

INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

Joyce S. Sterling

University of Denver Sturm College of Law

This session on interviews and focus groups will pick up where the survey session stopped. In the survey session, you discussed when surveys are useful for collecting data on law students and law graduates. However, there are many areas of research that do not lend themselves to survey research, or where researchers need qualitative research to understand individual experiences, and processes that are not conducive to quantitative research design. We want to focus on the use of studies such as *After the JD* as illustrative of how to study research questions in legal education that require more in-depth material than that provided by survey data. Among the questions we will address in this session:

- 1) What subjects did we find needed to be elaborated on by in-person interviews?
- 2) How do you structure the questions in an in-person interview?
- 3) Should you use a combination of close-ended and open-ended questions, or focus exclusively on open-ended questions?
- 4) The value of interviews to probe the experiences of particular segments of the law school population: e.g., experiences of lawyers of color; women; disabled lawyers, etc.
- 5) Does it matter where I interview a person? (home vs. office, vs. Starbucks, etc.)
- 6) Should I record my in-person interviews or just take notes?
- 7) Do I need to guarantee confidentiality? If so, what should I say to encourage a potential respondent to agree to cooperate?
- 8) Who should conduct the in-person interviews? (e.g., students, faculty, or persons hired from outside of the educational institution?)

A second part of this session will be concentrate on Focus Groups. Here we want contrast the use of in-person interviews with focus groups. It is important to recognize that while in-depth interviews generate detailed information about individual respondents' experiences, perspectives, and

histories, in contrast, focus groups are collective interviews that generate data from group interaction of the participants . In-depth interviews tend to focus on questions of “what”, “why”, and “how”, rather than the “how many” of survey research. While the in-depth interview provides data rich with complexity, nuance, and the uniqueness of each participant, a focus group is basically a group interview intended to gather group perceptions and experiences. The data from focus groups are generated by interaction of the group participants. Members will listen, reflect on what others say and then provide input about their own perspective. The situations most conducive to focus group research should involve topics that need more exploratory designs prior to designing either in-depth interviews or surveys. We will use as an example of Focus Group research the case of evaluating the effectiveness of “experiential learning” in legal education.