

## FAQ: Small Group Instructional Feedback (SGIF) Sessions

### 1. What are SGIFs?

SGIFs are short focus groups with students initiated at the request of a faculty member or other instructor. A SGIF takes about 20 minutes; faculty are asked to leave the room while the session is being conducted. All feedback is anonymous.

### 2. When should I schedule a SGIF?

Typically, we receive requests for SGIFs around the mid-semester point, though certainly, we can do them at other times, as well. When requesting a SGIF, you'll want to select a couple of possible dates (given staffing limitations and the volume of SGIF requests, we may or may not be able to accommodate your top choice). You'll want to choose days when you can give up 20 minutes of your class meeting.

Ideally, CTE staff will come in the last 20 minutes of the class period, so that you don't have to guess when you should return to class; students are then dismissed from the SGIF. In classes that meet only once a week, this may not be feasible; in those cases, we recommend that you try to schedule the SGIF for just before a break, so that you know clearly when to return to class. The main reason for scheduling this way is so that you don't accidentally walk in on the focus group.

### 3. What questions are asked?

We ask students two open-ended questions: **1) What aspects of this class do you feel are particularly effective for helping you learn the course material?** And **2) What suggestions do you have for improving your learning experience in this class?** Faculty are welcome to ask for different questions, but we have found that these two questions typically get at all the things a faculty member could hope to hear about—and also at other things that more specific questions might not elicit. (There is also a space for “Additional Comments,” in case they want to record something that doesn't quite fall into one of those questions.)

### 4. How is the SGIF structured?

The CTE staff person introduces herself, offers a brief overview of the process (1-2 minutes), then begins the data collection by asking students to write down individual responses to the two questions described above (4-5 minutes). This allows students time for reflection and also enables us to find out what students are thinking prior to discussing the questions with their peers. Then, we collect the written feedback and divide students up into small groups, asking the groups to answer the same two questions (4-5 minutes). After the groups have jotted down their responses, we ask the groups to report out, starting with the first question, then moving to the second (remaining time). As the groups report out, we try to get a sense of how many other groups agree with the points made. The full-class debrief is crucial, since it allows students to better understand how their perceptions of the course match up to – or diverge from – the views of their peers.

### 5. What does CTE tell my students about the SGIF?

Typically, we begin by introducing ourselves and explaining that **1)** we are there at the faculty member's request, because s/he really wants to know how they are experiencing the course and how to make it a better learning experience; **2)** we seek their honest and *specific* feedback (with details and examples where possible); **3)** the session must not turn into a complaint session—for every complaint, they should provide a *specific suggestion for what the faculty member can do* to improve the experience; **4)** all feedback will be brought back to the CTE, typed up, and arranged according to patterns, and sent to the faculty member with no names or identifying information included; and **5)** students can expect the faculty member to discuss with them patterns identified and how they will respond to the feedback. (Note: during the full-class debrief, we typically ask for a student volunteer to take notes and record the main points of the discussion.)

## FAQ: SGIFs (continued)

### 6. What should I tell my students about the SGIF?

Please do make sure to let them know we're coming, but it's also important you tell them we're coming at *your* request, because you genuinely value their feedback on the course and want to improve their learning in whatever ways you can. You can also tell them their feedback will be anonymous and encourage them to be as thoughtful, critical, and specific as they can be in their comments. You might also point out to them that this sort of focus group offers you *formative feedback*, of the sort you are probably giving them to help them assess their own learning, and that they'll have a chance to offer *summative feedback* at the end of term in student evaluations and any other forms you've chosen.

### 7. What does the CTE do with the feedback?

After the SGIF, we bring everything back to the CTE, type it up, and group like comments together, so that you can easily see patterns. Typically, we put the small group and full-class debrief comments together at the beginning, so you can see what was most pressing for students. Then, we list the individual comments, again arranged according to patterns and most common responses.

### 8. How long will it take to get the results of the SGIF from CTE?

We try very hard to get the feedback to you prior to your next class meeting, so that you can go in relatively quickly and discuss the feedback with students, make needed adjustments, etc. In busy times, we may be unable to get it to you before your next class meeting, but we aim to get it to you as soon as possible.

### 9. What will I get back from the CTE?

You will receive a typed report divided into two main sections: 1) small group and full-class feedback and 2) individual student comments. The first section will offer a description of the most common responses in the groups, arranged in order of most to least frequent responses, and will include a note about how much agreement there was among the students about each point. The second section will record individual student comments, also grouped in order of most to least frequent responses.

### 10. How should I interpret the feedback CTE gives me?

Try to focus on the most common responses and those about which there was broad agreement among students. This will help you to see quickly what's working well and what sorts of tweaks you might wish to make. Also, compare the group feedback with the individual feedback; usually, there is overlap between these two sections.

However, occasionally, we see classes where students' individual feedback (i.e., the feedback they generated on their own, without influence from one another) differs markedly from the group responses. This may be a sign that there are a few dominant students in the class whose comments in the small group and full-class discussions overshadowed other students' views. Of course, it may also be a sign that, in discussing the questions with their peers, students identified other things as more noteworthy. In cases where there is a gap between the two sections, we encourage you to mention it to students, just so they will have context for which suggestions you act on and which ones you don't.

Finally, keep in mind that you cannot respond to every single suggestion students make. We encourage you to focus on the top 2-4 suggestions and areas of feedback as you consider how you might respond, and leave outlier and other comments for another time.

## FAQ: SGIFs (continued)

### 11. How should I respond to the feedback?

At a minimum, you should plan to address the feedback with students within a class or two of the SGIF. For SGIFs to be most effective (both for your teaching and for your relationship with students), it is crucial that students feel heard and perceive you as taking their suggestions seriously.

Start with patterns for what's working well, and focus on the top 2-3 comments. Summarize what you learned from the feedback, and assure students that you will continue doing those things they identified as working effectively for learning.

Then, summarize the 2-3 most frequent suggestions, and let students know whether or not you can act on those suggestions (and if not, why not). You need not take every student suggestion in order for the SGIF to be successful. Most often, we find that students do recommend things the faculty member can easily act on. However, students sometimes suggest things that you would never do (because it conflicts with your philosophy of teaching or because the research on teaching and learning clearly suggests it's not a best practice). In those cases, it can be very helpful for students to hear your rationale for not acting on the suggestion—and it's often the case that you can think of something else you could do instead, that would address the need being highlighted.

### 12. Will asking for this kind of feedback suggest to students that I am not confident about my teaching or damage my credibility with them?

On the contrary, students typically tell us, as we're leaving the classroom, how much they appreciate being asked about their experience, and they express deep gratitude that the faculty member cares so deeply about their learning experiences. By all accounts, SGIFs positively impact student-faculty relations, and emerging research indicates that they also positively impact faculty's end-of-semester evaluations. Note: there is one exception to this rule: SGIFs can work against you, if do not follow up with students afterward to summarize the feedback and explain how you will respond to it.

### 13. Will the CTE conduct a SGIF with my students at the request of my chair / dean?

No. All SGIFs must be requested by the faculty member herself/himself.

### 14. Does the CTE give the results of the SGIF to my chair / dean?

No. All materials collected belong to you. Whether or not you wish to share the results of the SGIF with others is entirely your decision.

### 15. How do I schedule a SGIF?

It's easy! Just go to [cte.slu.edu](http://cte.slu.edu) and look for a link to the online mid-semester focus group form. Or, contact the CTE directly at 314.977.3944 or [cte@slu.edu](mailto:cte@slu.edu). Be sure to have some possible dates in mind, as well as your class meeting day(s)/time(s), total number of students, and classroom location.