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Council of Graduate Schools
Completion and Attrition in AGEP and non-AGEP Institutions
Student Focus Groups
INFORMED CONSENT

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[TURN ON RECORDING DEVICE]

Hello, my name is _____. This is my colleague, _____.

Thank you for coming. We are from the Council of Graduate Schools, a non-profit organization based in Washington, DC dedicated solely to the advancement of graduate education and research. The National Science Foundation has funded CGS to examine completion and attrition among underrepresented minority students in doctoral programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields. Specifically, we are investigating the factors that influence the ability of underrepresented minority students to complete these programs. The goal is to be able to provide information to universities that might help them improve completion rates in doctoral education, particularly among underrepresented minorities.

As part of this study, we are collecting data from 21 institutions nationwide, including online surveys of underrepresented minority students in STEM doctoral programs in the current academic year. To add depth and richness to this study, we are conducting focus groups with STEM doctoral students from 16 of these institutions who are U.S. citizens and permanent residents and Black/African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Hispanic/Latino/Latina to better understand why students enroll in doctoral programs, what influences their ability to complete the program, and their experiences to date in the program and institution. This particular focus group is aimed at understanding the perspectives of **[PRE or POST-CANDIDACY DOCTORAL STUDENTS**]. If you are not a **[PRE/POST]** candidacy doctoral student, or if you are neither a U.S. citizen nor an underrepresented minority student, you will be given the opportunity to excuse yourself from this focus group before it begins in a few minutes.

The information you provide during this focus group will be reported only in aggregate form. We will take notes but will not share them outside the research team. We will keep your identities confidential and we ask that each of you also protect the confidentiality of others in the group by not repeating what is said here. Your participation in this focus group is voluntary, so if you prefer not to answer a question, or if you choose not to participate for any reason, just let me know.

We have a set of questions we will be asking you. We are interested in your opinions on these questions and there is no right or wrong answer. Feel free to treat this as a discussion and respond to what others are saying. At the end there will be time for you to mention anything that we didn't cover.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Thank you. I would like to record our conversation. The recording will be used for research purposes only and will allow us to double check our notes if needed. Is that okay with you?

Now, can I ask all of you to verbally agree to participate in this focus group and be recorded by saying "I agree."

Now we would like to ask that each of you fill out the short anonymous survey in front of you. It should take you only 1 to 2 minutes to complete. Please do not write your name or any other identifying information on the survey. Let me know if you have any questions. Once you are done, please put your survey in the envelope located in the middle of the table. For those of you who are neither U.S. citizens nor underrepresented minorities, or do not wish to participate, you may take this opportunity to excuse yourself.

Completion and Attrition in AGEP and non-AGEP Institutions
Student Focus Group
Comprehensive Protocol

1. Could we quickly go around the room and have each of you indicate the academic program in which you are currently enrolled, and when you expect to complete your degree. And as a reminder, please do not tell us your name.

    a. Why did you decide to pursue a doctoral degree? What do you hope to get out of it?

    b. What are you planning to do when you complete your degree? What sort of careers are you most interested in pursuing?

2. Let's begin with a few questions about your decision to enroll in this program.

    a. Think back to when you were first considering this program. What criteria or factors played a role in your decision to enroll in this doctoral program, etc.?

    b. Did you visit the campus before enrolling? If so, what impact did the campus visit have on your decision to enroll? What was it about the visit that influenced your decision, etc.?

    c. Now that you have been in the program, are there criteria or factors that you wish you had considered? Do you think you had all of the necessary information to make an informed decision, etc.?

3. Since you started the program, have you taken a leave of absence (i.e., were you not enrolled or taking classes)?

    a. If so, for how long? Can you tell us why? Did this delay your expected graduation date, etc.?

4. Let us talk about some of the factors that might influence students' ability to complete the program.

    a. Were you assigned an advisor when you first enrolled in the program?

        i. How often do you met with your advisor? What kinds of help did he or she provide? What kinds of help does he or she not provide but would have otherwise be helpful, etc.?

        ii. Can you share some of the characteristics or behaviors of your advisor that have been helpful or not? Explain.

        iii. Overall, are you satisfied with the experience you are having with your advisor?

        iv. What would improve the advising experience?

    b. Do you have a mentor, someone who is not your academic advisor, whom you go to for support, inspiration, or when you have concerns or face challenges?

        i. Can anyone share some of the characteristics or behaviors of your mentor that have been helpful or not?

        ii. To what extent is your network of family and friends interested and able to support and encourage you in your doctoral program?

c. Next, we want to ask about your program expectations.

  i. Were expectations and milestones clearly explained at the start of the program? How did you learn about these (e.g., through an orientation, a student handbook, fellow students, advisor, etc.)?

  ii. Has your actual experience differed from your initial expectations? e.g., Is the doctoral program harder or easier? Is the actual workload greater, smaller, or about what you initially expected? Please explain.

d. We want to shift gears now and ask a few questions about the program climate or environment.

  i. Do you feel welcome in the department/program? Is there a sense of community? Do you feel a part of the community, etc.?

  ii. Are faculty approachable outside of class for formal and informal discussions? Do you feel as though they treat all doctoral students equally, etc.?

  iii. What about peer support? Are fellow students generally collaborative or competitive, etc.?

    1. Are there student groups or associations? If so, are you a part of any of them, and do you find them useful? How so?

  iv. Generally speaking, how effective do you feel your program/department is with respect to helping underrepresented minority doctoral students complete their program?

e. Now we have some questions about programs aimed specifically at helping underrepresented minority students complete their doctoral programs.

  i. Did any of you participate in an undergraduate research or other program (e.g., Bridges to the Doctorate, LSAMP, etc.) before enrolling in this doctoral program?

    1. If so, did you find these useful? How so (or not), etc.?

    2. If not, were programs such as these available at your undergraduate institution, or did you choose not to participate?

  ii. Do you participate in AGEP or other similar programs? Do you find these useful? How so (or not), etc.?

  iii. How is information about these programs communicated? Is there a single office or other source of information about these programs, or is it largely decentralized? Is this communication strategy sufficient, etc.?

  iv. Generally speaking, how aware of these programs are faculty in your program? Are faculty supportive of students' participation in these programs?

f. What types of professional development activities are offered (e.g., speaker series, writing workshops, job placement services, etc.)? Did/do you participate in any of these? How useful did you find them? Were there other opportunities that were not offered that you would have found useful, etc.?

g. Financing education is a challenge for many students. How are you financing your education? Do you have concerns about your ability to pay for your doctoral degree? Do you have concerns about whether or not you will get a good return on your investment, etc.?

5. Is the program going as expected thus far? Do you think you will complete the program in a timely fashion?

   a. If so, what are the factors that have enabled you to succeed thus far?

   b. If not, what challenges might you be facing that might prove to be an obstacle? How might you overcome these? What could your program do to help you overcome these challenges?

6. Overall, how satisfied have you been with the program? Do you have specific recommendations for improving the program?

7. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience thus far in the program or the institution?

Thank you very much for participating in this focus group. We anticipate that the results of this study will be available in 2014. We would be glad to hear from you, if you have additional thoughts or comments so please take one of the business cards on the table—they have our e-mail addresses and contact information.