Conducting Interviews for Assessment & Research

Interviews can be a useful means of extracting more detailed information when doing research and assessment. The answers to “how” and “why” questions can become clearer through interviews, especially when used to provide insight to data collected through a survey.

There are several interview types, but most fall into one of these categories:

- **Structured** – The interviewer works from a clearly defined set of questions with no room to stray from the interview protocol. Questions are more likely to be closed-ended and similar to those asked in a survey.

- **Semi-Structured** – This format is less controlled and the interviewer has some freedom to vary how the interview is conducted based on participants’ answers. The order in which questions are asked or how they are asked can be left to the interviewer’s discretion. This interview follows a protocol, which guides the process, but allows for open discussion about the topic.

- **Unstructured** – This interview type is less planned and outlined than the others and often occurs during a field observation. For example, questions posed to students while they are participating in an event or activity to learn more about their experience would likely be unstructured.

Tips for Successful Interviews (Schuh, 2009)

**The Interviewer**

- Have an interest in the topic
- Develop rapport and trust with the participants
- Listen actively; talk less
- Use positive body language
- Be careful not to lead, but to follow up on what is being said
- Don’t interrupt
- Maintain eye contact if culturally appropriate
- Don’t show discomfort, even if responses make you uncomfortable
- Share personal stories sparingly
- Be patient and comfortable with silences
- Avoid a counseling relationship

**The Interview**

- Ask open-ended questions
- Avoid closed-ended questions that encourage yes/no responses
- Avoid leading questions
• Ask “what” rather than “why” unless there is a specific reason
• Ask direct questions, rather than asking participants to remember
• Explore laughter – it can mask a number of responses
• Maintain the focus of the interview at all times
• Ask for concrete details, examples, and stories

Follow-Up
• Record notes right after the interview
• Notes should include details about the setting, participant interactions and non-verbal cues you observed
• Transcribe interviews soon afterward while the experience is fresh
• Record your personal impressions of the interview
• Thank participants for their time
• Follow up on any confusing responses or points that need to be clarified

Asking Good Questions

Consider the following prompts:
• How did you feel…?
• What are you perceptions of…?
• Tell me about a time when...
• What is your opinion of…?
• Why do you feel this way…?
• Describe what that experience was like...