programming exist within our county to address these healthy lifestyle issues?**

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS	
QUOTES	

**What agricultural or food supply chain challenges or issues are facing the county?**

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS	
QUOTES	

**What do you consider as major areas of unmet educational needs related to agriculture, farming, food, and agri-business?**

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS	
QUOTES	

**What other challenges or issues are members of the community facing that you believe Extension should provide programming to address?**

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS	
QUOTES	

**How can Cooperative Extension in [insert name of County] improve its future program offerings to better meet the needs of the community?**

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS	
QUOTES	

**Is there anything else you'd like to share with us about our discussion today?**

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS	
QUOTES	