The IGERT Program Evaluation:

A Focus Group Study on IGERT New Student Experiences

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Introduction

This report is the result of one assessment in a larger study designed to evaluate Maryland's IGERT program in language science. The evaluation seeks to determine the effectiveness of the program in terms of its goals and obtain information that offers insights into the components which appear most beneficial, and those that could be refined to enhance the program's impact. The program evaluation is led by the Director of Assessment in Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment (IRPA) and her graduate assistant.

Focus groups allow evaluators to explore salient issues for participants by providing the opportunity for them to express their thoughts, opinions, and experiences in their own words. On September 24, 2010, program evaluators conducted a focus group study of first-year graduate students who were interested in interdisciplinary studies and/or the IGERT program. The focus group was designed to capture data on participants' interest in, initial perceptions, and awareness of interdisciplinary studies and the IGERT program at the University of Maryland (see Appendix for protocol).

It should be noted that the data provided in this report are perceptions that participants have of their experience with IGERT, regardless of whether the perceptions are based in fact. As always, caution should be used not to generalize qualitative data beyond this focus group.

Methods

Program evaluators, in consultation with the IGERT administrators, formed the research team responsible for the protocol development, data collection, and analyses in the focus group study.

The focus group protocol was vetted by program evaluators and IGERT program leadership to ensure questions were 1) clear and understandable, 2) broad, non-leading, and open-ended, and 3) would capture the range of issues. Questions were ordered, prioritized, and assigned approximate time limits for discussion based on their complexity and importance. The focus group was designed to run approximately 60-90 minutes. A focus group script including information about the confidentiality of the session and informed consent form were also developed as per IRB agreement.

Data Collection

First-year graduate students were invited to participate via email. All students who responded and could attend the entire focus group were selected to participate.

The focus group was staffed by two trained research team members and was audio recorded. One served as a discussion facilitator and the other served as a note-taker. The protocol was followed to ensure that all topics were covered. The facilitator began by reading a script to communicate necessary information about the discussion. Attendees were informed of the confidentiality of the session, and asked to sign a consent form if they had not previously done so. After the audio recordings were started, the facilitator began the discussion.

Data Analysis

After the completion of the focus group, the audio recording was transcribed by student employees in the IRPA office. The transcription was verified by a second student employee. The data were then analyzed by the research team using qualitative procedures. One evaluator analyzed the data collected from the focus group, first by reading the transcript and generating a list of common themes. Each theme was assigned a code. A second evaluator audited the analyses to confirm that themes were properly assigned and to ensure that the report accurately reflects the focus group discussion.

Participants

Eight first-year students participated in the focus group. Half of the participants in the focus group were students in the linguistics department; two students were from second language acquisition program; and one student each from the department of human development (EDHD) and department of philosophy. The majority of participants had a general understanding of the IGERT program and of interdisciplinary studies at the university. The participants' collective interest in the IGERT program and their motivation (some might believe that participating will positively impact their status with the IGERT program) to attend the focus group could have resulted in a participant bias. It is important to keep this potential bias in mind as the results reflect a group of students with a vested interest in the IGERT program.

Results

The results presented below follow four main topic areas: students' knowledge of interdisciplinary research at the University of Maryland, interest in and understanding of interdisciplinary research, awareness of the IGERT program, and their expectations and perceived benefits of getting involved with the IGERT program.

Knowledge of Interdisciplinary Research at the University of Maryland

Participants were asked if they were aware of interdisciplinary studies in language sciences before they enrolled at the University of Maryland, and whether or not this impacted their admissions decision. Less than half of the students reported that they knew about interdisciplinary research at the University of Maryland prior to enrolling. There was a consistent disparity between the knowledge of students in the linguistics department and those in other programs at the university. Similarly, students from second language acquisition had a better grasp than their counterparts in EDHD and philosophy.

- I'm in linguistics, and I think when I was here for prospective students weekend I feel like they talked a lot about collaboration with other departments, and I come from psychology so that was a huge plus for me. One of the main reasons why I wanted to apply to Maryland was because I felt like they do a good job of sort of language sciences across departments.
- I could see that my department, second language acquisition, is affiliated with linguistics and other departments. I was actually aware.
- Well I did know beforehand a bunch of people in [my] department were also cross-listed in the linguistics…that is unusual for [my program].

A few participants made their admissions decision based on the interdisciplinary research being conducted in language sciences at the University of Maryland. One participant said that University of Maryland was recommended from those outside the university community as well.

- One of the main reasons why I wanted to apply to Maryland was because I felt like they do a good job of sort of language sciences across departments.
- I think that places that do produce really great research and are, you know, I mean when I looked at grad programs I only wanted to go places where departments really collaborated but I think a lot of schools haven't caught on yet.
- … for people who plan on beginning and are interested in interdisciplinary, which was my case, Maryland was obviously a name that I heard a lot when I was talking to people about where I should apply. Definitely for people who are interested in interdisciplinary stuff, Maryland comes up a lot.

Yet, other participants reported that they came to Maryland because of specific faculty members and departments, but that the focus on interdisciplinary research became evident after they started their program.

- I've been working with [chosen field] my whole career… and part of my decision for coming here was the faculty… getting a strong grounding in [another discipline] is extremely rare in [my field], so that will be something that is really to your advantage so all this other stuff just the connections between departments became clear to me after only a year.
- I didn't know exactly but I came here because of the faculty and particularly because of one professor, but [Maryland's notoriety for interdisciplinary studies] became very obvious once I was here.

Interest in & Understanding of Interdisciplinary Studies

All participants were interested in interdisciplinary studies. Additionally, they were able to articulate their understanding about the purpose and potential benefits of pursuing interdisciplinary research. Participants spoke about the benefits of collaborating between disciplinary fields, departments, and programs in terms of research outcomes: utilizing resources effectively and building cognitive resonance between theory and practice.

- I mean I think every department comes at language research from a different perspective and I think working together we can use the advantages and the different perspectives of other departments in order to sort of better everyone's research.
- In the past, linguistics was kind of considered as a lonely branch, but as soon as cognitive linguistics appeared then people became aware that you can't isolate the language, there are so many other fields that can contribute to a better understanding of how people, for example, acquire language. Of course it's very essential to…collaborate with other departments yes.
- … just to be able to use the resources of other departments, you know like, one department's not gonna be able to have experimental facilities for every kind of experiment someone in that department might ever wanna run.
- I think there is a lot to be gained...the field has a lot to gain if people try to take a more cross-methodological approach to these problems.

- And it's huge, because it helps both sides to be way more efficient. So if you are thinking about doing experimentation, a lot of time, a lot of work, a lot of money goes into doing these experiments, and if we can use the theories that are there in order to make our testing more efficient, that would make our progress so much faster and I think the same goes for the theoretical side. If they can use experimental data to further their studies, it's good.

More specifically, students discussed the benefits and purpose to their individual research and studies at the University of Maryland. Beyond their current studies, participants noted their expectations beyond their programs: One participant wants to go back into industry, one is not sure about their future career plans, and six want to stay within the academy for professorship or research.

- Yeah, I think it helps to kind of understand correlations between objects of study so you get kind of a different perspective and you can understand your field of study as modeling a very similar thing to another field of study, but talking about it in a different way, right? Or talking about the objects of your field in a different way kind of.
- It's of great value to me, is to, essentially not lose sight of what the subject matter is. [My discipline] has a tendency to go off into various, more or less, abstract areas which turn out to have nothing to do with the linguistics at all. So, uh, that's the value for me.
- …the value for me is that people can benefit a lot from their communication… to have a broad view of the language, I think.
- I just want to learn more from different faculties and different programs to figure out exactly what I want to do for my job in the future. So I'm interested in participating in the interdisciplinary studies and learn more from more aspects about [my areas of study] and find exactly my interest.

Participants spoke broadly about perceived transformations and stagnations within their disciplinary fields; the dichotomy between theory and practice, silos that exist in various disciplines, and movement towards studying with an interdisciplinary foci.

- …a lot of linguistics, I think, started kind of going off and doing its own thing that was, looking at language in a very, very specific way. Like linguistics was, and not necessarily using all the different sources of data that you could be using to kind of get at the problems they wanted to get at. So it's a nice re-emerging.
- There's still a bifurcation [in the research literature]…you still talk about the theoretical linguists and the experimental linguists or the psycho linguists.
- … it used to be, in like the 60's and maybe the early 70's there was a lot of collaboration between linguistics and philosophy. The journal of linguistics and philosophy, for example. And then it sort of stopped… but it seems to be coming back on.
- I think there's this kind of fatigue around theoretical work, that's really pure theoretical work. That is definitely kind of mounting. I have kind of gotten that, it's spread to me at least. The feeling kind of like, "Oh I really don't want to rehash what everyone else has done." It's kind of the feeling that I want to start doing something a little less purely theoretical.
- My personal impression of professional linguistics is that, again, that there are these two kinds of camps [theory and practice]. And the people who do this interdisciplinary and experimental kind of work don't really look at the insights that have been gained by the

people who do theoretical work. My prime interest isn't in theoretical kind of work, but I'm interested in not throwing that to the side when I go out into the real world and do experiments and find out how things actually work.

<u>Awareness of the IGERT program</u>

While some students learned about IGERT prior to enrolling at the institution, others were not provided with information until they arrived. Over half of the linguistic students reported knowing about IGERT before they started classes, and most of the other participants heard about IGERT after the semester started. However, all of the participants heard about IGERT via word-of-mouth (e.g. instructors, peers, mentors, and advisors) first and later received e-mails about IGERT activities.

- So when I came to Prospective Students Weekend last March, the department talked about it. Some of the opportunities it could provide and what is was about. So that is how I heard about it, and like I said that was a big factor in me deciding to come to Maryland and then as soon as I got here there were plenty of emails and information about lunch talks and things.
- Actually a girl… she has been a full member of IGERT program and she introduced me to participate in this program. She said, not only the faculty, but also the students in IGERT programs, they're very very smart and she told me that I can learn a lot, not only from the faculty members, also from the students there.
- …one of our professors at the weekly dissertation…weekly I had a class and he just spoke, long just spoke really really well of it and really encouraged the new students to look at it and think about joining it, others too. There are two people who were in it, are in it who...he just said that it really is something good and to look into it early because if you don't then you won't be able to finish it. There are too many course obligations, and by the second year or third year it is too late.
- Yeah, there's always...I mean every week, multiple emails a week between people in the department where it is like "IGERT, IGERT, IGERT," you definitely see it.
- I learned about it, I think the first week of September, basically the first week of the semester, independently through all of the professors who are also involved in linguistics. So as soon as I mentioned I was interested in [my research area], they said that I should go to IGERT or get involved.

All of the participants were not only encouraged to get involved with IGERT, but their advisors were actively collaborating with other departments. However, this encouragement and collaboration cannot be generalized to all the departments represented in this study. Participants outside of the linguistics and second language acquisition reported that their advisors were involved with the program, but that their department, generally, is not encouraging or even aware of IGERT.

- I should say, though, that departmentally, IGERT is unknown… It's only people who are interested in [my area of study] who were encouraged, and encouraged quite a lot. But that's unfortunate, because there are a lot of people who have their secondary interest in language who would be well served by coming to the talks. But, I think a lot of them don't really know about it. So that might be something to change.

- … very many people in [my] department are involved in a language, so my advisor focus a lot on language, especially the bi-lingualism. So she encourage me to participate in this program, actively. But other I don't see their students, perhaps I don't know them, but I don't see them , I never see them show up in the lunch talks, I mean. So, perhaps, because of their interest, I think, but in my advisor's life everyone just actively participates in this program.

Participants were asked if they perceive any barriers to getting involved with IGERT and interdisciplinary studies at the university. One respondent mentioned logistical barriers to receiving a certificate in another department, but generally, all participants did not anticipate any barriers and felt supported in their research endeavors. However, students from linguistics had a more positive outlook regarding support from their department than students from other departments.

- I think it's pretty obvious we have a lot of students involved, a lot of faculty involved, and not only are there no barriers, but I feel like every student would be encouraged to get involved somehow, if they had any interest.

Expectations & Perceived Benefit of the IGERT Program

When participants were asked about their expectations for IGERT activities they listed several desired outcomes: making connections with other departments, learning about unpublished work, receiving feedback from faculty and students about potential research projects, finding an existing research team to work with, and learning about cross-department research.

- And I guess also I'm hoping to maybe find some inspiration, in terms of, like, other projects that I could be, start doing, and projects that are kinda in the process of being done that I could join, and things like that. See how I could get involved in interdisciplinary research.
- I think, for me the, just to get a quick snapshot on what, the kinds of research that other departments are doing.
- But, eventually, I think, it would be great to have feedback from people who just come from a different perspective.

A few participants explicitly stated that they hope to join as an affiliate or full member of IGERT, but there was confusion around the appropriate terminology and distinctions between the types of membership.

Summary
- About half of the participants were knowledgeable about interdisciplinary studies prior to enrolling at University of Maryland.
- A few students came to Maryland because of the emphasis on interdisciplinary research.
- Respondents felt that University of Maryland has a reputation for interdisciplinary studies outside of the university community.
- All participants are interested in and understand the value of interdisciplinary studies; at the university, department, disciplinary, and individual level.
- Most of the participants anticipate staying within the academy after they graduate.
- Participants understand developments and stagnations within their discipline in relation to interdisciplinary studies.

- About half of the participants knew about the IGERT program, while others learned shortly after coming on campus.
- All participants heard about IGERT from peers and faculty members.
- All participants received support for their pursuit of interdisciplinary research. Additionally, students felt that there was a mutual interest between students and faculty members.
- Participants articulated tangible benefits to their participation with the IGERT program: making connection, learning about interdisciplinary research, and receiving feedback about their own ideas for interdisciplinary work.
- Participants were confused about the IGERT student classification (full or affiliate).

Appendix: Protocol

Focus Group Protocol

Topics of Interest

- Awareness of interdisciplinary studies with language sciences at the University of Maryland and IGERT
- Alignment of department and individual goals for interdisciplinary research.
- Interest and involvement with interdisciplinary studies and the IGERT program
- General feedback on interests in interdisciplinary studies

Focus Group Script

Hello, my name is _____. I am _____ (TELL BRIEFLY WHO YOU ARE HERE AT UM). I will be moderating our discussion today about your experiences with interdisciplinary research and the IGERT program. This is my colleague _____ who will be taking notes. (EITHER INTRODUCE THE NOTE TAKER, OR LET THEM INTRODUCE THEMSELVES.) I'm going to read the following information from a script to ensure that I communicate all of the necessary information about our discussion. Some of you may already know a lot about cross-department language research at the university, and some may not, and this is something we hope to learn about during this session. I will read a brief description of the program and its goals during our session today to provide further clarification.

This is a focus group, which is a research method useful for gaining information about a topic in a comfortable environment. As participants we ask you to maintain the confidentiality of today's discussion and not share the content with anyone outside the focus group. With your permission, we will tape record the session so that the notes will accurately reflect the conversation. Your identity will be kept confidential. We will summarize all of the focus groups discussions, no names included, and present our findings, again no names included, to the IGERT program staff, after which they may present the findings to agencies funding the project, and members of the academic community. This focus group is a part of a larger study to assess the effectiveness of the IGERT program and to provide internal feedback that facilitates program improvements. As NSF states, IGERT is an "experiment in graduate education", and participating in the assessment process is an important part of the educational research effort.

Over the past year we have conducted focus groups with returning students and faculty members with similar goals in mind. Although the assessment process is guided, and funded, by the IGERT program in language science, its goal is to better understand the environment for language science research more broadly at UMD, and to create a model for sustainable change in the science of language.

In order for this to be a productive session, we ask that you speak clearly and one at a time, and that you think about the questions and answer candidly. Keep in mind you don't have to answer every question. While at times you may disagree with the comments made by others, we ask that

you respect their right to say what they think. At this point, if you would like to leave and not participate in the focus group, feel free to do so now. [IF ANYONE GETS UP, THANK THEM FOR THEIR TIME.]

Now I would like you to write your name on one side and your number on the other side of the card in front of you [have participants count off after this sentence]. You may choose a name other than your own if you prefer, but your name will not be associated anywhere with your comments. The number on the opposite side of your card will be used for note taking today [reference note taker] and it will also be used later for the transcriptions and data analysis. We will use your names, as written, to talk with each other during today's session for conversational purposes.

I am also handing out a consent form for you to read. If you feel comfortable doing so, sign the form indicating that you understand the purpose and procedure of this session, and that you agree to participate. If you have any questions about this study, we can be reached through the person in charge of this project, Sharon La Voy. I will hand out her business cards now. [HAVE STUDENTS SIGN AND RETURN INFORMED CONSENT FORMS. IF ANYONE DOES NOT WANT TO SIGN, AND CHOOSES TO LEAVE, THANK THEM FOR THEIR TIME.]

At this time, I will start the tape and we will begin our discussion. We will begin by asking each of you to state the name you have written on the card, the name of your academic department and program, and when you started your program.

10:20am

(20 mins)

1. First, we would like to hear about your awareness of interdisciplinary research at the University of Maryland:
   a. *Before enrolling, were you aware of interdisciplinary studies in language sciences at the University of Maryland? If so, did this impact your decision to attend the university?*

   b. *What do you see as the purpose of interdisciplinary research? How would you describe it?*

   c. *Do you feel that interdisciplinary research is relevant to your field of study?* [And/or is it common in your field?]

10:40am

(20 mins)

2. The next set of questions will discuss your interest in interdisciplinary studies in language science:
   a. *Are you interested in attending activities that promote interdisciplinary studies in the language sciences? What types of activities would you like to attend?*

   b. *What is your primary reason for getting involved with interdisciplinary studies at the University of Maryland? (skills, networking, understanding of interdisciplinary research, funding, applying in the spring, etc.)*

  c. *Do you plan on getting involved with any interdisciplinary research teams while studying at the University? If so, please explain.*

3. We would like to hear about your initial perceptions and awareness of the IGERT program, first I will read a more detailed description of the IGERT program [Read description of IGERT program]:

Description of the IGERT Program and Its Goals

The IGERT program is an interdisciplinary program in Biological and Computational Foundations of Language Diversity, which is supported by the National Science Foundations prestigious Integrative Graduate Education and Research Training (IGERT) program. The IGERT program is designed for highly motivated students who seek broad interdisciplinary training that is not normally available within an individual program. The IGERT program's main goal is to strengthen the language science community at University of Maryland by offering students and faculty venues and resources for interdisciplinary training and collaborative research.

  a. *Were you aware of IGERT, if so how did you hear about IGERT? What were your initial impressions of the program?*

  b. *What would you expect out of IGERT activities and programs?*

  c. *Has your program department or advisor discussed the IGERT program with you, if so in what context?*

  d. *What is your departments overall faculty/student involvement with the IGERT program and/or interdisciplinary studies? Do you see any barriers to getting involved?*
    i. [Do you think the IGERT program fits into your department goals?]

  e. *Do you think the IGERT program fits into your career/research aspirations?*

4. Before we conclude today's discussion, is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your interest in interdisciplinary research and the IGERT program?

Thank you for participating in today's discussion, your insights have been extremely valuable. As a reminder, we ask you to maintain the confidentiality of today's discussion and not share the content with anyone outside the focus group. Before you leave, if you feel comfortable doing so, please fill out the following questionnaire [PASS OUT QUESTIONNAIRE] to help us in our analysis of the group's discussion.