Choosing the Right Assessment Method:
Focus Groups

Definition:
Focus groups consist of samples of individuals (usually 5 to 15 individuals in one focus group) chosen to explore perceptions of a specific population. They are used to elicit qualitative responses from individuals that can provide more detailed information than surveys. Typically this type of interaction is developed and conducted by the Office of Institutional Effectiveness. The interview material is developed in conjunction with a service unit’s members based on the purpose or goals of such an interview. The Office of Institutional Effectiveness, based on parameters set by the service unit, aggregates the results. The unit can use these results for discussion, analysis, and improvement.

- **Advantages:**
  - Can provide more detailed and unexpected information than quantitative data.
  - Unlike surveys, potentially confusing questions can be clarified by the facilitator.
  - Allows the facilitator to explore unanticipated issues that may arise during conversation.
  - Results can be gathered in a quick amount of time.
  - Helpful to design surveys for future use.

- **Disadvantages:**
  - Topics must be restricted and carefully chosen to guide discussion.
  - The facilitator of the discussion must remain neutral during the discussion, so as to not bias results.
  - Results can be difficult to analyze.
  - Can generate “group think,” the tendency for people in a group to conform with the opinions and decisions of the most outspoken members of the group.
  - Groups can be difficult to assemble.
  - Generalizations from the sample to the population cannot be made.

- **Ways to reduce Disadvantages:**
  - Offer an incentive for students to participate.
  - Over-recruit students to participate in case some drop out.
  - Train facilitators to ask questions in particular ways (e.g., utilize open-ended questions, probes, pauses).