

Promoting Reentry Success through Continuity of Educational Opportunities

Focus Group Facilitation Guide: Program Staff

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Participants (maximum of 12 per focus group): Members of leadership or advisory groups working on the PRSCEO project

Time: 1 hour

Introduction (5 minutes): As participants arrive, the facilitator will hand them the informed consent forms and ask each person to complete a form and return it to her. When everyone is present and the consent forms are completed, the facilitator will say:

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this focus group. My name is [facilitator name] and I will be leading the discussion today. My job is to evaluate the Department of Education's PRSCEO project, which you may know as [local project name]. The purpose of this project is to help participants continue their education when they return to the community after release from [prison/jail], and I am trying to learn more about how the project is working.

We really appreciate you being here today and sharing your experiences with this project. We think it's important to get your perspectives, and what you tell us today will help us improve our work in the future. We also want to remind you that your participation in this focus group is voluntary and you are under no obligation to answer any of the questions I will be asking. There really aren't any right or wrong answers to my questions so please feel free to share your point of view even if it's different from others in the group.

I'll be recording the focus group today because I don't want to miss any of your comments, but the only people who will hear the recording are myself and a transcriptionist. The information I learn from you and other participants will be written up in an evaluation report for the Department of Education, but the report will not identify any individual or be published. I want you to feel comfortable talking about your work and ask that you respect each other's confidentiality outside this room.

Does anyone have a question about the focus group or the evaluation? If not, I'm going to go ahead and turn the recorder on and get started. For the first question I'd like to go around the room and hear what each of you has to say, but after that feel free to jump in at any time. I just ask that you speak one at a time to help with the recording.

Questions for Discussion (50 minutes):

- 1) Let's start by having each person introduce themselves. Please give your first name and your role on this committee.
- 2) What challenges do you believe offenders face in continuing their education after release from [correctional facility]?
 - Has the work of the PRSCEO project done anything to help overcome those challenges?
 - What other strategies or resources might be helpful in overcoming those challenges?
- 3) How important are the issues of correctional education and/or the reentry process in your community?
 - Are there elected officials or other local leaders who are supporters in these areas?
 - Are these issues ones that are discussed in public forums? In the media?
 - Are there any citizens groups that are advocating around these issues in your community?
- 4) What, if anything, would you say has changed about correctional education and/or the reentry process in your community over the last year?
 - Do you see these changes as being connected to the PRSCEO project? If not, what has led to these changes?
 - Do you think these changes have made it easier for offenders to continue their education after release?
- 5) Thinking more specifically, have you seen any changes to policies or practices at your own organization or other organizations in your community as a result of this project? What were those changes?
 - Do you think those changes have made it easier for offenders to continue their education after release?
 - Are there other policies or practices currently in place in your community that hinder or help ex-offenders in continuing their educations? What are those?
 - Are there existing policies at the state or national level that hinder or help ex-offenders in continuing their educations? What are those?

- 6) Has the PRSCEO program helped your community develop new strategic partnerships around correctional education? Expand existing partnerships?
- What new or expanded services are being offered as a result of these partnerships?
 - Have relationships among the various partners working on this project changed over the last year? In what ways?
 - To what extent have these partnerships played a part in improving educational outcomes for this population?
- 7) Have you seen any additional resources (monetary or otherwise) being devoted to correctional education and/or reentry after incarceration in your community as a result of this project? What resources are those?
- To what extent have these additional resources played a part in improving educational outcomes for this population?
- 8) What pieces are still missing in correctional education and/or the reentry process in your community?
- What plans, if any, do you have to address those gaps?
 - Is there a need for additional resources devoted to correctional education and/or the reentry process? What kind of resources? Where should the resources be targeted?
 - Are there areas in which additional strategic partnerships are needed to improve correctional education and/or the reentry process in your community? What sorts of partnerships would be most beneficial?
- 9) What steps are you taking to sustain the work of this project once the PRSCEO grant ends?

Wrap-up (5 minutes): Facilitator will briefly summarize key points from the conversation and say:

The purpose of today's conversation was to learn how [local project name] may have changed the reentry process in your region. We really appreciate the chance to get your input and want to make sure that we have covered all the important points. Is there anything we've missed or that you would like to add?

Participants (maximum of 8 per focus group):

Group 1) Community counselors or case managers

Group 2) Community corrections and/or probation and parole officers

Time: 1 hour

Introduction (5 minutes): As participants arrive, the facilitator will hand them the informed consent forms and ask each person to complete a form and return it to her. When everyone is present and the consent forms are completed, the facilitator will say:

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this focus group. My name is [facilitator name] and I will be leading the discussion today. My job is to evaluate the Department of Education's PRSCEO project, which you may know as [local project name]. The purpose of this project is to help participants continue their education when they return to the community after release from [prison/jail], and I am trying to learn more about how the project is working.

We really appreciate you being here today and sharing your experiences with this project. We think it's important to get your perspectives, and what you tell us today will help us improve our work in the future. We also want to remind you that your participation in this focus group is voluntary and you are under no obligation to answer any of the questions I will be asking. There really aren't any right or wrong answers to my questions so please feel free to share your point of view even if it's different from others in the group.

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Does anyone have a question about the focus group or the evaluation? If not, I'm going to go ahead and turn the recorder on and get started. For the first question I'd like to go around the room and hear what each of you has to say, but after that feel free to jump in at any time. I just ask that you speak one at a time to help with the recording.

Questions for Discussion (50 minutes):

- 1) Let's start by having each person introduce themselves. Please give your first name and a bit about where you work and what you do there.
- 2) To what extent do you play a part—formal or informal—in supporting your clients' educational goals?
- 3) What challenges do your clients face in continuing their education after release from [correctional facility]?
 - Has the work of this project done anything to help overcome those challenges?
 - What other strategies or resources might be helpful in overcoming those challenges?
- 4) Have you seen any changes to policies at [correctional facility] or [community education provider] or your own organization as a result of this project? What were those changes?
 - Have those changes had any impact on how you do your job?
 - Do you think those changes have made it easier for your clients to continue their education after release? In what ways?
 - Are there other policies currently in place that hinder or help your clients in obtaining educational services? What are those?
- 5) Beyond your clients themselves and your immediate supervisors, do you work with anyone else to help support your clients' educational goals? If so, who do you work with and in what ways?
 - What sorts of working relationships do you have with staff at [correctional facility]? At [community education provider]? In other community organizations and/or community corrections?
- 6) Have you received any training as part of this project? If so, what did the training cover?

- Did you find the training useful to your work? In what ways?
 - Is there training you have not received that you think would be helpful to you? If so, what type of training?
- 7) Let's talk a bit more about the specifics of your work. What procedure do you follow when you first meet with a new reentry client?
- Does that meeting take place at [correctional facility] or after the client is released?
 - Has that procedure changed since the project began? In what way?
 - What information is available to you on your client's educational background and/or career interests?
 - If your client has been taking classes while incarcerated, what do you do to help them continue that education after reentry into the community?
 - How easy is it for your clients to enroll in classes at [community education provider]? What factors make that process easy (or hard) for them?
 - Do you work directly with staff at [community education provider] to help your clients enroll in educational programs?
 - Do you track educational enrollment as part of your work with reentry clients?
 - Do you do any outreach with clients who have stopped attending classes?
- 8) In general, what do you talk about with your reentry clients in terms of education, especially in relationship to careers or jobs?
- Where do you get information on educational programs available in the community?
 - How do you decide what educational program or class may be right for a client? Do you have information about labor market needs and/or restrictions on jobs for those with criminal histories that can help you assess whether or not a program makes sense for a particular client?
- 9) What other services are most important for your reentry clients?
- Has this project had any impact on availability of those services or on making it easier to connect clients to services? If so, how?
 - What services are still hard for your clients to obtain? Do you know of any community efforts to expand access to those services?

Wrap-up (5 minutes): Facilitator will briefly summarize key points from the conversation and say:

The purpose of today's conversation was to learn how [local project name] may have changed the reentry process in your region. We really appreciate the chance to get your input and want to make sure that we have covered all the important points. Is there anything we've missed or that you would like to add?

Participants (maximum of 8 per focus group): Correctional officers, counselors, and/or reentry coordinators working in participating correctional facility

Time: 1 hour

Introduction (5 minutes): As participants arrive, the facilitator will hand them the informed consent forms and ask each person to complete a form and return it to her. When everyone is present and the consent forms are completed, the facilitator will say:

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this focus group. My name is [facilitator name] and I will be leading the discussion today. My job is to evaluate the Department of Education's PRSCEO project, which you may know as [local project name]. The purpose of this project is to help participants continue their education when they return to the community after release from [prison/jail], and I am trying to learn more about how the project is working.

We really appreciate you being here today and sharing your experiences with this project. We think it's important to get your perspectives, and what you tell us today will help us improve our work in the future. We also want to remind you that your participation in this focus group is voluntary and you are under no obligation to answer any of the questions I will be asking. There really aren't any right or wrong answers to my questions so please feel free to share your point of view even if it's different from others in the group.

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Does anyone have a question about the focus group or the evaluation? If not, I'm going to go ahead and turn the recorder on and get started. For the first question I'd like to go around the room and hear what each of you has to say, but after that feel free to jump in at any time. I just ask that you speak one at a time to help with the recording.

Questions for Discussion (50 minutes):

- 1) Let's start by having each person introduce themselves. Please give your first name and a bit about what you do at [correctional facility].
- 2) To what extent do you play a part—formal or informal—in supporting inmates' educational goals?
 - Do you believe that encouraging inmates to get an education is an appropriate role for you to play?
 - To what extent do you think inmates are serious about wanting to pursue educational goals? What has led you to reach this conclusion?
- 3) What challenges do inmates face in participating in educational programs while incarcerated?
 - Has the work of this project done anything to help overcome those challenges?
 - What other strategies or resources might be helpful in overcoming those challenges?
- 4) Have you seen any changes to policies here at [correctional facility] as a result of [local project name]? What were those changes?
 - Do you think those changes have made it easier for inmates to participate and persist in educational programs?
 - Are there other policies currently in place that hinder or help inmates in obtaining and/or completing educational services? What are those?
- 5) How are education services coordinated with other services such as mental health or drug treatment and with inmate jobs at your facility? What other organizations are involved in this work?
 - What sorts of working relationships do you have with staff at [community education provider]? In community corrections? At local social service agencies?

- 6) Have you received any training as part of this project? If so, what did the training cover?
- Did you find the training useful to your work? In what ways?
 - Is there training you have not received that you think would be helpful to you? If so, what type of training?
- 7) Let's talk a bit more about the specifics of your work. What procedure do you follow when an inmate arrives at [correctional facility]?
- Has that procedure changed since the project began? In what way?
 - What sort of information do you collect about the inmate's educational background and/or career interests? How is this information obtained?
 - Do you work with the inmate to develop a program plan that might include education? If so, what all is included in that plan?
 - How do you decide what educational program may be right for a particular inmate? Do you have information about labor market needs and/or restrictions on jobs for those with criminal histories that can help you assess whether or not a program makes sense for an inmate?
- 8) How would an inmate go about enrolling in an educational program at [correctional facility]?
- Is there an application process? If so, how does that work? Has this process changed since the project began? In what way?
 - How easy is it for your inmates to enroll in educational programs while incarcerated? What factors make that process easy (or hard) for them?
 - What sorts of things might happen that would prevent an inmate from completing a class in which he or she had enrolled?
 - Are there any strategies you use to help ensure that inmates are able to keep participating in educational programs?
- 9) Tell me about the procedure you follow when an inmate is scheduled for release.
- Has that procedure changed since the project began? In what way?
 - What sorts of topics do you cover with inmates while they are going through the prerelease process?
 - Does the prerelease process include information on continuing in educational programs? Who provides this information? To what extent are education staff members involved in this process? Do you provide any in-reach services from community education providers?
 - Do you work with the inmate to revise their education and career plan? If so, what areas do you focus on?
 - Do you work directly with staff at [community education provider] to help inmates enroll in educational programs after release?
 - What educational records are given to the inmate at the time of release (e.g. assessment scores, transcripts)?
 - Do community corrections staff and/or staff at [community education provider] have access to educational records for newly released inmates?

Wrap-up (5 minutes): Facilitator will briefly summarize key points from the conversation and say:

The purpose of today's conversation was to learn how [local project name] may have changed the reentry process in your region. We really appreciate the chance to get your input and want to make sure that we have covered all the important points. Is there anything we've missed or that you would like to add?

Participants (maximum of 8 per focus group): Adult education instructors (working in correctional facility or at community education provider)

Time: 1 hour

Introduction (5 minutes): As participants arrive, the facilitator will hand them the informed consent forms and ask each person to complete a form and return it to her. When everyone is present and the consent forms are completed, the facilitator will say:

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this focus group. My name is [facilitator name] and I will be leading the discussion today. My job is to evaluate the Department of Education's PRSCEO project, which you may know as [local project name]. The purpose of this project is to help participants continue their education when they return to the community after release from [prison/jail], and I am trying to learn more about how the project is working.

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Does anyone have a question about the focus group or the evaluation? If not, I'm going to go ahead and turn the recorder on and get started. For the first question I'd like to go around the room and hear what each of you has to say, but after that feel free to jump in at any time. I just ask that you speak one at a time to help with the recording.

Questions for Discussion (50 minutes):

- 1) Let's start by having each person introduce themselves. Please give your first name, a bit about what courses you teach, and what experience you have working with incarcerated students and/or ex-offenders.
- 2) What challenges do your students face in continuing their education after release from [correctional facility]?
 - Has the work of this project done anything to help overcome those challenges?
 - What other strategies or resources might be helpful in overcoming those challenges?
 - For those who teach at [community education provider], do you do any outreach with students who have stopped coming to classes? Do you have a sense of why students drop out of classes, and if so, what are those reasons?
- 3) Have you seen any changes to policies at [correctional facility] or [community education provider] as a result of this project? What were those changes?
 - Do you think those changes have made it easier for your students to continue their education after release?
 - Are there other policies currently in place that hinder or help your work? What are those?
- 4) Beyond your students themselves and your immediate supervisors, who do you work most closely with to help your students further their education?
 - What sorts of working relationships do you have with staff at [correctional facility]? In community corrections? In social services agencies in the community? In workforce agencies? At other educational providers?
 - Do you find that these staff members are supportive of students' efforts to continue their education? If so, in what ways? If not, does this lack of support create problems for students?
- 5) Have you received any training as part of this project? If so, what did the training cover?

- Did you find the training useful to your work? In what ways?
 - Is there training you have not received that you think would be helpful to you? If so, what type of training?
- 6) Let's talk a bit more about the specifics of your work. Has working with this project changed the content or instructional methods you use in your classes? If so, in what way?
- Have there been changes to the curriculum or materials you use in your classes?
 - Are you using cognitive-based skills instruction in your classes? Could you give some examples of that type of instruction?
 - How much focus do you place on career preparation in your classes? How is that material incorporated into the curriculum?
 - Do you have access to technology in your classes? If so, how do you use it?
 - What opportunities do your students have to work collaboratively or help each other with school work?
- 7) What procedure do you follow when you first meet with a new student?
- How does the procedure differ for those who teach in [correctional facility] versus those who teach at [community education provider]?
 - Has that procedure changed since the project began? In what way?
 - What data do you collect when you first start working with students? How do you use that data?
- 8) For those who teach in the correctional facility, how do you work with a student who will soon be released and wants to continue his or her education?
- Has that procedure changed since the project began? In what way?
 - Do you give the students any materials or information to take with them after release?
 - Do you communicate about the student with an instructor or administrator at [community education provider]? If so, what information or data do you give them?
 - How easy is it for your students to enroll in classes at [community education provider]? What factors make that process easy (or hard) for them?

Wrap-up (5 minutes): Facilitator will briefly summarize key points from the conversation and say:

The purpose of today's conversation was to learn how [local project name] may have changed the reentry process in your region. We really appreciate the chance to get your input and want to make sure that we have covered all the important points. Is there anything we've missed or that you would like to add?