

Assessment Notes

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One-On-One Interviews: A Qualitative Assessment Approach

by Cristin Bates, Claire Droste, Lee Cuba, and Joseph Swingle

INTRODUCTION

The following information is adapted from slides from the presentation “Qualitative Assessment and Student-Faculty Collaborations,” by Cristin Bates (Wellesley College '08), Claire Droste (Wellesley College '10), Lee Cuba (Wellesley College Professor of Sociology), and Joseph Swingle (Wellesley College Assistant Professor of Sociology) at the Mixed-Method Assessment Meeting for Wabash National Study institutions held at the Center of Inquiry in March 2008.

In their presentation, Cuba, Swingle, Bates, and Droste discussed using student interviews in a collaborative project between a consortium of seven New England institutions, including Wellesley College, and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. This project was designed to explore student learning, better understand the transition from high school to college, and learn how students make important academic and social decisions during college. The institutions involved in the project trained students to become interviewers, with faculty supervision.

For further questions about this material, please contact Lee Cuba at lcuba@wellesley.edu or Joe Swingle at jswingle@wellesley.edu.

I. ADVANTAGES OF STUDENTS INTERVIEWING STUDENTS

Students vs. Faculty as Interviewers

- Students go through the training process with peers.
- Process makes students accountable for important research.
- Students are better able to build rapport and connect with other students.
- Students stay in the role more consistently than faculty.
- See Appendix A for an example of an interview conducted by a student.

Certain “Type” of Student Makes a Good Interviewer

- Academically sound
- Able to maintain motivation
- Disciplined
- Socially comfortable
- Able to work independently

Students Develop Research Skills

- Provides an opportunity to utilize and hone research methods and skills.
- Can be a valuable experience for social science majors.
- Learn how to make the connection between qualitative and quantitative data.

Student Interviewers Collaborate with Faculty Supervisors

- Experience provides opportunities for later independent research projects.
- Students build unique relationships with faculty members, enriching their academic experience.
- Students are able to collaborate with faculty members on common areas of interest.

II. INTERVIEWER TRAINING

Agenda for Two-Day Training Workshop for Student Interviewers at Wellesley College:

- Overview of approaches
- Watch two interviewers in action:
 - Matt Lauer interviewing Tom Cruise
 - Michael Moore interviewing Charlton Heston
- Review interviewing techniques, including “The 10 Commandments of Interviewing” (see Appendix B).
- Training with digital voice recorders
- Students conduct mock interviews with role playing
- Discuss ethical obligations
- Preparing for the first interview
 - Division of labor: faculty supervisor and student interviewer
 - Prepping for and conducting the first interview

A. TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

The table below illustrates the features of three types of interviews, showing the differences between structured interviews typically used by survey researchers and less structured interviews that tend to be the practice of researchers collecting qualitative data.

Qualitative interviews:		
Structured interviews	Semi-structured interviews	Unstructured interviews
➤ Interviewer follows scripted questions; no deviations from question order. ➤ Wording of each question asked exactly as written. ➤ No adjusting of level of language. ➤ No clarifications or answering of questions about the interview. ➤ No additional questions may be added. ➤ Similar in format to a pencil-and-paper survey (although the latter almost always uses fixed responses).	➤ Asymmetrical structure ➤ IR initiates questions and poses probes in response to IE's descriptions. ➤ Questions may be re-ordered during the interview. ➤ Level of language may be adjusted. ➤ Interviewer may answer questions and make clarifications. ➤ Interviewer may add or delete probes to interview between subsequent subjects.	➤ Free-flowing conversation. ➤ Completely unstructured. ➤ No set order to any questions. ➤ Both IR and IE initiate questions and discuss topics. ➤ Level of language may be adjusted. ➤ Interviewer may answer questions and make clarifications. ➤ Interviewer may add or delete questions between interviews.

IR = Interviewer; IE = Interviewee

Table adapted from Berg, B. L. (2004). *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences* (5th ed., p.79) Boston: Pearson.

The Structured Interview Approach

Responses from a structured interview form, such as the Student Satisfaction Survey below, can be tallied to get an overall snapshot of information. For example, responses from the Student Satisfaction Survey can provide an overall picture of students' satisfaction with college experiences. The levels of satisfaction can also be cross-tabulated with other data, such as ethnicity or major, to compare levels of satisfaction among subgroups.

Example of a Structured Interview Form

Student Satisfaction Survey

How satisfied are you with each of the following aspects of your college experiences so far?

	Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very Satisfied	No Basis for Judgement
1) Quality of first-year advising	0	0	0	0	0
2) Quality of advising by the class dean	0	0	0	0	0
3) Quality of informal advising by faculty	0	0	0	0	0
4) Quality of peer tutoring through the Learning and Teaching Center	0	0	0	0	0
5) Quality of professional tutoring through the Learning and Teaching Center	0	0	0	0	0
6) Center for Work and Service	0	0	0	0	0
7) Financial Aid office/services	0	0	0	0	0
8) Recreational and intramural athletics	0	0	0	0	0
9) Life in the residence halls	0	0	0	0	0
10) Climate for minority students on campus	0	0	0	0	0
11) Student government	0	0	0	0	0
12) Opportunities for religious practice	0	0	0	0	0
13) Student clubs and organizations	0	0	0	0	0
14) Social life on campus	0	0	0	0	0
15) Safety	0	0	0	0	0
16) Support for diversity	0	0	0	0	0
17) Ability to find a social group you felt a part of	0	0	0	0	0
18) Accommodation for people with disabilities	0	0	0	0	0
19) Career preparation	0	0	0	0	0
20) Preparation for life	0	0	0	0	0
21) Sports/athletic facilities	0	0	0	0	0

Exploring the Limitations of Structured Interviews

- Do close-ended survey questions cover the most relevant and interesting dimensions of student experience?
- Do survey questions include all salient response options?
- Do responses recorded at one point in time mask changes over time? Is it safe to assume a student's attitude is stable?
- What events led the respondent to her current state of satisfaction/dissatisfaction? What was the process?
- What is the respondent's frame of reference when responding to these questions? Would she qualify her response if given a chance to do so?
- Can we say for sure the source of a respondent's satisfaction or dissatisfaction? Do we know what cause stands out most for her?

Qualitative Interviews

A Qualitative Interview Is a Good Choice When the Goal Is

- To obtain understanding through detailed examples and rich narratives.
- To ascertain the meanings of actions and experiences and the sentiments underlying expressed opinions.
- To shed new light on puzzling questions.
- To unravel complicated events and events that evolve over time.
- To identify variables and to frame hypotheses for future survey research.

A Good Qualitative Interview Builds on Conversational Skills

- We routinely ask questions and listen to answers.
- We know about conversational turn-taking.
- We know when to talk at length and when to be brief.
- We know when it's OK to change the subject.

But a Qualitative Interview Differs from a Conversation

- As a research tool, it imposes different social roles.
- A greater intensity of listening leads to active listening.
- The interviewer keeps the interview focused on his or her agenda.
- The interviewer is challenged to obtain full and detailed responses.

B. TWO INTERVIEWERS IN ACTION: MATT LAUER AND MICHAEL MOORE

Students compared Lauer's and Moore's interview styles using the following questions:

- What kinds of questions does each interviewer ask? How does he pose them?
- How does the interviewer listen and ask questions? Interact with interviewee?
- Does he use effective probes?
- How do the interviewer and interviewee react to one another?
- What do you think of the interviewer's body language? The interviewee's?

To see Matt Lauer's interview with Tom Cruise, go to: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8343367/>. To see Michael Moore's interview with Charlton Heston, go to: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q1iuEcu7O50>.

C. INTERVIEW TECHNIQUES

An Experienced Interviewer Will

- Ask clear, short, open-ended questions, such as how, what, and why questions.
- Use appropriate follow-up probes.
- Follow up on key terms ("markers").
- Listen carefully (active listening).
- Elicit detailed responses to the questions.
- Elicit data relating to the research topic.

Some Generic Probes

- "You mentioned _____, tell me more about that."
- "You mentioned _____, what was that like for you?"
- "You talked about _____, describe that experience in as much detail as possible."
- "What else happened?"
- "What were your feelings about that?"

- “It sounds as though you had a pretty strong reaction.”
- “It sounds like you’re saying”

When Problems Arise During the Interview

Workshop participants also discussed some of the problems that can occur when conducting interviews:

- Dealing with reluctant interviewees
- Dealing with strong emotions
- What to do when an interviewee is in “trouble”
 - Addressing direct requests for advice and help
 - Volunteering advice and help
- Dealing with health- or life-threatening attitudes or behaviors
- Dealing with illegal activity
- Maintaining a professional relationship

D. MOCK INTERVIEWS AND ROLE PLAYING

Students conducted mock interviews for another training exercise. One student played the part of the interviewer, asking a question about academic plans or about what defines a successful year (questions shown below). The other student reacted to the questions by playing out a role assigned by the workshop facilitators (described in bullets below), enabling the interviewer to practice handling “problematic” situations.

- Question #3: Did you have well-defined academic plans upon your arrival at college?
 - At some point direct the question back to your interviewer and ask if she had well-defined plans when she arrived for her first semester. If she ducks the question, try one more time. If she ducks again, then drop your line of questioning. You don’t want to be too much of a nuisance here.
- Question #8: What is your definition of a successful year?
 - Respond in a way that seeks the approval—and more probing—from your interviewer: “Do you think it’s silly if I say something like, ‘I just want to survive?’” Stop and wait to hear what your interviewer has to say in response to your question. Let the interview develop naturally after that.

E. ETHICAL OBLIGATIONS FOR INTERVIEWERS

- Avoid deception.
- Be honest about the intended use of the research.
- Obtain the interviewee’s informed consent (see Appendix C for an example of an informed consent form).
- Protect the interviewee’s right to privacy (see Appendix D for an example of a data confidentiality agreement).
- Ensure that the interviewee does not suffer emotionally or socially.

F. FACULTY SUPERVISOR AND STUDENT INTERVIEWER DUTIES

At each institution involved in this project, one faculty member supervised three student interviewers. Each student interviewer was responsible for interviewing 12 students.

Faculty Supervisor Duties

- Assign interviewees to interviewers.
- Locate appropriate spaces for interviews – faculty offices, etc.
- Ensure that interviews are done in timely manner.
- Archive interview summaries and audio recordings.
- Meet periodically with interviewers.
- Assist interviewers in prepping for subsequent interviews.
- Monitor coding of interviews.

Student Interviewer Duties

- Contact students and schedule interviews.
- Obtain a signed copy of the consent form from interviewees.
- Conduct and record interviews in an appropriate setting.
- Complete a post-interview comment sheet for each interview (see Appendix E for an example).
- Submit consent form, audio recording, and post-interview comment sheet to faculty supervisor.

III. COLLECTING INTERVIEW DATA

Methods of Collecting Data from Interviews

- Jotting down notes during the interview itself
- Post-interview comment sheet
- Interview summary

Though the interviews at Wellesley were audio recorded, the interviewers jotted down notes during the interview to remind themselves of points to follow up on without disturbing the flow of the conversation. After the interview was over, interviewers filled out a comment sheet (see Appendix E) or wrote up an interview summary. Post-interview notes can serve as a valuable resource when formulating questions to ask in follow-up interviews, when preparing information to be submitted to college administrators, or when conducting data analysis.

Cristin Bates and Claire Droste were students at Wellesley College when this material was initially presented in March 2008. Cristin graduated in 2008 and Claire will graduate in 2010. Lee Cuba and Joseph Swingle are professors of sociology at Wellesley College. Dr. Cuba is also a Teagle Assessment Scholar with the Center of Inquiry.

Assessment Notes is a publication of the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College.

APPENDIX A

Excerpt of Interview Conducted by a Student	COMMENTS
• INTERVIEWER: And how about your, how about your other classes? How have they gone? • STUDENT: Everything's gone pretty well. What else do I have. I have Macro Economics, <u>Writing 125. Which oddly enough has been the hardest class for me compared to politics.</u> What else do I have? And Intro to Psychology. Yeah, so I don't know. I, I have the same grade in all of them, so I guess that's, that's nice. But yeah, they've all gone pretty well. It's just they're not particularly difficulty, it's just keeping up with all the work, so. • INTERVIEWER: And what's made writing difficult? • STUDENT: I don't know. That's, that's a good question. I don't know, we've, I've had some conference days with my professor and he's kind of told me flat out, like your writing style and I don't really get along. And I was like, okay. So, I guess he was just a little, it was just a little weird in this class, because all of my other, I mean I had to write first semester and I have to write this semester in different classes, and all my other professors love my writing and they're fine with it. And then this, this, just in this particular class it wasn't, it wasn't clicking in the beginning but I think I've improved. I've kind of, I don't know, I've changed my style a little bit to fit more of what he wants. • INTERVIEWER: But it seems like you're going to, are you going to stick with the way you've always written? • STUDENT: Probably. I mean I've definitely gotten, I've definitely learned some, learned how to tighten up my writing in this class, but I don't think I'm going to make any fundamental changes to the way I write.	The student indicates that all courses are going well, except for Writing 125 (underlined section). The interviewer picks up on the student's remark about writing being difficult and probes the topic more deeply. The interviewer probes further still, focusing her question on the particular point of difficulty that the student mentions.
<i>and a little bit later . . .</i> • INTERVIEWER: So we talked a little about each of your classes, right? We've covered, we've caught them all? • STUDENT: Yes.	The interviewer makes sure she has exhausted this line of questioning before moving to the next topic and gives the interviewee a chance to raise other points.

APPENDIX B

The 10 Commandments of Interviewing

1. Never begin an interview cold.
 - Chat and make small talk with interviewee (IE). The goal is to put IE at ease and establish a warm and comfortable rapport.
2. Remember your purpose.
 - You want to obtain information. Try to keep the IE on track. Always have a copy of the interview schedule in front of you—even though you should have your questions memorized.
3. Present a natural front.
 - Even though your questions are memorized, you should be able to ask each one as if it popped into your head. Be relaxed, affirmative, and as natural as you can.
4. Demonstrate aware hearing (active listening).
 - Offer IE appropriate nonverbal responses. If they describe something funny, smile. If they tell you something sad, look sad. Do not present yourself as uninterested or unaware.
5. Think about appearance.
 - Dress appropriately. Convey the message that this interview is important to you.
6. Interview in a comfortable, non-threatening place.
 - Somewhere the IE feels comfortable expressing herself and free of distractions. Also a place where the IE will know that the interview is to be taken seriously. For these reasons, don't conduct interviews in your dorm room or the IE's dorm room.
7. Don't be satisfied with monosyllabic answers.
 - Be aware when subjects begin giving yes-and-no answers. When this does occur, be sure to probe.
8. Be respectful.
 - Make sure the IE feels that he or she is an integral part of your research and that any answer is appreciated and wonderful. Often IEs will say things like, "You don't really want to know how I feel about that." Assure them that you really do!
9. Practice, practice, and practice some more.
 - The only way to get really good at interviewing—establishing rapport, making smooth transitions from one question to the next, eliciting in-depth responses, making good use of probes, etc.—is to practice. Be patient with your "mistakes" and missed opportunities for follow-ups—your interviewing skills will improve over time.
10. Be cordial and appreciative.
 - Remember to thank the subject when you finish and answer any questions he or she might have about the research.

From Berg, B. L. (2004). *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences* (5th ed, pp. 110–111.) Boston: Pearson.

APPENDIX C

Consent Form – Students at Wellesley signed the following consent form before participating in the interviews.

CONSENT FORM

TITLE OF STUDY: Educational Practices and Student Learning in Selective Liberal Arts Colleges

STUDY INVESTIGATOR(S):

Lee Cuba, Wellesley College Department of Sociology, [REDACTED]

Joe Swingle, Wellesley College Department of Sociology, [REDACTED]

Invitation to Participate & Study Description

As one of 36 students entering Wellesley College this fall, you are invited to participate in a research study about how college students make the transition from high school to college and about how they experience the first two years of college life. This study will help us better understand how students make decisions about their academic program (e.g., what courses they decide to take or what major they choose) and how they adjust to living at a residential college. By agreeing to participate in this study, you are agreeing to be interviewed three times this year—early in the fall semester, early in the spring semester, and near the end of the spring semester. You will also be interviewed two or three times in your sophomore year. Each interview will take about an hour to complete and will be recorded. Information about you maintained by the college (e.g., what courses you take) will be added to the interview data as part of this study.

Risks & Benefits

This study does not involve any type of physical risk; you will be asked to answer questions about your expectations about college life, your academic and residential experiences, your interactions with friends and family, and your plans for the future. Although this study is not designed to help you personally, the information you contribute will help us better understand how students learn, make decisions, and adjust to living away from their families while at college. The results of this project will be used by staff, faculty and students at Wellesley College to improve and develop programs to support students, both academically and socially. The results of this study will also be made available to interested research participants. Respondents are welcome to contact any one of the study investigators for more information.

Confidentiality

The information you provide will be kept strictly confidential. To protect your privacy, your responses to the interview questions will only be identified with a code number and will be kept by Professor Joe Swingle at Wellesley College. All project materials will be kept for three years after the study has ended, and will be accessible only to members of the research team. Your name will not be associated with your study materials or with the research findings. The information obtained in this study may be published in scientific journals and presented at professional meetings, but only group patterns will be described and your identity will not be revealed.

Your Right to Refuse or Withdraw

The decision to participate in this research project is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study without affecting your relationship with anyone or any office at Wellesley College. You may also choose not to answer any question posed. Your decision will not result in any loss or benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your Right to Ask Questions

You have the right to ask questions about this study and to have those questions answered by any of the study investigators before, during or after the research. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigators, you may contact Nancy Marshall, Chair of the Wellesley College Institutional Review Board at [REDACTED]

Consent

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to participate voluntarily this study and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

Signature of Participant: _____ Date : _____

Name of Participant (PLEASE PRINT): _____

APPENDIX D

Data Confidentiality Agreement – Student interviewers signed the following confidentiality form before beginning the project.

_____ College Data Confidentiality / Non-Disclosure Agreement

As an associate working with _____ College, I recognize that all data collected and maintained by the college are property of _____ and are not for use outside the realm of my work for this project. I agree that my work with these data will be restricted to the terms of my relationship to this specific project.

For the duration of my relationship with the college, I will treat all data that is accessed with the utmost commitment to confidentiality. I will access these data only when required by my duties, and I will not transmit or otherwise share these data with any third parties, nor will I make personal use of these data.

Date:

Project

Name:

Signature:

Printed

Name:

APPENDIX E

Post-Interview Comment Sheet

After they conducted an interview, student interviewers in the Wellesley project filled out the Interview Summary shown below. This information served as a record of the interview and its important points. If the interviewer marked the interview as having lots of interesting detail, she or supervising faculty could listen to it again on the audio recording and analyze it more thoroughly. The interviewer could also use the notes to form follow-up interview questions.

Interview Summary

ID:	
Date:	
Length of interview:	

1. How would you describe the interviewee's overall attitude about college life at the moment: content, frustrated, discouraged, apprehensive, relaxed, etc.?

2. How would you rate the overall quality of the interview? Did the interviewee provide lots of interesting detail or very little? Circle one.

Little interesting detail	Some interesting detail	Lots of interesting detail
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3. Did the interviewee say something noteworthy/interesting in response to one or more of the interview questions? What questions did he/she provide interesting detail, if any?

Question number and/or question topic:	Jot down 3-4 words about what was said:

4. Items that came up in this interview that would be worth following up on during the next interview:

- (a) _____
- (b) _____
- (c) _____
- (d) _____