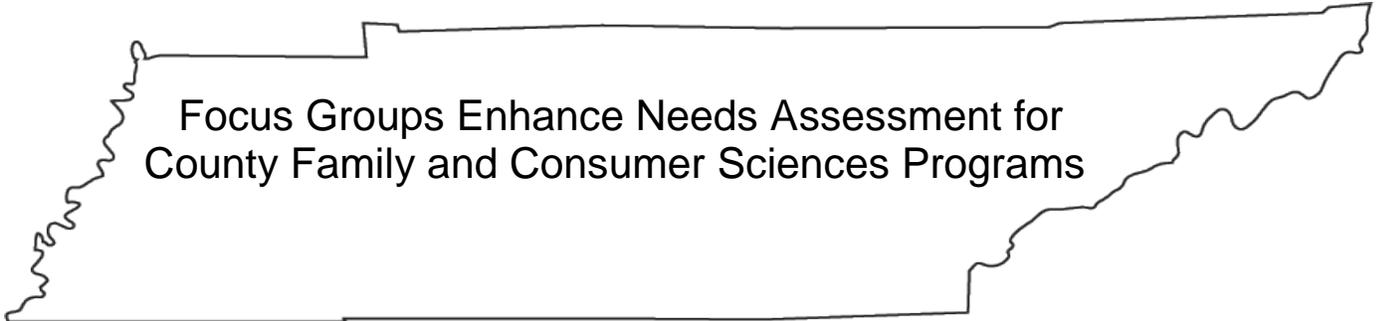# UT Extension

Bridging People and Programs

Focus Groups Enhance Needs Assessment for
County Family and Consumer Sciences Programs

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September 18, 2013

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Focus Group Overview

Effective, engaging needs assessment is a principle of democracy and a hallmark of the Cooperative Extension System. In a national assessment of training needs, Davis, et. al (2012) found that Extension personnel (n=1,434) wanted to acquire more skills and knowledge in needs assessment. The majority indicated a need to learn more about assessing individual client needs (69%), assessing community needs (79%), and engaging stakeholders in program development (83%).

Focus groups are planned discussions that help capture perceptions from a select group of people, and focus groups have multiple uses including needs assessment and program development (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The ideal size of a focus group is seven to 10 people (Kreuger, 1988; Smithson, 2008); Krueger & Casey, 2009). The focus group moderator is critically important because the group discussion is many times reflective of his/her skills and values.

In 2010, the University of Tennessee Extension conducted an extensive statewide strategic planning process that involved nearly 3,000 Tennesseans in surveys, area meetings, opinion polling, and focus groups. The result was a comprehensive, 10-year plan to achieve new resources and growth, exceptional programs, organizational visibility, and a world-class workforce. As with most extensive planning efforts, the process provided much instruction and "food for thought". Many Extension personnel noticed that while all of the data collected was valuable, the focus group results connected with emotions, attitudes, and perspectives in ways that cannot be achieved with surveys. This realization cultivated questions, interest, and discussion among Extension personnel as to how to use focus groups more effectively for ongoing needs assessment.

A professional development course in effective focus groups was conducted for Extension FCS Agents in the Eastern Region of Tennessee (33 counties). The goal of this course was to equip agents to conduct focus groups for needs assessment purposes. Agents learned best practices for recruiting participants who were both familiar and unfamiliar with Extension programs. The course included a protocol with specific questions. Extension FCS Agents then conducted focus groups which produced rich and powerful needs assessment information for their programs. The assessment information was useful in introducing new programs, modifying existing programs, identifying new audiences, building public support, and identifying new partnerships.

Focus groups provide more valuable information when participants interact with a product or service rather than just give their perceptions (Eskenazi, 2011). For this reason, we asked all focus group participants to visit the State Extension FCS website (fcs.tennessee.edu) prior to the focus group so that participants could share specific examples and interactions with program information, rather than just react to program names or objectives.

Participant Selection

- Consider 4-12 people for a single session. Consider those who would be comfortable with one another, but do not necessarily know one another.

- Plan 2-3 focus group sessions with different people. This provides you with a greater cross-section of your clients and allows you to see patterns across the groups.

- Similar association to the topic being discussed

- Methods for selecting participants include nominations and asking for volunteers

- We suggested that agents select individuals who were familiar with Extension (as defined by their names appearing on one or more Extension mailing lists) and those who were not familiar with Extension

Focus Group Best Practices

- Invite people personally

- Secure location, comfortable

- Have pens/pencils available

- Refreshments

- Take a break after one-hour

- Appoint a recorder

- Table set-up

- Seating

- Name tags/table tents

Sample Letter

Dear [name],

The University of Tennessee Extension in [County Name] is working to improve programs and select new programs for the next five years. Our planning process will include a review of existing social indicators (like Census data), focus group interviews, and input from our Extension Advisory Councils. The purpose of this letter is to ask for your direct involvement in our planning process by participating in a focus group.

Details of the meeting are as follows:

> Date:
> Start Time:
> End Time:
> Location:

This meeting will allow you to share your opinions about UT Extension programs and your community needs. The focus group session should take no more than two hours. Your comments and feedback will remain confidential. Please visit the following website prior to the focus group to familiarize yourself with the various UT Extension family and consumer science programs:

<p align="center">http://fcs.tennessee.edu/</p>

I look forward to seeing you on [date]. If you have any questions, please contact me at [phone] or [email].

Sincerely,

Extension Agent
Family and Consumer Sciences

Moderator Skills

Be Mentally Prepared
- Alert, friendly and free from distractions
- Have the discipline of listening
- Completely familiar with questions

Purposeful Small Talk
- Be warm and friendly
- Set the tone for friendliness and sharing
- Don't get involved in long conversations with any one person

Introduction
- You must rehearse in advance
- Critical to make this *short, smooth and snappy*

Encourage people to talk
- Smile
- Look at them
- Listen
- Call on them by name, "Nancy, we have heard various ideas. What were your experiences?"
- Never cross your arms

Control Your Reactions
- Don't evaluate or judge in any way
- Never say "that's good" or "excellent"
- Nod your head to encourage dialog, but don't show agreement with an idea
- Think about what you are communicating verbally and nonverbally

Questions/Probing

Use Pauses and Probes
- Ask your question, and pause
- Don't talk to fill the silence – allow people to think about the question
- After someone stops speaking and no one else responds, wait five seconds, then call on someone else to comment
- Probes:
    o "Would you explain further?"
    o "Tell me more."
    o "Would you provide an example?"
    o "I don't understand. Tell me more."

Introduction

- ***Purpose of the Group***: Hello everyone. Thanks so much for being here. My name is [your name] and my colleague is [recorder's name]. Our purpose is to conduct focus group discussions about the future of UT Extension to strengthen the organization's programs and service to Tennesseans.
- ***Confidentiality:*** Everything that you say is confidential.
- ***Length of the interview***: We will conclude at approximately [end time] and we will take a break after the first hour.
- ***Ground Rules***:
  - First, there are no right answers or wrong answers. We are interested in your opinions and perspectives on UT Extension.
  - Second, you shouldn't feel that you have to agree with everyone else in this room if that's not how you really feel. We expect people will have different views on our questions.
  - Third, we want you to feel comfortable saying good things as well as critical things. We're not here to promote a particular way of thinking. We just want to understand your viewpoints.
  - Fourth, we ask that you talk one at a time.
- ***First Question***: Our first question will be round-robin, we will ask everyone to respond. The first question is: *How and when have you been involved with UT Extension?*

Interview Protocol

Introduction

    The leader summarizes the purpose of the group, confidentiality, length of the interview, the fact that there are no right answers and that it is ok to disagree. Either ask people to introduce themselves, or make sure everyone is introduced before the first question (see page 6).

Extension Programs

    1. How and when have you been involved with UT Extension? [Round Robin]

Focusing on Needs

    2. Prior to focus group – review knowledge area website[1].
    3. How many of you were able to review?
- Tell me what you saw
- If UT Extension only has resources to do <u>one</u> of those programs, which one or two are most needed in our county?

Thinking Ahead

    4. What must UT Extension family and consumer sciences do in the future to remain relevant to the needs of [county name]?
    5. Is there something that UT Extension family and consumer sciences could do to improve our service to [county name]?
- How can programs be more effective in the future?

    6. What priorities in [knowledge area] do you feel Extension should address in the future?

Agencies/Organizations

    7. What other agencies/organizations are addressing this issue?
    8. Is there a need for UT Extension to conduct programs addressing this issue?

Audiences

    9. Who has this need?
- Do they recognize they have this need?

    10. Who would be the most likely audience to participate?

Marketing

    11. How can we best reach this audience?
    12. How can fee-based programs be used, if at all, to conduct these programs?
    13. How can we motivate this audience to participate?

Closing

14. Is there anything we have not talked about that you believe is important for the future of UT Extension family and consumer sciences?
15. Of all the things we discussed, what is the most important?

Summary

- Recap the big ideas as time allows (call on the recorder)
- Show video of statewide FCS programs as time allows
- Thank the participants
- Other ideas? Feel free to contact the Extension FCS agent

[1] The knowledge areas are: family economics; health and safety; human development; and nutrition; and food safety. See fcs.tennessee.edu

Analyzing Your Data

- Identify common ideas across the different focus groups.

- Look for different sources of the same information. Are there any common ideas that are represented in data sources from the U.S. Census Bureau, Kids Count, and/or Centers for Disease Control and Prevention?

Lessons Learned

- Focus are valuable for gathering rich, valuable information

- Agents appreciate sample letters and standard protocol

- Interviewer effects are real

- Agents need a way to process the data together

- Focus groups provide information beyond a written survey

- Identified needs can be outside the "normal" realm

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Notes