Module 1: Identifying a Research Topic

- **In-class activity 1:** Through a think-pair-share activity, students answer:
  1. What motivates you to take this class on research?
  2. From your perspective, what is a major problem that affects our university community?

- **In-class activity 2:** Based on responses to questions above, students practice grouping the various identified problems according to EITHER (a) common themes or (b) common subpopulations/subject groups.

- **Examples from our class:** Based on responses to question (2) that included “lack of socioeconomic diversity in my major,” “difficulty transitioning to college,” and “support for student parents,” students discussed points of overlap in their topics. From this conversation, they decided to focus on a particular population as their “community” or central subject group: first-generation college students. *(Note: During our discussion, five out of the six students voluntarily identified themselves as “first-gen” students).*

- **Take-home assignments:**
  - Selected readings on devising qualitative research questions
  - Create list of potential research questions for and about this subject group.

Module 2: Writing Research Questions

- **Lecture:** What makes a good research question? Using examples from students’ potential research questions (see take-home assignment above), the instructor facilitates a lecture and discussion about developing good research questions (specific, measurable, open-ended, feasible, connected to research goals).

- **In-class activity:** In pairs or groups, students provide peer feedback revising each other’s research questions to meet the above criteria. The instructor then helps build consensus around 1-3 overarching research questions.

- **Examples from our class:** By comparing and revising their respective research questions, the group decided on two main questions to ask as a group: (1) What
motivates first-generation college students to pursue a college education? (2) What resources and support help first-generation college students transition to and succeed in college?

- **Take-home assignments:**
  - Students conduct and summarize background research relevant to the research question/topic identified. For example, our students researched existing academic literature on first-generation students and the college transition, as well as resources on our campus for supporting first-generation students.
  - Selected readings on focus group interviews and/or taking field notes

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**Module 3: Focus Group Observation and Note-taking Practice**

- **Advance preparation:** Instructor organizes a focus group of volunteers willing to be interviewed and observed during class time. The focus group is confidential and for educational (not research) purposes.
- **In-class activity 1:** While the instructor moderates the focus group, students observe the interview and take notes. Students are each assigned one of three different note-taking tasks: (1) to transcribe participants’ responses verbatim, (2) to record observations and non-verbal information (room set-up, non-verbal communication, etc.), or (3) to take notes about their own reactions, questions, and real-time analysis of the event. Detailed instructions for these tasks are provided in advance.
- **Examples from our class:** The instructors organized a small group of volunteers who identified as first-generation college students to participate in a sample focus group. Volunteers were recruited via email listserv, making clear this is an educational rather than research activity. Instructors also developed four questions to ask during the one-hour focus group. Responses to some of the questions were recorded on flipchart paper (see photos).
- **Take-home assignments:**
  - Students fill in and organize their focus group notes, and share in a group folder visible to their peers
  - Students read each other’s focus group notes
  - Students write a reflection on challenges and key insights from the focus group and note-taking activity
  - Selected readings on coding and qualitative data analysis
Module 4: Note-taking Reflection and Coding Practice

- **In-class activity 1**: The instructor facilitates a group discussion reflecting on the focus group activities. Students compare and contrast their experiences taking notes on different aspects of the encounter (verbal, non-verbal, or their own subjective reactions). What are the limitations or benefits of each of these kinds of “field notes”? When might students use these different techniques in their research?

- **In-class activity 2**: Using three code-labels as examples, students practice coding their peers’ focus group notes. This exercise can be done in pairs, in small groups, or as a class on a projector or white board.

- **Examples from our class**: In a small group, students coded the notes on the focus group responses according to the “internal” or “external” resources that participants identified as having helped them transition to college. Commenting on the transcript in a shared online document, students coded these internal resources as “life-skills” (time management, budgeting and financial habits, etc.), “academic skills” (study habits, writing skills, etc.). External resources included family support, social networks, and on-campus counseling resources.

- **Take-home assignments**:
  - Based on their background research, focus group notes, and preliminary data analysis, students develop a draft interview guide for an individual interview about the given topic. Instructors provide feedback on the interview guide draft before the final assignment.
  - Selected readings on interviewing

**Final Assignment**:

For the final term project, students carry out a “key-informant” interview based on their preliminary group research. They code their interview transcripts and write a separate reflection on their observations from the interview. Using this data, they report their key findings in a final paper and class presentation. In our class, students interviewed campus social workers, transfer student resource center staff, and self-identified “first-gen” faculty.