

Faculty/Staff and Cadet Focus Groups

Faculty/Staff groups

Recruiting Procedures

We aimed to recruit up to ten faculty/staff per online focus group. Per a VMI provided spreadsheet listing the names, positions, department, race, ethnicity, and contact information for all employees, we eliminated anyone who had previously been interviewed, declined to be interviewed, or was missing contact information. Our goal was to recruit a diverse and approximately representative group of individuals, without targeting any specific individual. Using the reduced list, a social scientist selected 70 individuals to invite.

Once the list was generated, we sent email invitations to the employees explaining who we were, the purpose of the email, details of the focus groups including available dates and times, details about how we plan to use information provided as part of the investigation, and alternate methods for participating in the investigation. In the invitation, we requested that employees let us know if they were interested and for which sessions. Based on the response rate, we selected an additional 71 employees via the process above and sent invitations over the course of several days. In addition, we sent reminders to individuals who had not yet signed up or opted out. In total, we invited 141 faculty/staff (approximately 17% of the entire faculty/staff population) to participate in the focus groups.

We sent all faculty/staff who signed up to participate in one of the three scheduled sessions a Zoom link, the name of the social scientist moderating their session, and their scheduled appointment time via email and through calendar invitations. We also sent reminder emails to each of the participants on the day of their scheduled focus group. Employees who requested a date or time that was already full, or that had another individual from their same department participating, were told the session was full and offered another time or to be placed on the waitlist. Two employees were placed on the waitlist. We offered both employees slots that opened up, but neither agreed to participate at that point due to scheduling conflicts.

Procedure for conducting focus group sessions

Three focus groups involving VMI faculty/staff were conducted in April of 2021, specifically April 15th, April 19th, and April 22nd. A moderator and note-taker attended all sessions. Sessions lasted about two hours with a short break about half-way through, and were structured in a “Q&A” format. After brief introductions by all participants, the moderator posed a series of questions with group discussion following each one. Questions covered topics such as feelings about the investigation, valuation of demographic diversity, inclusiveness, the experience of different demographic groups, race-related events and their relation to VMI’s culture, desired

changes, and challenges to achieving those changes. The questions asked in each session varied somewhat as a function of time available, participant responses and follow-up questions, as well as the experiences from preceding sessions.

Moderator profile and qualifications

Dr. Dennis Devine conducted all three online focus group sessions with faculty and staff. He is a former professor of psychology at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, with a doctoral degree in Industrial and Organizational Psychology. He taught courses covering organizational culture, change, and development. As an educator, he has over 20 years of experience leading small-group discussions. As a consultant, Dr. Devine has also routinely facilitated both in-person focus group discussions and online focus group research studies.

Cadet Focus Groups

Recruiting Procedures

We aimed to recruit up to ten current cadets per in-person focus group. Using a VMI provided spreadsheet listing current cadet names, athlete status, gender, class, major, race, ethnicity, and contact information, we eliminated anyone who had separately been interviewed or declined to be interviewed. From here, the invitation process focused on three categories of cadets: general, minorities, and women. Any cadet could be a part of the general focus groups, whereas the cadet would need to be in a racial minority group or be female to qualify for the others, respectively. Our goal was to recruit a diverse and approximately representative group of individuals, without targeting any specific individual. Using the reduced list, a social scientist selected 79 individuals to invite.

Once the list was generated, we sent email invitations to the cadets explaining who we were, the purpose of the email, details of the focus groups, privacy information, alternate methods for participating in the investigation, and a link to a sign-up survey. This survey collected the full name, preferred name, email address, availability for each session, and whether or not the cadet would need a permit to be excused from a scheduled activity. We did not inform cadets that the focus groups would be constructed based on specific demographic criteria, but did tell them that some groups would be diverse. Based on the response rate, we selected an additional 134 cadets via the process above and sent invitations over the course of several days. In addition, we reminded cadets who had not signed up or opted out about the opportunity to participate. In total, we invited 213 cadets (approximately 13% of the entire cadet population) to participate in the focus groups.

Once several cadets had provided availability, we assigned them to specific focus group sessions based on the available demographic information and session type (i.e. general, minorities, or women). We sent all cadets that signed up the date, time, and location of their session, the name of the social scientist moderating their

session, the name of the note-taker for their session, and instructions for how to access their permit if necessary. We also sent reminder emails to each of the cadets the day of their scheduled focus group.

Procedure for conducting focus group sessions

The three on-post cadet focus groups were conducted on April 21st and 22nd, 2021. A moderator and note-taker attended all sessions. Cadets sat socially distanced from one another, and masks were required. Each session lasted about two hours, and we structured them around a “Q&A” format.

After brief introductions by all participants, the moderator posed a series of questions with group discussion following each one. Questions covered topics such as feelings about the investigation, the Rat Line, VMI’s culture, traditions, and recent related changes, racial and gender related items, cadets’ desired changes, and challenges to achieving those changes. The questions asked in each session varied somewhat as a function of time available, participant responses and follow-up questions, as well as the experience of preceding sessions. Towards the end of the session, the moderator provided cadets with an “open floor” for commentary, where they could raise and discuss any issues they chose.

Moderator profile and qualifications (General and Minorities groups)

Amit Patel is an attorney and social scientist with ThemeVision LLC, a subsidiary of Barnes & Thornburg LLP. He has experience conducting social scientific research using both quantitative and qualitative methods, including focus groups. He has designed, executed and analyzed research projects, and has authored articles and whitepapers on topics relating to psychology and decision-making.

Moderator profile and qualifications (Female group)

Trisha Volpe is an attorney and legal communications strategist with extensive experience leading group discussions and interviewing individuals in many different contexts, in particular legal and adversarial contexts. As a former journalist, Trisha has personally interviewed thousands of people. In her dual role as a litigation partner at Barnes & Thornburg and as ThemeVision’s Vice President, she designs, develops and executes research projects using various methodologies including focus groups, surveys and data analysis. Trisha has published articles, produced videos on effective communication strategies, and has applied her experience in the context of investigations, compliance and at trial.

Benefits and Limits of the Methodology

In general, the focus groups were designed and conducted using methodology consistent with generally accepted methods as set forth by Drs. Richard A. Krueger and Mary Anne Casey, leading experts in focus group methods, and well-respected researchers, consultants, educators, and authors in the field of qualitative research.

Our limit of no more than 10 participants per group is in line with best and common practice.¹

Like all methods, focus groups have their advantages and disadvantages.² Focus groups are particularly good for eliciting deeper discussions about complex topics that are difficult to capture adequately via other “large-sample” methodologies such as a survey.³ Respondents can be engaged directly, confusion can be noted and addressed, and follow-up questions can serve to elaborate and clarify contributions. Focus groups have their limits as well. Being necessarily small, any individual focus group cannot capture the full diversity of any large community or population. Focus group sessions can also be impacted by negative interpersonal dynamics, such as the chilling effect of status differences among respondents, the emergence of “alpha” speakers and resulting turn-taking disparities, and the potential elicitation of negative emotions within the group.

In light of their benefits and limitations, focus groups are ideally paired with one or more other social science methodologies when the subject of study is complex, as in this investigation. The purpose of using multiple research methodologies is to obtain the benefits of each while negating or offsetting their individual limitations. Achieving this complementarity is the reason we included focus groups in the research plan for the special investigation. The focus group methodology serves as one data collection “prong” of the overall investigation that complements other research methods used to learn about VMI’s culture. But, the focus group results are not meant to be the source of conclusions in isolation from the totality of the other data collected during the investigation.

Demographics

Faculty/Staff

In total, 21 employees signed up to participate in the focus groups. Of these, two employees switched from focus groups to interviews, one had a last-minute cancellation, and one employee did not show up after confirming. Thus, in total 17 employees participated in the faculty/staff focus groups. Basic demographic information is as follows:

¹ See Mousa A. Masadeh (2012). Focus Group: Reviews and Practices. *International Journal of Applied Science and Technology*, 2(10), 63-68.

² See Pranee Liamputtong (2011). *Focus group methodology: Principles and practice*. Los Angeles, Sage.

³ See Richard Krueger & Mary Anne Casey (2015). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. Los Angeles, Sage.

Category		Count
Race	White	13
	Black	2
	Asian	2
Ethnicity	Hispanic/Latino	1
Full-time Position	Teaching Faculty	8
	Admin. Professional	7
	Classified	2
Area of Employment	Administrative	6
	Liberal Arts	5
	STEM	4
	Athletics	2
Gender	Male	9
	Female	8
Total Participants		17

In the table above, Race, Ethnicity, and Position are pulled directly from the employee spreadsheet VMI provided. In accordance with the U.S. Census Bureau, Race and Ethnicity are categorized separately.⁴ We categorized “area of employment” based on the data provided in the spreadsheet. We report these data in aggregate, rather than individually, in order to avoid identifying any particular person who participated in the focus group.

Cadets

In total, 30 cadets signed up to participate in the focus groups. Of these, one cadet was not eligible for the focus group they were available for (a non-minority female who was unavailable for either the general or female focus groups), and seven cadets cancelled in advance; we offered each of these cadets the option for an interview or attending on-campus office hours. Four cadets did not show up even after confirming. Thus, in total 18 cadets participated in the cadet focus groups. Basic demographic information as drawn from the VMI-provided spreadsheet is as follows:

⁴ More details regarding the U.S. Census Bureau’s policy on reporting Race and Hispanic Origin can be found at <https://www.census.gov/topics/population/hispanic-origin/about/comparing-race-and-hispanic-origin.html>.

Category		General Focus Group	Minorities Focus Group	Women Focus Group	Total
Race	Asian	0	3	1	4
	Black	0	1	0	1
	White	4	0	6	10
	Hawaiian / Pacific Islander	1	1	0	2
	American Indian / Alaska Native	0	1	0	1
Ethnicity	Hispanic / Latino	0	1	0	1
Class	1st	2	1	1	4
	2nd	1	2	4	7
	3rd	0	0	0	0
	4th	2	3	2	7
Area of Study	Liberal Arts	3	1	1	5
	STEM	2	5	6	13
Gender	Male	5 ⁵	4	0	9
	Female	0	2	7	9
Athlete		1	3	3	7
Total Participants		5	6	7	18

We categorized “area of study” based on the data provided in the spreadsheet. We report these data in aggregate, rather than individually, in order to avoid identifying any particular person who participated in the focus group.

Take-aways

The focus groups provided an opportunity to hear from both faculty/staff and cadets, and provided rich data. Below are key takeaways for each type of focus group.

Faculty/Staff focus groups

1. Consistent concerns emerged with respect to prejudice and bias against both women and cadet-athletes. Focus group participants raised and discussed concerns about these forms of differential treatment in all three faculty/staff focus groups.
2. The focus group participants noted some issues related to race, but no participant in any group saw them as rising to a “culture of intolerance.” The participants essentially viewed race-related events as isolated events caused by other things.

⁵ The general group was open to both male and female cadets.

3. Valuation of diversity varies by unit/department but tends to be greater at lower levels within the Institute—in other words, there is some skepticism about the administration’s buy-in. There are also significant challenges to attracting and retaining a diverse community in Lexington, VA.
4. Faculty who do not wear uniforms are treated with less courtesy and respect—especially if they are women.
5. There was a general sense that things have improved somewhat over time, and General Wins is the right person to continue that trend.

General cadet focus group

1. Some cadets expressed annoyance with what they say is inaccurate reporting by the Washington Post and Ian Shapira. In particular, it was claimed by a cadet that Raphael Jenkins was given a fair trial and the reason VMI is unable to refute his claims is because he refused to sign an affidavit to publish his records. In another anecdote provided by a focus group participant, a cadet who allegedly used the N-word was supposedly suspended for one semester, but was allegedly reported by Shapira as the cadet not receiving any sort of punishment.
2. Reaction to a female cadet’s recent promotion to Regimental Commander (RCO) was largely negative. Many cadets in the all-male group expressed that she was not qualified because of physical inadequacies, and that her promotion was a PR stunt. Some of the cadets in the focus group stated that they knew many other women who would have made for a better RCO.
3. As superintendent, General Wins has exhibited a positive change and allowed cadets to be heard about changes they want to see at VMI. When compared with General Peay, cadets in the focus group prefer General Wins because he is more hands-on and interactive within the core and aims to see the cadets happy.
4. Cadets, and in particular, cadet athletes are largely unaware of the rigors of the Rat Line, and feel blindsided when reality sets in. They feel the duration and strenuousness of the Rat Line should be made perfectly clear to prospective cadet athletes. The lack of clarity leads to low retention amongst athletes.
5. To cadets, the Honor Code is paramount. Above all, it is valued as what separates VMI from other institutions, even other military colleges, as it is a single-sanction policy. It adds pressure and stress to cadets’ lives, but also makes them who they are. Much has changed about VMI in the recent past but this, above all, must remain, if not expanded.
6. In general, the cadets conveyed that the sentiment is not one of “VMI has a systemic culture of racial and gender intolerance,” but instead that there are isolated incidents that occur occasionally, not unlike any other college campus or post.

Minority cadet focus group

1. There is concern that Federal Title IX policies and procedures are not being properly followed. Some cadets believe that when a complaint of sexual harassment or assault is made, investigations and penalties are arbitrary and related to whom they are reported. At times, complaints are handled by the Cadet Equity Association (CEA), and may be passed along to the Inspector General. This may result in certain complaints not being reported or handled with care, in turn leading to lenient punishments. Further, some cadets do not take Title IX training seriously, with jokes and derogatory commentary made by cadets during the training.
2. Minorities feel the problems within the Corps stem from the Commandant's staff. The Commandant staff does not interact with the rats and leaves them to the whims of the CEA and OGA (Officer of the Guard Association), to sanction them for offenses. The lack of comradery between the Commandant's staff and rats creates a culture of non-reporting, and after the Rat Line, cadets who have a good relationship with the Commandant staff are afforded lenient and discretionary penalties.
3. As with the general group, reaction to a particular female cadet recently being promoted to RCO was largely negative. Among the Corps generally, rumors existed that she was going to become RCO regardless of her qualifications, or lack thereof, because of her relationship with commandant staff and her gender.
4. As with the general group, cadet athletes are largely unaware of the rigors of the Rat Line, and feel blindsided when reality sets in. The duration and strenuousness of the Rat Line should be made perfectly clear to prospective cadet athletes. The lack of clarity leads to low retention amongst athletes.
5. Most cadets in this group expressed strong hesitation at the thought of their sister or a close female relative attending VMI due to gender inequities. (Note: the male cadets in the general group did not feel the same way, and would not have the same hesitation, so long as the cadet knew what she was getting into, e.g. the rigors of the Rat Line and being a part of a military institution.)

Female cadet focus group

1. On balance, this group of women look at their VMI experience with pride. They appreciate the school for what it is – including its strengths and weaknesses. Related to this is the appreciation among these women of VMI tradition, including the school's rigorous regimen. They focused on the fact that they chose VMI. No one forced VMI on them. In particular, when discussing the New Market March, these Cadets seemed to disconnect the cause of the Civil War in the South from the tradition of the March itself. For them, the March is about 'brotherhood', unity, comradery, sacrifice and the leadership qualities of the fallen cadets.

2. This group tended to ‘normalize’ gender disparity – meaning, they know women are treated differently at VMI, they often feel more scrutinized, criticized and held to a higher standard than their male counterparts, but they concluded this behavior is ‘just the way it is’ and women will always be treated differently.
3. This group recognized that racial disparity exists on campus, but had never really experienced it or witnessed it themselves. Most believe a few isolated incidents have received disproportionate attention.
4. The women spoke frankly about mental health issues on campus. They noted counseling services are available to anyone who needs help, but most are reluctant for fear of the stigma associated with mental health issues, regardless of gender.
5. There appears to be a general fear among the Corps of being stigmatized and this includes stigma related to injury. Injured cadets must wear something called a GIM tag that enumerates their injuries. The purpose is so injured cadets are not forced to do something that will further injure them. However, the tag has turned cadets into targets for harassment. In addition, most would rather not wear the tag and risk further injury so they do not become targets of their fellow cadets.

Investigation objectives

The purpose of the investigation into the culture, policies, and traditions at VMI is to determine if there are racial or gender inequities, racial intolerance, unreported civil rights violations, or other barriers to VMI providing a first-class education to its cadets. When the commentary from the focus groups is taken as a whole, certain conclusions can be drawn with regard to the focus group results. However, it is critically important to recognize that the focus group procedure was merely one method among many employed in the overall investigation. The focus group results cannot stand alone as representative of the results of the investigation as a whole. Instead, all the methods used and all the data gathered across all aspects of the investigation must be considered and synthesized before drawing any conclusions about the results of the investigation as a whole.

Here are some narrow conclusions based on the focus groups alone, preceded by the topics they relate to.

Race/Gender (across all focus groups)

- Sex and gender inequities may be more prevalent at VMI than inequities related to race. The institution was built on ‘male tradition’ and women are simply forced to conform or choose to conform – some willingly and some with great difficulty.
- Overall, when these members of the VMI community were interviewed in a focus group setting, there was little support for the notion that VMI has a

systemic culture of racial and gender intolerance. The focus group participants identified inequities and isolated incidents that may contribute towards that belief, but they indicated that the incidents are not so pervasive to be considered indicative of the culture at large.

Diversity and inclusion (across all focus groups)

- Many cadets, women included, appreciate VMI and its culture. They have benefited from the rigors of VMI life.
- Faculty and staff perceived differences across departments and the extent to which diversity and inclusion are valued at VMI and believed they were more valued at lower levels of the Institute, i.e. amongst faculty and staff, rather than at upper levels, such as the Commandant staff.
- Cadets' physical shortcomings are stigmatized and make them targets for ridicule and bullying (e.g., cadets who cannot meet the regimented physical requirements set forth, or are forced to wear a GIM tag).

VMI's culture in general (across all focus groups)

- The Honor Code is valued and revered, and generally held in high regard. It is a large part of what makes VMI the Institution that it is today, and should remain in place going forward. If the Honor Code were abolished, VMI will become like so many other Institutions, and cease to be unique. However, that does not mean that changes to the Honor Code would not be welcome. Amongst cadets, there is generally strong support for retaining the Honor Code, and perhaps expanding it. Amongst faculty and staff the call to expand Honor Code tenets is even more pronounced, and broadening beyond "lying, cheating, and stealing" to include items related to character and interpersonal treatment (e.g., not discriminating against other groups based upon any particular demographic characteristics) is imperative.
- The Rat Line is often misrepresented by coaching staff towards cadet athletes. Efforts at ensuring that full transparency regarding Rat Line expectations and duration need to be addressed.

Recommendations provided by focus group participants

As part of the moderator's questioning of focus group participants, we elicited suggestions about what, if anything, needed to be changed about VMI's policies, traditions, and institutional culture. Participants identified a number of means to bring about desired change at VMI. Below are suggestions from the aggregated faculty/staff group, as well as all cadet focus groups combined.

Faculty/Staff focus groups

1. Increase communication among faculty/staff within the Institute. Similar to many universities, faculty and staff perceived the existence of "silos" and a

general lack of awareness about goals, objectives, and initiatives in other academic units.

2. Provide more training for faculty & staff on handling sensitive/reporting situations. This would ensure faculty/staff know what to do when various situations arise, allowing them to act promptly and assertively. It would also reduce disparities in the handling of sensitive situations across people and departments.
3. Broaden the Honor Code to include character. Add content specifying the importance of acting ethically and treating others fairly and appropriately.
4. Intermix cadet athlete and non-athlete activities to promote mutual awareness and appreciation of challenges faced by each group. There is clear tension and misunderstanding between cadet athletes and non-athletes. Promoting interaction among members of the two groups would help each to appreciate the challenges faced by the other.
5. Do more to actively seek out and attract people that will diversify the Institute. Faculty and staff perceive efforts to recruit under-represented groups as largely confined to a few departments (e.g., Athletics). Much more could be done to recruit non-traditional cadets and employees. Once those individuals come to VMI, VMI needs to make efforts to retain them.

Cadet focus groups

1. Eliminate Yodel and other campus social media platforms, as they are the root of many VMI issues. It is easy to criticize and spread rumors when hiding behind a social media platform.
2. While they feel safe on campus, female cadets who took part in the focus group welcome the recent policy change regarding locked doors. It is a policy change that should remain permanent.
3. The Commandant Staff needs to change. Many of their decisions are based upon what they want, rather than jointly between cadets and staff. The Commandant staff is perceived as not listening to cadets. The hiring of General Wins is a step in the right direction. General Peay was hands off, but General Wins is more proactive.
4. There should be an Honor Code-like one-strike policy for instances of stigmatization (racism or otherwise).
5. The Institute could benefit from increasing education on African American history, so long as it is a truthful accounting of events.