

AAG Career Development Research - Focus Groups Protocol

Date Created: August 4, 2005

Objectives: To acquire primary data for AAG research on career development in geography, we will conduct a series of focus groups with individuals having varying levels of geography experience, professional positions, and educational backgrounds. Focus groups will elicit discussion of issues related to:

- (1) geography's value for employment in the contemporary workplace, and
- (2) the quality of career preparation and guidance (advising, mentoring, and coursework) provided by geography programs

Each topic will be explored separately by different focus groups.

Focus Group Participants: The focus groups will be drawn from companies, government agencies, and educational organizations in the Washington, DC metro area. In an effort to address differences within and among economic sectors, we aim to conduct approximately six focus groups total with individuals in the following three workforce sectors:

1. Government:
 - a) Federal Government
 - b) State and Local Government
2. Private:
 - a) Private For-Profit (Large, Small and Entrepreneurial)
 - b) Private Non-Profit/NGOs
3. Education:
 - a) Academic Comprehensive or Research Institutions (Master's and PhD programs)
 - b) Academic Teaching Institutions (2-year community/technical colleges and liberal arts colleges)
 - c) K-12 Schools (of all types, including: public, private, and charter)

Ideally, each focus group will include a mix of 6-10 individuals with knowledge of employment issues in geography and the nature of geographic expertise. We will supplement our focus groups by interviewing two individuals in each sub-group (approx. 14 total) outside the Washington, D.C. metro area to account for possible geographical differences in the career sector.

Individuals will be invited to participate on the basis of being employed in companies, agencies, and organizations that have provided internships or hired geography graduates during the past year; on the basis of being a corporate/institutional member of the AAG; or on the basis of recommendation from the EDGE Project Advisory Committee. The

sample will include individuals having two-year, four-year, and graduate degrees in geography, as well as individuals with little academic preparation in geography.

Informed consent: Informed consent forms will be distributed and collected by staff prior to the focus groups.

Description of the Focus Group: The participants and the facilitator will sit around a table for the discussion. The facilitator will begin the meeting by introducing herself and explaining the purpose of the focus group session. The focus group meeting will last approximately 60 minutes and it will be tape-recorded.

Logistics: The focus group will take place at the AAG or via teleconference at times that are convenient for the participants.

Focus Group Topic One: Value/Importance of Geography for Employment

Introduction

We are conducting a series of focus groups with individuals representing organizations in government, industry, and education in order to understand the value of geography knowledge and skills in careers, professional development, and the workplace. In particular, we want to identify the specific competencies that are most useful and desired by employers, what types of courses and educational experiences are important for career development, and the extent to which there will be a greater need for geographically competent individuals in the modern workforce.

Your comments here will be kept confidential, and your names and any other identifying information will not be used in any report coming from this research. We appreciate your honest feedback and appreciate the time you have taken to help us with this research. We will hear from each of you and appreciate your being respectful of all opinions from the group.

1) To begin, could each of you tell me your name, affiliation, and specific role within your organization? Could you also explain in what capacity your organization hires individuals with associate's, bachelor's, and graduate degrees in geography?

My next questions will focus on determining the value of geography knowledge and skills in your industry or organization, as well as the need for geographically competent workers:

2a) What kinds of geographical knowledge and skills are needed in your industry, organization, or agency? How does this need vary for individuals in different roles and positions of responsibility?

2b) What kinds of more general professional competencies, personal qualities and dispositions are needed in your industry, organization, or agency? How does this need vary for individuals in different roles and positions of responsibility?

3) In the past decade, what have been the most significant changes in the workplace affecting your industry, organization, or agency? How have these trends affected the need for geographically competent individuals in your industry, organization, agency?

4) From your perspective, are undergraduate and graduate geography programs producing workers with the competencies required for success in your industry, organization, or agency? What are these programs doing well in terms of career preparation? What needs are not being satisfied?

5) Looking toward the future, to what extent do you anticipate changes in your industry, organization, agency in the coming decade? How might these changes affect hiring decisions and the need for geographically-competent workers?

Follow-up questions will be asked, when appropriate, to gather further information on specific capacities and workplace changes.

Debriefing

That's all the time we have. I would like to thank you for your participation. I also want to restate that what you have shared with me is confidential. No part of our discussion that includes names or other identifying information will be used in any reports, displays, or other publicly accessible media coming from this research. We will provide you with review drafts of the analysis, as well as copies of final reports, and practical resources developed under the grant. Finally, I want to provide you with a chance to ask any questions that you might have about this research. Do you have any questions for me?

Focus Group Topic Two: Quality of Career Preparation in Geography Programs

Introduction

We are conducting research on issues related to the job search, employment, quality of the research/education experience, and adequateness of the curriculum and mentoring/advising relationships in undergraduate and graduate geography programs. Your comments here will be kept confidential, and your names and any other identifying information will not be used in any report coming from this research. We appreciate your honest feedback and appreciate the time you have taken to help us with this research. We will hear from each of you and appreciate your being respectful of all opinions from the group.

- 1) To begin, could each of you tell me your name, the degree(s) you have and from what institution, and what job you have held that has made the best use of your geography education?

I would like to continue by asking a series of questions focus on the training and career guidance provided by your undergraduate or graduate program. Please feel free to answer these from the perspective of a student or from the viewpoint of an advisor:

- 2) What types of mentoring, advice, and guidance did your undergraduate and/or graduate program and institution provide for career planning? How well did this information assist you in finding a job or continuing your education? Have you ever provided career guidance to others, and if so, in what capacity?
- 3) What knowledge, skills, and abilities are important for employees in your industry, organization, or agency? How do they acquire these competencies? Does your industry, organization, or agency provide opportunities for post-graduate education or training? If so, please describe these opportunities.

Finally, I'd like you to ask for your ideas for how to improve career development in geography:

- 4) Are there any areas of career development where more communication and cooperation is needed between geography departments and employers?
- 5) How might departments and employers improve the climate and expand employment opportunities for women, minorities, and other underrepresented groups in geography?

Follow-up questions will be asked, when appropriate, to gather further information on specific issues.

Debriefing (same text as above)