DEVELOPING FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS FOR NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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The concept of needs assessment is explained to students based on McKillip's (1987) Need Analysis. Need analysis is a tool for decision making that focuses on making judgments concerning the adequacy of services and the existence of solutions. The steps in need analysis include: (1) identification of users and uses, (2) description of the target population and service environment, (3) needs identification (describing the problems and solutions), (4) needs assessment (evaluating the needs), and (5) communication to decision makers.

One of the techniques that can be used for needs identification is the focus group interview. According to Krueger (1988), "The focus group interview is created to accomplish a specific purpose through a defined process. The process is to obtain information of a qualitative nature from a predetermined and limited number of people" (p. 26). A focus group study consists of conceptualizing the study, developing the questions, conducting the interviews, and analyzing and reporting the results of the data gathered. The activity described here provides students with a "conceptualized study," guidelines for developing questions, and an opportunity to apply those guidelines to a hypothetical study.

MATERIALS

I have developed a handout that describes the basic problem that emanates from the poor performance of deaf students in elementary and high school, and the university's desire to conduct outreach research that can enhance student performance. In order to begin such an outreach program, the university is proposing that a needs assessment be conducted to define the institutional contexts, identify the target population and assess their needs,

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diagnose problems underlying the needs, and identify ways to overcome barriers to conducting research in the schools.

PROCEDURES

1. Students should already be aware of the process for planning an evaluation. I used the model explained by Brinkerhoff, Brethower, Hluchyj, and Nowakowski (1983) to develop the first three steps of the evaluation plan for the hypothetical study.

2. The conceptual background of needs assessment is explained in class and students are required to read McKillip's (1987) *Need Analysis*.

3. The basic concepts of focus group interviews are explained. (See the opening discussion and Krueger, 1988.)

4. The following characteristics of focus group questions are explained (see Krueger, 1988):

   a. Usually focused interviews include less than ten questions and often around five or six total.
   b. Focus group interviews use open-ended questions. So, instead of asking, "Does your child play at the playground?", ask "Where does your child usually play?"
   c. Avoid asking dichotomous questions that can be answered yes or no.
   d. Avoid using "why" questions. These questions can set off a defensive reaction by the respondent. Modify the question, such as "What prompted you to want to participate in the program?"
   e. Carefully develop the questions. Brainstorming sessions with colleagues or audience members is one way to generate questions. Many questions can be generated this way and then priorities can be established to determine critical questions.
   f. Establish the context for questions so participants are ready to respond. Provide enough information in each question so that the participants know where you are coming from.
   g. Questions should be arranged in a logical order, sometimes from general to specific.

5. Provide the students with examples of focus group interview questions. Sessions and Yanos (1987) conducted focus group interviews to determine desirable characteristics of a counseling agency. They asked such questions as:

   a. What qualities would one look for in a counselor?
   b. What type of office setting would be preferable for the provision of counseling services?