
Focus Groups

Guidelines and Support Documents

NIU Baccalaureate Review—Spring 2009

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Purpose

The purpose of the focus groups is to gather information that will help Northern Illinois University develop goals that will enhance the baccalaureate experience of students at NIU.

Process

- ❖ Take a moment to explain the purpose, thank people for attending, and emphasize the importance of their input at the beginning of the focus group.
- ❖ Explain why we are asking for informed consent. At a future point in time, the information we gather from the focus groups might be useful to other universities. For example, the extensive use of focus groups coupled with an online survey is relatively novel. Gaining informed consent gives us the option to publish or present our work. Given an opportunity to read and sign the informed consent statement and the participant information form.
- ❖ Have everyone provide an introduction as a warm up. This is particularly important for focus groups where the majority of participants may not know each other.
- ❖ Refer to the Moderator's Guide and review the first aim. Remember to have participants reflect on each one and write notes. Go around the room and ask for input from each person. Have one or two team members record the information in detail. One person can use the flip chart and the other person can record information via paper and pen or computer.

Probe participants by asking “what does this aim mean to you,” “how should NIU go about achieving this goal,” or “how do we get to this point by way of the baccalaureate experience?”

Important change: The preceding protocol will be used with staff, students, employers, and administrators. In contrast, faculty focus groups will be less structured. Based on our experience during the focus group training sessions, faculty responded more positively when provided a blank slate upon which to develop their ideas. The steering committee liaisons will work with the faculty constituency task force members to clarify the specifics of this revised approach.

- ❖ Remember to ask for additional input and questions as you move through the focus group.
- ❖ At the end of the focus group, thank participants for their thoughtful and insightful responses. Describe how the information will be used. Then, give them a copy of the “baccalaureate website and online survey” and “follow-up contact” handouts. Finally, let them know they are free to leave.

Reports

Upon completing a focus group, please write a summary of the participants’ ideas. We ask that these reports be submitted to Greg Long (glong@niu.edu) no later than 10 days after your group. Please use the report template (page 13) to structure your summary. Contact your liaison if you have any questions, comments, or concerns.

Thank you for your continued support.

Moderator's Guide

Structure: A focus group will require at least three task force members, a moderator who will conduct the focus group, and two team members who will record the information. One person should use the flip chart while the other person records information via paper and pen or computer.

Supplies: You will need a flip chart, markers, and tabletop name tents. The steering committee liaisons will work with you to supply these materials.

Instructions: You can memorize the information and present it or read it as it appears here. Whatever you do, keep in mind the format and what we hope to accomplish. Remember to collect the informed consent statement and the participant information form prior to beginning the group.

Let's begin.

Introduction to participants (about 3 minutes)

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the focus groups at Northern Illinois University. We appreciate your taking the time to provide your thoughts and insights on how to make this institution and the students we serve better and stronger.

The purpose of the focus group is to obtain feedback from key groups such as this one, incorporate that feedback into the curriculum, and enhance the baccalaureate experience at NIU. We want our programs to better address students' needs.

We will be conducting approximately 30-40 focus groups with different constituency groups important to the University. These groups include students, faculty, staff, administrators, employers, and community colleges.

All of the information will be compiled and a report will be issued for the University community to review. The governing bodies (e.g., General Education Committee, Committee on Undergraduate Education, Undergraduate Coordinating Council) will review the information, set priorities, and then act upon the information provided.

This focus group should take about 45 - 60 minutes to complete. We will review a list of aims and then, one by one, determine what goals will help us achieve each aim. Toward the end of the focus group we would also like you to consider if there are other aims and goals that Northern Illinois University should address. The Baccalaureate Review Steering Committee developed these aims as a starting point for our discussion. There are many aims...these are just a few to elicit your feedback.

(Stop and ask for questions, comments)

We would like you to help us develop **goals** that will enhance the baccalaureate experience of students at NIU. For instance, what should our students be able to do when they leave NIU? What qualities and characteristics should our students have as graduates of NIU? Each one of you may have a different perspective and that's great. We want different ideas and opinions. We value your frank and honest comments, suggestions, and recommendations.

(Stop and ask for questions, comments)

Focus Group Questions

At Northern Illinois University the Baccalaureate Review Steering Committee developed several broad aims to help structure our discussions. These aims are, in fact, common to most universities across the United States. We have included each aim on a separate sheet of paper and an example of goals that might be appropriate.

(Stop for a moment)

Let's begin. We have posted the aims on handouts for you to review. You can jot down some notes as we move through the session. We will not collect the handouts. They are for your personal use. Now, let's see what goals we can come up with to make the baccalaureate experience at NIU more meaningful.

(Stop and ask for questions, comments)

When you introduce each aim, ask the participants to consider "As a result of their NIU experience, we would like baccalaureate graduates to..."

Promote a literate society.

Example—Access and critically use various information sources
Spend about 5-6 minutes discussing goals. Be sure to record all participants' responses.

Contribute to a democratic society.

Example—Use critical thought and action
Spend about 5-6 minutes discussing goals. Be sure to record all participants' responses.

Value the interdependence between people and nature.

Example—Know and understand the natural world
Spend about 5-6 minutes discussing goals. Be sure to record all participants' responses.

Advocate for diversity both locally and globally.

Example—Demonstrate multicultural sensitivity
Spend about 5-6 minutes discussing goals. Be sure to record all participants' responses.

Continue learning about the world and themselves.

Example—Appreciate the interrelatedness of various disciplines
Spend about 5-6 minutes discussing goals. Be sure to record all participants' responses.

Create, transfer, and preserve knowledge.

Example—Understand the intellectual processes, perspectives, and methodologies implicit in one's major
Spend about 5-6 minutes discussing goals. Be sure to record all participants' responses.

You might have some time left over. Based on the flow of the focus group, you can review the aims with the goals developed by your group. You might want to prioritize the aims and/or prioritize the goals. During your focus groups a participant might bring up an interesting point. This would be the time to address it. This part of the session is totally up to you.

(about 5 minutes).

Close (2-3 minutes)

- ❖ Thank participants for their thoughtful responses.
- ❖ Give them the a) website & online survey handout and b) follow-up contact form.
- ❖ Let them know they are free to leave.

Informed Consent Statement—Focus Groups

Northern Illinois University

I agree to participate in a focus group discussion as part of a research project titled, “Identifying Goals to Support NIU’s Baccalaureate Aims.” This project is being conducted by the Northern Illinois University Baccalaureate Review Task Force.

I have been informed about the rationale for this research. Specifically, the NIU Strategic Planning Imperative identified general education reform as a top priority. The first phase of this reform is a review of the University’s baccalaureate degree goals. That is to say, what skills, knowledge, and abilities should NIU graduates achieve? What values and ideals should be promoted? To address these questions, a series of focus groups will be conducted during the Spring 2009 semester. Information gained from these focus groups will be shared with the University community and other interested groups. After goals are drafted, they will be submitted to appropriate University governance bodies for review.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I will be asked to participate in a focus group session that will last 45 - 60 minutes. The primary activity will be a discussion of aims and goals associated with NIU’s baccalaureate mission.

I am aware that my participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice. If I have any additional questions concerning this study, I may contact Greg Long at glong@niu.edu or 815.753.6508.

I understand that if I wish information regarding my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University (815.753.8524).

I understand that the intended benefits of this study center upon the development of baccalaureate goals to be used to guide the University's curricular efforts. I understand that it is unlikely that I will experience risks and/or discomforts during this study.

I understand that all information gathered during this focus group will be kept confidential by keeping separate files of consent forms and study data. In addition, no individual participant will be identified in any report. Only aggregate data will be reported. However, I also understand that when participating in a focus group, confidentiality among the members of the group cannot be guaranteed.

I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Signature of Subject

Date

Participant Information Form

To help us better understand the views of specific groups, we ask that you please provide us with some information about yourself. This information will be used for reporting purposes only. If you do not wish to provide this information please disregard this request. Check the box that best describes you.

Gender Male Female

What is your race/ethnicity?

- Caucasian/Non-Hispanic Hispanic/Latino African American
 Pacific Islander/ Asian Other- Please specify

What is your age range?

- 18-24 years 25-34 years 35-44 years 45-54 years
 55-64 years 65-74 years 75 & up

Which is the highest level of education you have completed?

- High School/ GED Some College Completed Bachelors
 Some grad school Completed Masters or equivalent
 Completed Ph.D., Ed.D., or equivalent

What is your affiliation to Northern Illinois University? (check all that apply)

- Student Faculty Staff Administrator Employer
 Community College Parent Alumni Other _____

Follow-up contact—Optional

We would like to stay in touch with you. Kindly provide your e-mail address if you would like to be kept informed regarding our progress on this project.

My e-mail address is: _____

My name is (optional): _____

Baccalaureate Review Website and Online Survey

Thank you for sharing your ideas with us. Your input to the process is valued. If you would like to provide additional feedback, please do so. The NIU Baccalaureate Review Website provides access to an online survey. The site also includes additional information regarding the structure, timelines, and expectations for the review process. The website and online survey may be reached from a link on the NIU Home Page.

Report Template—Focus Groups

Constituency: Students Faculty Staff Administrators Employers

Meeting date:

Task force group leaders:

Number of participants:

Feedback summary:

- ❖ What specific goals did the group propose (as related to each aim)?
- ❖ What additional aims or goals, if any, were suggested?
- ❖ Were any suggestions, feedback, and/or criticism offered regarding the process.
- ❖ Briefly describe your sense of the meeting. Were people active and engaged? Did the process seem to interest them? Do people want to remain involved with the process? Etc.

Date submitted:

Please remember to include informed consent statements and participant information forms with your report.