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Using Focus Groups to Evaluate Youth Development Program Direction

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Using Focus Groups to Evaluate Youth Development Program Direction

Abstract

Focus groups are an efficient and effective assessment tool for youth development practitioners with limited time and resources. This article examines the practical use and limitations of focus groups to assess a county 4-H program's response to a changing demographic profile. A complete description of the process is followed by a report of results and implications for program direction.

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Introduction

4-H educators are continually challenged to provide programs that produce impact. Unfortunately, Extension educators function in stressful environments and operate programs on nominal budgets, within narrow timeframes, and with minimum of staff (Diem, 2002). Such constraints inhibit the use of assessments that provide information necessary to address changing program needs. The problem becomes finding an efficient and effective strategy to obtain useable data to make informed decisions.

This article illustrates the usefulness of focus groups in Extension programming. The focus group, as a type of case study (Creswell, 1998), is an informal qualitative assessment capable of capturing the breadth and depth of a situation without quantification (Washington & Fowler, 2005).

The county in the study has experienced substantial population growth. The central city has experienced rapid growth and urbanization, while much of the county remains rural. As a consequence, the county 4-H program is struggling to keep up with services to meet the demands of its clientele.

Review of the Literature

Originally, focus groups were designed to aid in the understanding of war propaganda and finally gained popularity as a marketing tool in the 1980's (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). They gained appeal in social science research, health research, and business management in the 1970's (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). Eventually, they become popular in the late 1980's and into the 1990's with sociologists, program developers, policy makers, decision makers, and evaluation researchers (Ansary, Perkins,

& Nelson, 2004; Hollander, 2004; Munday, 2006; Plax & Cecchi, 1989; Straw & Marks, 1995; Straw & Smith, 1995).

Focus groups are not new to Extension educators. They have been used to assess the needs of Latinos, identify stepfamily needs, evaluate educational materials, acquire youth opinions, check perceptions, ascertain health issues, and balance work and family (Archer, 1993; Davison, Workman, Daida, Novotny, & Ching, 2004; Duncan & Marotz-Baden, 1999; Foote, Clark, & Recker, 2004; Holz-Clause & Jost, 1995; Malek, 2002; Nordstrom, Wilson, Kelsey, Marezki, & Pitts, 2000).

4-H educators can effectively assess program breadth by adopting the use of focus groups (Ansay, Perkins, & Nelson, 2004). Duncan and Marotz-Braden (1999) point out that focus groups are an effective way to comprehend and respect the needs of 4-H program clientele and stakeholders. Focus groups provide an intimate understanding of clientele and stakeholder priorities that are essential to a 4-H program and its relevance within a county.

Methods

Because information needs were urgent and results could be acted on immediately, the assessment method selected was focus groups. The use of focus groups was based on a belief in a grassroots participatory process as a way to more deeply understand local demands (Kidd & Parshall, 2000; MacDougall & Fudge, 2001; and MacDougall & Baum, 1997), produce meaningful and broader results, and accumulate group statements into a single voice (MacDougall & Baum, 1997). Equally important, the process honored participant time commitments, was less labor intensive, was more cost effective, and was easily organized in the short time frame.

Two focus groups were conducted in the fall of 2006. Sixteen participants were purposefully sampled (Creswell, 1998) primarily for their abilities to provide information that reflected the needs of youth and their interest in the well-being of youth (Arnold & Lesmeister, 2006). A total of 15 informants consented to participate.

Group one consisted of two females and two males between 35 and 70 years of age and two females and two males between 15 and 18 years of age. All were active volunteers, parents, or members in the 4-H program. Group two was comprised of two females and two males between 30 and 50 years of age and one female and two males between 14 and 18 years of age. No one from group two was actively involved with the 4-H program. However, the participants were aware of the 4-H program. The adults in the second group were community leaders, and the youth represented area high schools and community serving agencies.

On consecutive nights, the groups met for approximately 2 hours. A trained facilitator guided participants through a series of predetermined questions (R. Rennekamp, personal communication, September 26, 2006). Participants were asked the following.

- How are changes in the county affecting youth?
- Are there aspects of the county that make it unique for youth today?
- What should a community youth development program offer?
- What type of skills building experiences should be included in a community youth program?
- What is the county 4-H program doing well?
- What advantages do you see in an organization that includes adult volunteers?
- Are there ways the county 4-H program needs to change?
- Are there gaps between youth development programs and the community?

Careful notes were kept by a trained recorder using flip charts. The recorder was not involved in facilitation. Video and audio recordings were not considered. Facial expressions, body language, dress, and participant identity were not integral to the case study. In addition, according to E. Espinoza (personal communication, March 4, 2008), the intrusive nature of video and audio taping increases risks to participants by adding to the levels of discomfort and distress among discussants. Espinoza also noted that electronic recording devices can inhibit a free exchange of dialogue.

4-H staff involvement in the study was kept to a minimum. Staff made informational comments to each focus group prior to any dialogue. Although not present in group one, staff did observe group two. The information was transcribed and coded (Creswell, 2003), which resulted in patterns, themes, and perspectives to enhance program offerings.

Validity

Qualitative assessments are not subject to internal and external validity criteria. According to

Creswell (2003), "Reliability and generalization play a minor role in qualitative inquiry" (p. 195). The purpose of the focus groups was to provide a snap shot of perspectives and perception leading to new program opportunities. Practitioners interested in trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility, all corollaries to quantitative validity, should see Creswell, 1998; Creswell, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 2003; and Schwandt, 2001.

Of primary concern were disclosures made by Hollander (2004) and her work with focus groups and their social contexts. She advises researchers to take into consideration the categorical (status), associational, conversational, and relational contexts within groups. She warned of the potential for "lack of disclosure" and "strategic shaping of comments" (p. 603). She notes that "the participants in a focus group are not independent of each other and that the data collected from one individual cannot be separated from the social context in which it was collected" (p. 631).

The potential for individual disclosure and social context to interfere with the trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility of the data is real. In order to mitigate this eventuality, careful attention was given to the composition of the group, the relationship between participants, the focus group setting, the kind of dialogue that would be encouraged, participants' social status, and the order of speaking based on Hollander's (2004) citation of Carey.

Equally important to qualitative validity was the protocol established to obtain the report of results. The recorder transcribed and reviewed the notes from the flip chart paper. The focus group facilitator provided independent review. Final interpretation was accomplished through the peer review and consensus of the facilitator, recorder, and 4-H staff.

Results

Coding produced four themes that include changes in county demographics, 4-H as a youth development program, marketing 4-H, and community collaborations (Arnold & Lesmeister, 2006).

Changes in Demographics

All focus group clientele agreed that the degree of growth in the county created negative impacts on youth. Over-crowding in schools created problems for young people and their learning, their relationships, and their leadership development. Some youth are not getting sufficient attention in public school classrooms, are not able to play sports, and are not involved in positive, safe peer interactions.

Families and whole communities are experiencing negative impacts as well. The non-4-H clientele group identified an important difference between families that have resources and can access community opportunities and those families that are not currently accessing community resources.

There is an increasing divide between the more urban areas of the county and, to some extent, the smaller cities, towns, and rural areas of the county. 4-H was doing well in rural settings and areas with close proximity to the Extension office. The enrollment challenge remains in the population center of the county.

4-H as a Youth Development Program

There was consensus from both groups that a youth development program needs to provide opportunities for life skill development such as problem solving, communication, and teamwork. Both groups also identified the important role that youth development organizations play in the development of character and values such as respect, honesty, and service. Both groups emphasized the need for youth programs to be fun, inviting, and meaningful while at the same time making sure the skill development and opportunities for growth exist.

Marketing 4-H

Both groups indicated that 4-H needs to do a better job of marketing itself. 4-H has a positive image in the community, but it does not get the marketing opportunities that other groups receive (e.g., FFA is marketed in-school). More aggressive marketing strategies that include youth inputs are needed.

Increasing Collaborations

Many opportunities for community collaborations exist; this may be particularly true in the high population centers. For example, the Metro Parks and Recreation District, the largest provider of after-school programming, sees opportunities to add value to its programs through an alliance with 4-H.

Conclusion

Focus groups are an inexpensive and efficient means to engage local constituents in dialogue regarding new directions needed in dynamic situations. Despite the changes in the county and need to respond to changes, it is clear the 4-H program was recognized and valued by 4-H and non

4-H clientele. The program has a strong and positive history of working with youth and families to provide fun, meaningful, and engaging learning opportunities. The 4-H program was also valued and supported by community agencies and businesses. The time appears right for the program to develop intentional ways of connecting to the areas of the county that are not currently involved in the traditional 4-H program.

The study was an example of focus group methodology as a qualitative approach to help determine the needs of clientele and stakeholders. What was discovered was intuitively known. However, the focus groups helped solidify a course of action. Many areas of the country are facing changes in urban/rural demographics, reduction in resources, and changes in families and volunteerism.

However, there are conditions attached to the use of focus groups. A focus group, as a qualitative assessment tool, is not intended to reflect the thoughts and opinions of the entire county. As such, the results cannot be generalized to the larger population. Focus groups do, however, help identify specific questions and key ideas that need to be probed more fully for generalizability.

In addition, Extension educators need to be aware that focus group validity is potentially compromised when more personal issues are the focus. Highly contentious topics (sexuality, drugs, alcohol, and tobacco) can prohibit disclosure and promote strategic responses. Triangulation, using pretests, can help determine if participant disclosures are fully articulated, potentially guarded, or intentionally crafted.

Equally important are the skills of the facilitator and recorder. They are participants in the process; their objectivity plays an integral role in the success of the focus group. The posing of questions, the ordering of their questions, the authority they hold, and their interaction in group dynamics are not to be ignored.

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