

Summary

The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (The RP Group) developed this qualitative research guide to provide the institutional research, planning, and effectiveness (IRPE) community and broader California Community Colleges (CCC) system with a foundational resource to describe key components and use cases for qualitative research as a means to inform institutional priorities associated with advancing institutional effectiveness, student success, and equity. Therefore, the methods and practices identified in this guide are provided within the context of supporting community college practitioners with common qualitative research paradigms applicable to campus and educational community improvement priorities.

What is qualitative research?

According to Merriam (2002), qualitative research endeavors to understand and make meaning of phenomena from the participant's perspective. All qualitative research is grounded in the search for meaning and understanding, with the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection, analysis, investigative strategy, and ultimately the descriptive end product. **Qualitative research is a method used to understand “what” people think and “why” they have these thoughts, opinions, or beliefs.** It works to understand the lived experiences of research subjects and is based on social science disciplines including—but not limited to—psychology, sociology, and anthropology.

Qualitative researchers can approach their investigations from a vast array of philosophical or theoretical perspectives. According to Creswell (1998), “traditional” forms of qualitative research include biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. The primary methods employed to gather data and information are one-on-one interviews, focus groups, ethnographic research, case study research, observation, record keeping, and document review. These methods will be described briefly in the section entitled “*Common qualitative research methods.*”

When to use qualitative research

Qualitative research is by definition exploratory, and it is used to define a problem or develop an approach to a problem when we do not know what to expect. It is also used to go deeper into issues of interest and explore nuances related to the problem at hand. Though qualitative research can be conducted within any context, it can be an extremely labor- and resource-intensive endeavor for institutional research offices.

Therefore, researchers should approach qualitative research needs judiciously when time and resources are scarce. Here are some guiding questions to consider when approaching this important work:

- How can we collect a robust, actionable qualitative dataset with minimal investment of time and effort from researchers and their subjects?
- From a time and effort perspective, will these data be used to direct large expenditures over several years, or will they be used to help a relatively small program better serve its students?
- Can the qualitative research questions integrate with other larger research priorities like campus climate surveys or department needs assessment instruments that tend to have high response rates?

Some strengths and limitations of qualitative data

Strengths	Limitations
Can provide a nuanced understanding of the perspectives and needs of participants.	May lend itself to working with smaller populations that may not be well represented in analyses of overall population or groups with larger proportions.
Can help support or explain results indicated in quantitative data analysis.	Data analysis can be time-consuming.
Source of detailed or “rich” information that can be used to identify patterns of behavior.	Analysis can be subjective; there is greater potential for evaluator bias in data analysis/ collection. ¹

Below are some contextualized examples of productive and unproductive use cases for qualitative research in community college settings:

Productive Qualitative Research Example	Unproductive Qualitative Research Example	Methods to Maximize Qualitative Research Productivity
Including a couple of open-ended survey questions in a campus climate survey to better understand why students provided certain Likert scale ratings	Conducting student focus groups to determine why 150 students rated campus climate unfavorably on a recent campus survey	Focus groups can be very labor- and resource-intensive activities and should be utilized judiciously when research questions cannot be answered with other low-cost approaches like surveys
Conducting phone interviews with students who stopped out to determine the reasons why these students decided to stop attending at the college	Administering an electronic survey with 15 open-ended questions to determine the reasons why students decided to stop attending at the college	Though surveys are efficient, they typically are not the most effective means to answer complex research questions that require a large series of open-ended prompts designed to capture substantial amounts of feedback from research subjects
Participating in classroom observations to identify effective teaching practices	Conducting one-on-one faculty interviews to identify effective teaching practices at the college	Observations can be a powerful medium to quickly capture nuanced information to answer research questions

¹It should be noted that quantitative research is not immune to evaluator bias in data analysis/collection.

Common qualitative research methods

CASE STUDY

Stake (1995) defines case study as “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi). Similar to other qualitative research methods, case studies provide a holistic view of context within a defined boundary that helps the researcher establish what will be included within the study. The scope of boundaries could limit the research to a person, group of people, a classroom, an institution, a policy, or any given unit of study. According to Merriam (1998), case studies in educational research can be categorized into four main groups:

1. Ethnographic: explore how people behave in cultural settings;
2. Historical: use data and information to understand context over a period of time;
3. Psychological: examine individuals to analyze their behavior; and
4. Sociological: focus on social constructs and employ demographics to explore a case.

ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

In-depth interviews are one of the most common qualitative research methods. This conversational approach invites opportunities to connect with research subjects on a personal level to gather data and information. **The primary advantage to one-on-one interviews is the ability to quickly establish trust with participants in order to gather precise and, in some cases, controversial or closely held information.** Interviews can be performed in-person, over the phone, or via virtual meeting software. If at all possible, the researcher should request permission from the interviewee to record interview sessions to ensure that they can remain present throughout the interview without fear of missing important details shared by the research subjects.

FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups are interviews that tend to have six to 10 interviewees who are asked a series of questions over a one- to two-hour time period. If at all possible, the researcher should request permission from the interviewee to record interview sessions to ensure that they can remain present throughout the interview without fear of missing important details shared by the research subjects. The focus group interview format provides several benefits over one-on-one interviews, including—but not limited to—the following:

- It allows the researcher to quickly increase the sample size and concentrate the interviewer’s time and effort by interviewing many subjects in a single session.
- There are opportunities to explore complex topics, generate multiple hypotheses, and assess consensus.
- It facilitates candid sharing of information by interviewees due to group validation and interaction dynamics.

GROUNDED THEORY

This qualitative research method rests on the principle that theories emerge from the qualitative data and are used to explain phenomena. Unlike most cases where researchers have a specific sample, grounded theory seeks to achieve theoretical saturation or a point at which no new data exists. Once the qualitative data becomes redundant, data collection is complete and theories emerge. According to Patton (2002), the central research question for grounded theory is, “What theory emerges from systematic comparative analysis is grounded in fieldwork so as to explain what has been and is observed?” (p. 133).

PHENOMENOLOGY

Both a research method as well as a philosophy, phenomenology focuses on understanding the subjective meanings that people allocate to the world around them. Phenomenology is used to understand subjects' life experiences and is primarily conducted through interviews. According to Patton (2002), the central research question for phenomenology is, "What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people?" (p. 132).

Key components of effective, equity-minded qualitative research in community colleges

California's 116 community colleges represent the largest system of higher education in the nation, dedicated to helping students of all backgrounds improve their social and economic mobility. As such, social justice and equity are key principles and values that CCC practitioners must incorporate throughout their work to elevate and empower diverse student populations. Qualitative research can provide a key lever to aid and reinforce these constructs if managed appropriately. This section provides an overview of some frames researchers can employ to ground qualitative research design and facilitation in social justice and equity.

CULTURALLY COMPETENT AND PROFICIENT RESEARCH FRAMES

The concept of cultural competency manifests in the ability to navigate cultures different from one's own, which is a foundational necessity for social justice research (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013). Cultural proficiency takes the paradigm a step further and is grounded in educating all students to high levels through knowing, valuing, and using their cultural backgrounds, languages, and learning styles as assets within the context of teaching and learning (Center for Culturally Proficient Educational Practice, 2018).

In order to demonstrate cultural competency and proficiency, CCC researchers need to understand their own status and position within the educational community and how their power and privilege could potentially impact data collection and analysis in relation to the community under study. Researcher biases and influence on social justice research can be minimized by:

- employing researcher self-examination, reflection, and communication to build awareness and expose potential research assumptions and biases;
- investing time to understand participants' cultural histories, values, norms, customs, traditions, and relevant policies impacting them; and
- using culturally competent language to demonstrate respect and a sense of connection with participants.

If significant differences exist between the demographics of the researcher and participants due to education level, privilege, race, disability, gender, sexual orientation, and/or veteran status, the researcher is considered a cultural outsider and should strongly consider organizing a research team that includes cultural insiders. **Diversity among the research team is critical and demonstrates a commitment to thoughtful research design, intentionality, and validity.** Researchers should secure research team members with key traits in common with student participants, especially if the study seeks to understand the experiences of a particular student group. If the research team is unable to locate members of the key demographic or sociocultural groups under study to participate throughout the entire research project, they should consider having a cultural insider review the focus group/ interview questions and protocols before initiating the study. If the researcher simply cannot secure any involvement from campus or community partners with key student traits, then it is critically important for the researcher involved to be aware and respectful of these fundamental differences when designing the study, recruiting participants, collecting the data, evaluating results, and sharing findings.

RECRUITMENT AND DATA COLLECTION

From recruitment through dissemination, researchers have ample opportunity to demonstrate respect for and understanding of equity issues and injustices impacting participants' communities. For example, respect for low-income communities may require recognition that subjects have long work hours without scheduling flexibility and childcare and/or transportation constraints. Scheduling and incentives/compensation should be appropriately scaled to meet participants' needs in order to ensure participation.

Additional means of recruitment to ensure subjects participate in the research might require researchers to step out of their comfort zone and meet potential participants where they are. Within the context of college campuses, researchers might need to vacate their offices to adequately recruit students in the spaces where students spend their time, including—but not limited to—student engagement centers, libraries, student club meetings, tutoring centers, or the cafeteria. Classroom visits and/or observations can also provide a great opportunity to recruit students or collect data about their experiences within a particular learning environment or support program. **Observational data collection methods can help researchers avoid some of the challenges and workload associated with recruiting students to participate in campus studies.** In many cases, researchers are unable to reach and engage participants through traditional forms of electronic communication such as campus email, text messaging, or the course/learning management system. When these challenges arise, researchers might consider partnering with campus constituents who work closely with the students under study to engage and recruit participants. Examples include student support program counselors/coordinators, athletics coaches, and instructional faculty. Researchers may also consider partnering with local businesses, local community-based organizations, and/or the college foundation as potential sources to adequately fund research participant incentives.

Choosing a site for the focus groups/interviews that is comfortable and accessible to participants can also play a vital role in facilitating qualitative social justice research, as it can build trust and demonstrate respect for participants. The space selected should have some familiarity to the students, such as a classroom, multicultural center, or meeting/conference room. Special consideration should be provided when the research might require heightened steps to ensure confidentiality or anonymity due to risk of discrimination, persecution, and/or oppression. Examples might include studies focused on LGBTQ+ individuals or immigrant student populations. It might be appropriate to host interviews or focus groups in smaller, private spaces that provide a more personal and secure ambience for participants.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISSEMINATION

Whenever possible, analysis and interpretation of qualitative research data are best accomplished utilizing a collaborative team to ensure unbiased research findings (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013). Another viable approach to help ensure the validity of qualitative research findings is to incorporate follow-up meetings or discussions with participants to verify that interpretations of the data are relevant and meaningful (Lyons et al., 2013). Feedback might include sharing the researcher's tentative interpretations or conclusions via email or during a debrief meeting. In working towards social justice, researchers have the opportunity and responsibility to fully engage participants as co-researchers by explaining the analytic procedures and conventions to support the subjects' own analytic and interpretive capabilities (Morrow & Smith, 1995).

To ensure research findings have the greatest impact on social justice and equity, researchers should plan to invest just as much (if not more) energy and creativity into the dissemination of findings as was invested into the research design, recruitment, data collection, and analysis. All too often, the product of robust qualitative research on college campuses results in a few brief presentations for a small group of stakeholders accompanied by a lengthy report that few are able or interested to invest the time to comprehensively review and act upon.

A multitude of strategies exist to avoid these common pitfalls, but all begin with developing a dissemination plan during the initial project design with key stakeholders. Here are some questions to consider when seeding student-centered change with qualitative research findings:

- What are the primary goals for this research project and which stakeholders could/should be most impacted by the research findings?

- Which avenues provide the greatest opportunities to reach and engage appropriate stakeholder groups with the research findings?
- **How can we employ a diverse array of modalities such as infographics, workshops, gamification, dramatized performances and/or participant presentations to share findings in a compelling way that invokes action?**
- How can the campus community ensure the sustainability of important findings and changed-focused energies resulting from new knowledge by keeping them at the forefront of practitioners' continuous improvement processes?

Navigating resistance to qualitative research findings

California Community Colleges are in a state of constant change and many institutions face significant challenges as colleges compete for dwindling enrollments and grapple with external pressures to improve student throughput and success. From the Basic Skills Initiative, to Guided Pathways, to AB 705, to the Student Centered Funding Formula, CCC practitioners face ever-evolving paradigms focused on institutional reform. The continuous churn of student-focused reform initiatives over the past two decades has taken a toll on practitioners. As a result, **institutional researchers should expect some form(s) of resistance to qualitative research centered in racial and social justice frames; as this research is grounded in systemic change.**

Researchers should establish a plan to navigate resistance from the onset of any equity-minded qualitative research project. Below is an outline of strategies researchers can leverage throughout the research project to minimize the impacts resistance can present when attempting to inform and inspire student-focused change.

METHODOLOGICAL PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

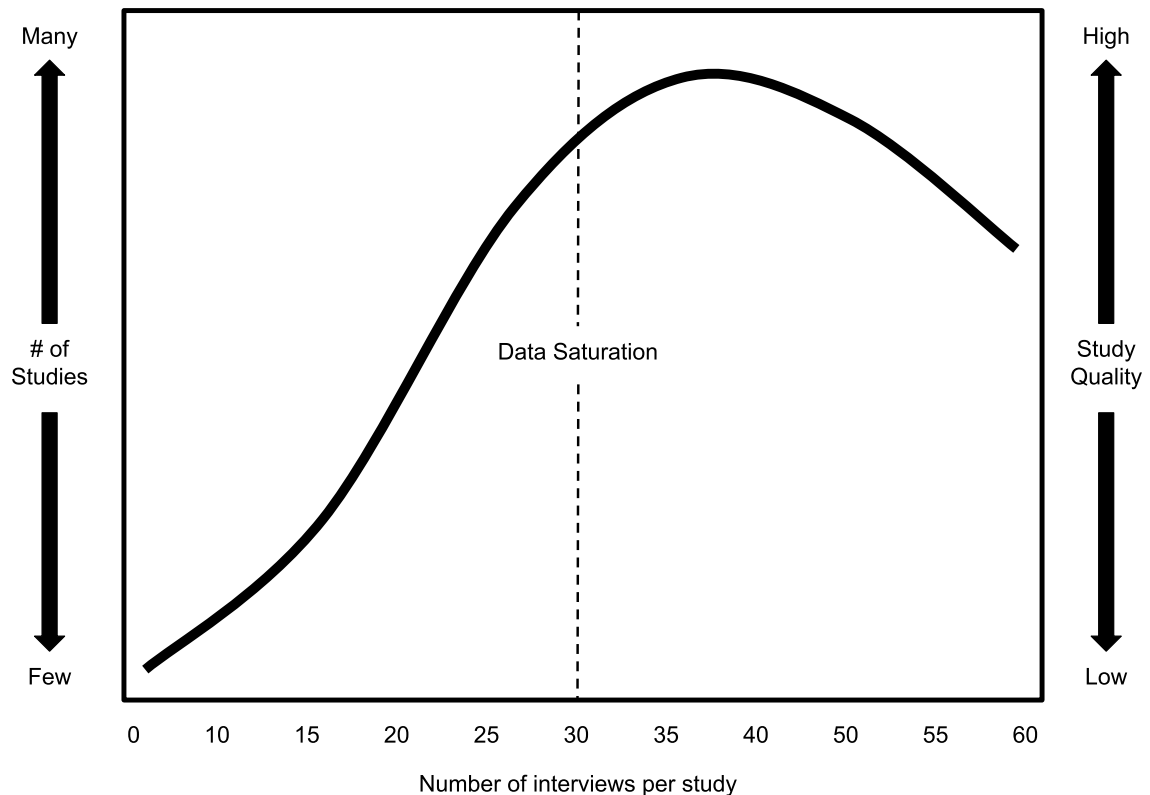
Sample size is often the first point of contention research skeptics cite when interpreting qualitative research findings. If resistors are able to quickly identify foundational issues with research methods, then a valid argument for inaction and status quo can be volleyed. Since qualitative research is somewhat subjective, researchers need to be diligent about the aspects of research design, data analysis, and reporting elements required to gain political support. It is also important to note that most stakeholders required to interpret and act upon qualitative research findings have little or no knowledge about proper qualitative research procedures. Many campus data consumers may be familiar with the concept of "statistical significance" but not always clear on when it does and does not apply. They may not understand that qualitative research is not intended to be representative and therefore it does not have to—nor will it—mirror the research methods and analysis utilized in quantitative studies to measure and demonstrate statistical significance. As such, researchers need to be prepared to meet practitioners where they are by helping them navigate through the nuances of qualitative research. The reality of the situation is that few qualitative researchers explain the rationale used to establish a valid sample size (Bowen, 2008).

Regarding the many political and resource constraints facing qualitative researchers, Patton (2002) states that sampling to the point of redundancy works best for unlimited timelines and unconstrained resources. California community colleges have never operated in an political environment defined by unconstrained time and resources. Here are some methodological sampling considerations for qualitative researchers:

- Grounded theory
 - Creswell (2007) recommends at least 20 to 30 interviewees
 - Denzin and Lincoln (2005) recommend 30 to 50 interviewees
 - Morse (2000) recommends 20 to 30 interviewees
- Phenomenological studies
 - Denzin and Lincoln (1994) recommend six interviewees

- Kuzel (1999) recommends six to eight interviewees
- Morse (2000) recommends six to 10 interviewees
- Case studies
 - Yin (2009) recommends at least six sources of evidence
 - Creswell (2007) recommends no more than four or five cases and three to five interviewees per case study

Here is a visual adapted from Guest, Bunce, & Johnson (2006) to help explain intersections between sample sizes and principles of qualitative data saturation:



Gathering too much data can impair researchers from the deep, rich analysis of the data that is a hallmark and central to the purpose of qualitative research (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, for most researchers, moving far past the point of saturation would devour limited time and resources.

DATA TRIANGULATION

Triangulating data sources can play a crucial role in reducing resistance to qualitative research findings since most resistance to qualitative data is based on the potential for the research to be influenced by a small, non-representative group of outliers. These positions generally stem from resistance to change and inequitable mindsets that opinions expressed by one student, or small groups of students, are less important than the institutional processes, protocols, and practices. Equity-minded researchers should be prepared to defend student voice and other qualitative data with external data sources.

Triangulation seeks convergence, corroboration, and correspondence of results from different research methods (Greene et al., 1989). The overarching goal behind combining qualitative and quantitative methods (i.e., mixed methods research design) is to expand and strengthen a study's conclusions. Institutional researchers can bolster qualitative research findings by conducting an inventory of data and findings from other recent campus research projects. Examples might include campus climate surveys, student health surveys, program evaluation results, student preferences research, and student information systems.

Incorporating quantitative data into qualitative research findings can go a long way toward validating the research findings and can help to dispel claims for inaction based on anecdotal evidence.

Advancing equity-driven change with qualitative research findings

Many CCC have incorporated creative practices to harness the power of student voice and other qualitative research findings to advance equity-minded institutional change. The RP Group (2021) produced a [report](#) documenting some of these insights from CCC practitioners. Here are some important frames for consideration as researchers attempt to facilitate information dissemination:

- **Know your campus culture and demonstrate cultural competency to maximize impact**
 - Within this context, it is important for researchers to remain sensitive to the ways in which faculty, staff, and administrators digest qualitative data and react to information. **When practitioners feel blindsided, attacked, or judged, they are much more likely to become defensive and resistant to change-focused priorities. Researchers should plan to scaffold data and information in a constructivist and thoughtful manner that does not alienate your data consumers.** One approach researchers might take is sharing preliminary data with allies or smaller constituent groups to determine how findings could and should be shared with the broader campus community to best communicate results and inspire action.
- **Begin with specific people or groups on campus**
 - Being mindful of campus culture considerations, researchers should incorporate intentional strategies to release qualitative research findings in a manner that best positions the data to inspire change. At some institutions, it might make the most sense for the research office to work closely with the college academic senate to build momentum and motivate data-informed change. At other institutions, starting with the campus executive leadership team might be the most effective approach to communicate that the support for this research comes from the top. At still other campuses, positive, student-focused change begins by harnessing the power and dedication of middle leaders (e.g., deans, directors, coordinators, department chairs) who lead efforts at the ground level. Therefore, **researchers should be mindful of how campus culture impacts data-informed change and the paths of least resistance to achieving that change.**
 - Research findings could also dictate how the data should be shared on campus. For example, if the data are overly critical of campus administration or counseling services, the research office will probably want to engage those constituencies about the data before any efforts are made to share it broadly with the campus. **Careful planning and intentional data dissemination strategies can help ensure that data lead to sustainable action rather than anger and resistance.**

Conclusion

California community college students continue to face challenging circumstances and significant barriers to their success, and it is important that campus research offices harness the power of qualitative research to help ensure that institutional priorities are centered in student-focused change. Student voice has the means to inspire and inform equity-minded change. IRPE offices should approach qualitative research judiciously to ensure finite institutional resources are utilized in ways that best answer the research question(s) at hand as efficiently and effectively as possible. Often the most impactful qualitative research is broadly informed and grounded in integrated and strategic planning to maximize the utility of the data to advance student-centered change.

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