The IGERT Program Evaluation:

A Focus Group Study on IGERT Student Experiences

By:
Corbin M. Campbell
Sharon A. La Voy
Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment
University of Maryland

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 which need to 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.

On March 26, 2010, program evaluators conducted a focus group study of students affiliated with the IGERT program. The focus group was designed to capture data on students' experiences with IGERT (frequency and type of involvement), perception of IGERT's impact on creating/sustaining interdisciplinary graduate research opportunities, the IGERT program management, IGERT impact's on the student experience (recruitment, retention, satisfaction), and the most and least helpful aspects of the IGERT program. Focus groups allowed evaluators to explore salient issues for students by providing the opportunity for them to express their thoughts, opinions, and experiences in their own words. (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 and prioritized, and assigned approximate time limits for discussion based on their complexity and importance. The focus group was designed to run approximately 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

Focus groups were conducted in late March of 2010. IGERT students and affiliates 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. At the end of the session, participants were reminded about the confidentiality of the discussion, and asked to answer a few demographic questions for use in analyses. The demographic variables requested included their

academic program, year in their academic program, year in IGERT, and whether they were a funded IGERT student.

Data Analysis

After the completion of the focus group, the audio recording was transcribed by student employees in IRPA. The transcriptions of each session were 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, and a second evaluator checked the analyses. The evaluators first read the transcript and generated a list of common themes. Each theme was assigned a code. The evaluator then assigned each comment to a code.

Participants

Eleven students participated in the focus group. Participants in the focus group were a diverse and representative group, including six students from Linguistics and the others from five different departments. Participants were at varying levels of experience in their academic program (1st through 4th year) and in IGERT. All, but one who had just applied, were fully participating in the program; there were six second years and four first years in the IGERT program. Eight of the eleven students were funded in the program.

Results

Involvement with IGERT

When asked how they first heard about the IGERT program, there were differences by department. For Linguistics students, all had heard through Colin Phillips. For those outside Linguistics, they had heard through emails, their advisor, or word-of-mouth from other students. Participants had varied involvement with the IGERT program, including participation in IGERT lunches, Winter Storm, and the outreach program to a local high school.

Some students commented that being over-committed affected their ability to participate. For example, three students commented that having to work outside IGERT either because they were not funded or because their department needed TA help made the IGERT responsibilities difficult to meet. Another student commented:

- I think in the second Winter Storm I was looking more for…a research group that, maybe makes me look at it in a different perspective… rather than, here is this new thing getting off the ground that I will have to devote many many hours of my life to because I really wasn't in a position where I could commit to that, but something that actually made me look at something in a different way, and actually apply to something I'm already doing.

Effective Program Activities

Participants mentioned several specific activities or components of IGERT that had been helpful in both their understanding of interdisciplinary research and their graduate careers, including funding for conferences and experiments, IGERT courses, research teams from Winter Storm,

lunch talks, lab rotation, student involvement with IGERT program administration, service opportunities, and grant writing.

- In my case, the IGERT courses offered give me research ideas to pursue which I wouldn't have been exposed to without those courses so they were very helpful.
- … being given the opportunity to present at the lunch itself and get feedback from people who might not necessarily be in your department. So I know I got very different feedback presenting at the IGERT group than I did presenting specifically in [home department].
- …the IGERT … requires you to do a lab rotation and so that has allowed me to…work in a lab that [has equipment] which we don't have in my department. My department is very small so our resources are very limited and being part of the IGERT has allowed me to learn many different skills and play with different equipment that I would have never have been able to use just by being in my department. I think just that and being able to work and see how another lab works is a big plus when it comes to building skills and seeing how other labs work and see how other departments can look at very similar questions in a completely different way.

Interdisciplinary Research

Participants discussed the benefits and challenges of engaging in and learning about interdisciplinary research. A few students discussed their experiences with being a part of interdisciplinary teams, which were developed during Winter Storm and, in some cases, continued to meet afterwards. Participants mentioned that faculty guidance and having team membership from multiple departments facilitated a positive interdisciplinary team experience:

- I think one of the great strengths of it was...that we all came from different departments and another thing that really helped was that there was a faculty member, [Name and department] who has helped, you know, get the meetings going...the one who facilitates a lot of our discussions. He has provided really useful guidance for our project.

Some of the benefits that participants mentioned about engaging in or learning about interdisciplinary research included being exposed to research outside one's discipline and creating a network of researchers from broad perspectives. There was particular agreement about the benefits of creating a broader interdisciplinary network.

- I think one good thing that has come out of it is just the fact that everybody has a different knowledge of the resources that are available. So one good thing is just that it exposed me to a lot more wider breadth of research. I'm referring to articles and other topics. We were dealing with memory and electrophysiological data and it just kind of opened up a new area of resources that I [hadn't] previously known about.
- One is just the academic, right. You develop your research, but the other part of it is sociological. You develop friends and collaboration and you just build a better sense of the community of language science people around here.

By contrast, two participants believed that IGERT had not changed their path significantly:

- I honestly don't know what I've done differently since the IGERT that I wouldn't have done before. I mean I guess it's like a nice feeling I guess to think that we have this language community and the people are talking to each other and coming from other departments. But, in terms of my own work, I don't think it has changed anything.

Other participants believed that their path had not changed significantly as a result of what they had learned in IGERT, but that IGERT had given them the means and the connections to make their research happen:

- So I'll say that the IGERT probably hasn't changed my interests in what I am working on so much…But essentially all the research I have done since becoming an IGERT student has been with our external partners so having official support for doing it has made it a lot more practicable…
- I was already taking some courses in the Linguistics department and I was already interested in interdisciplinary research before I joined IGERT, but then IGERT program came in and…it became more of a norm to collaborate with people from other departments….So I guess that kind of changed the mood in terms of working with someone who you are not really familiar with, but still you are open to their ideas.

When asked about how IGERT and learning about interdisciplinary research has affected their career, almost all participants seemed to think that it had changed their perspective on a broader level, even if their specific career aspirations had not changed since they started the program:

- I do think my approach to the research has changed a lot… I look in the past … I was looking at the …specified issues of my interest. But now it's more a bigger umbrella of language education, language science. What does this mean? How does this fit? I just see a broader perspective when think of my research topic. That possibly could affect my research path too.
- I'd say it hasn't changed mine. I would say that being exposed to something beyond your department gets you thinking about other options. In that way, I probably think more about non-linguistics options as well, and if I didn't have that interdisciplinary exposure, whether it be going to these conferences...so I'm not attributing it to the IGERT, but I would say that any [*inter*]disciplinary exposure does, for me, change your mind set.

Department Representation

One theme that came up frequently throughout the focus group was about the student representation in IGERT from non-Linguistics departments. Non-linguistics participants spoke about how their programs were under-represented in IGERT.

- I see that some of my fellow students in [my department] are not really taking advantage of this opportunity as much as they could.
- But it is the same case in my department. To get somebody to you and come to the lunches or try and participate in any of the activities, you're kind of begging them to come.
- [Regarding Winter Storm]: But I did hear some of my friends complain about how they were really turned off by their experience in another group where … it was dominated by certain faculty members and students who are already so invested in that research topic anyway, where as other people were just there to learn about it, and then that discussion just escalated to a level where it wasn't really accessible to people who weren't even familiar within that small little subset within Linguistics… I know that experience turned some people off from the whole Winter Storm experience.

There were some dissenting opinions:

- I think I've also heard other people complain about some of the, how the IGERT says it is supposed to help you meet other people from other departments, and … I think that is sort of an unfair …because I think in the end at the program level there is only so much that it can do. It is really up to the individual to take initiative and make things happen for themselves and to find the connections and in that aspect I know I had to take a lot of initiative myself, but once I did the program helped me carry them out.
- Also, if you just look around right now like less than half of us are in the Linguistics department, right? So that says something about hey we actually are pulling from different places. I think maybe the perception is you see people at IGERT and you just assume that they're Linguistics people if you don't know otherwise. … I didn't necessarily know the other people here weren't in Linguistics.

Students spoke about why it might be that non-linguistics students are less likely to participate, including funding issues and the view that IGERT is mainly Linguistics focused:

- They feel that this is predominately Linguistics students and so we don't fit over there. So "Why bother?" is kind of the attitude, but I don't think it's...I've never felt like...no one's ever treated me like I shouldn't be here. So that's why I'm saying I don't think it's a valid reason.
- One of the reasons I think is, in our department some of the students are international students so they are not actually qualified to get the full funding fellowship. So it's a little bit less encouraging since, if your funding sources in some areas in particular, in our case, many students work in … some other language research center. They have to work 20 hours there. So given these work groups, and then less of the financial incentives they see that they can from IGERT...

Non-linguistics participants also spoke about their perceived differences meeting course requirements. It appears that they feel that there is a greater burden on non-linguistics students to "go outside their comfort zone" for taking courses.

- So many of the outside requirements are in NACS, so those are requirements I would already take as part of my program, so for me the outside requirements are sort of what they're expecting their base to get in Linguistics anyway. So it seems there are almost too many requirements for me to fulfill within the language research.
- The IGERT …want[s] you to go outside of your comfort zone and take these tracks. But then the students that are in Linguistics that's... a little unbalanced because we're … required to go outside of our comfort zone and take some classes that don't really appeal... but it's doesn't seem like the Linguistics students will take that effort. It's very interesting, but they're not going outside of their comfort zone as much as we're forced to do so.
- …and then within those tracks you don't have anything that's required in Disorders, or Bilingualism, or in other things that perhaps, if we're talking about involving all of these different departments, they don't seem to be represented in those tracks.

Faculty Involvement

Students spoke about faculty involvement from non-Linguistics departments. Participants (from both Linguistics and non-Linguistics departments) felt that faculty and advisors were

encouraging of student participation in the program, but that the faculty affiliates who were not in Linguistics were not always active in the program:

- I think more broader faculty involvement, whether it's coming to the lunches or teaching seminars, something more would be good. In my involvement with it so far, I've mostly been involved with faculty who I already knew. Seeing a few talks at the Winter Storm lunches, but there are still a lot of people and I don't know what they are doing, and I think it would be interesting if we had this language community [*that exists*] on paper. I would like to see more of it in person I guess.
- It almost seems like they are on this list, but what does that mean to them? They don't seem to...[*be*]cause not all of them teach courses that are IGERT courses. A lot of them I don't think have even come to the talks. I don't know if maybe it's a matter of whether the faculty needs clarity on what their expectation are or if they are considered part...it almost seems like with the two Winter Storms it went from one extreme to the other. So the first one it seemed like it was too much involvement and the second one it felt like we were very much on our own.

Participants made some suggestions about how to involve more faculty from non-Linguistics departments, including encouraging faculty to think more broadly about how their research might apply to language instead of "get scared away from the idea of this language research, because that sort of puts this Linguistics heading over it." A few participants recommended that advisors take a more active role in connecting IGERT students with IGERT-affiliated faculty by setting up meetings. There was agreement that the logistics of the IGERT events were more tailored to recruit Linguistics faculty and students. Other locations or times might be better for other departments due to convenience, work schedules, etc.

- I mean, these lunch talks happen to fit in at a time where the Linguistics department historically had lunch talks. So everybody has that space on their schedule and they think, "Oh, of course I'll go to lunch talk. I always go to Thursday lunch talk."
- It seems like it might be useful to maybe tailor where and when our talks are based on, I mean if you want to present to these infant psychology people, maybe they have a colloquium series you could go to. Something where we could start throwing IGERT related talks out there to other departments. When it's just down the hall it's a lot easier for people probably than all the way across campus where it's mostly linguists and people who are not from your own background.
- I think that maybe it needs to be made clear to other faculty that even if what they're doing, they don't consider it language research, but it may still have an implication to language which is really why they are listed as IGERT faculty to begin with and I think that somehow faculty in NACS and Psychology get scared away from the idea of this language research, because that sort of puts this Linguistics heading over it

Program Administration

When asked about program administration, communication came up as a main concern. There was general agreement that the communication between IGERT administrators and students was lacking. They said that communication had improved since Csilla started working with IGERT. There were three main concerns with communication: the lack of communication about the admissions process, the desire to have more transparency with the program participants, and the lack of communication about expectations for the program:

- I applied last year and was not funded then. But I never heard anything, I just heard that other people were funded, so that was a hint. But, then at the same time, I don't think I started…they are really happy to have IGERT affiliates and people who want to be involved in the program, but I don't think I started getting e-mails about it until I started hearing by word of mouth…
- I remember when I applied I never got a letter, I never got anything saying what was happening, it was just very...and then one day I got an e-mail that - I didn't really get told I was accepted or anything - that said be at a meeting. Once the meeting was given, we were supposed to know we were getting funding? It was just very awkward.
- I mean being funded, being a fellow, I still don't fully know explicitly what the expectations are for me year to year, what the milestones are supposed to be, what a lab rotation entails, what types of progress reports you need to submit, like your proposal: do you actually need to see that through in two years or is that something that you're working towards? I still don't fully understand, so that might be something that could be communicated if it's made explicit somewhere or if somebody has the answers to those questions.

One student said that expectations are "clear if you ask about it," but that it would be helpful if it were more explicit. To help with transparency, participants suggested creating a list of all students who are involved, their program, their area of interest, and whether not they were funded. Some participants stated that there was not a tension between funded and non-funded students, but they thought that the IGERT faculty perceived that a tension exists. Many participants expressed a desire to know who was funded:

- I would actually like to know who the other participants are in the program and whether or not they are funded and all that other information that is kind of behind the scenes like we want to know and it is kinda weird that it is hidden from us.

When participants were asked about student participation in program administration, many stated that they felt very involved, but that it was usually specific students (students who are funded or non-linguistic students) who were most involved. Participants said that by helping with the administration and teaching, they learned about program organization and effective teaching techniques. Lastly, participants expressed a desire for balance with student and faculty involvement, stating that there was too much faculty involvement in the first Winter Storm and not enough in the second.

Summary

- Participants found several IGERT activities helpful in advancing their understanding of interdisciplinary research, including funding for conferences and experiments, IGERT courses, research teams from Winter Storm, lunch talks, lab rotation, student involvement with IGERT program administration, service opportunities, and grant writing.
- Participants mentioned two main benefits of engaging in or learning about interdisciplinary research: being exposed to research outside one's discipline and creating a network of researchers from broad perspectives.
- Many participants felt that IGERT had changed their thinking and their approach to research, but their broader career goals have stayed the same.

- As a result of IGERT, participants stated that they were exposed to an interdisciplinary network, resources, conferences, and equipment to which they might not otherwise have been exposed.
- Participants were concerned by the lesser involvement of non-Linguistics departments: both students and faculty.
    o Participants thought the lack of student participation might be related to funding, course requirements focused on Linguistics, or the perception that the IGERT culture is Linguistics-focused.
    o Participants also stated that they would like more faculty involvement from non-Linguistics departments.
    o Participants suggested that IGERT change the locations and times of events to be more convenient to other departments.
- Participants perceive that program administration is improving, but there are continued problems with communication of expectations, consistent communication, and transparency of information about participants.
    o Participants suggested sending a roster with information about students participating in IGERT.

Appendix: Protocol

Focus Group Protocol

Topics of Interest

- Experiences with IGERT (frequency and type of involvement)
- IGERT impact on creating/sustaining interdisciplinary graduate research opportunities
- IGERT program management
- IGERT impact on the student experience (recruitment, retention, satisfaction)
- General feedback (most and least helpful aspects of the 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 Foundation's 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.

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 in 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. Many of you may be very familiar with the IGERT program. I will read a brief description of the program and its goals [READ ABOVE DESCRIPTION OF IGERT PROGRAM AND GOALS]

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 be tape recording 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, no names included, and present our findings, again no names included, to the IGERT program staff and also possibly to agencies funding the project, and members of the academic community.

Now I would like you to write your name on both sides of the card in front of you. You may also write a pseudonym if you prefer so that your real name is not associated anywhere with your comments. These are the names we will use to talk with each other during today's session.

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.]

This focus group is a part of a larger study to assess the effectiveness of the IGERT program. 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.

Many of you may have signed a consent form about the IGERT assessment project during the IGERT Winter Storm workshop. I have copies available for anyone who would like to revisit the consent form. Is there anyone present who did not sign a consent form during the Winter Storm workshop? [IF YES, DISTRIBUTE CONSENT FORM AND GIVE TIME TO READ AND SIGN]. If you feel comfortable doing so, sign the form indicating that you understand the purpose and procedure of the IGERT assessment, 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 RETURN SIGNED 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, how long you have been in your program, and whether you are a funded IGERT student.

11:40am

(10 mins)

1. Please tell us about your involvement in the IGERT program, such as how often you participate in IGERT activities.

    a. *How did you first hear about or get involved with the program?*

    b. *Which IGERT activities have you been involved with?*

11:50am

(20 mins)

2. The next questions will discuss how IGERT has impacted your ability to conduct interdisciplinary research.

    a. *Have you been involved with any interdisciplinary research teams since you began your involvement with IGERT? If so, please describe your experience with these teams.*

    b. *Even if you haven't yet worked across programs, has the IGERT program broadened your understanding of challenges and opportunities in interdisciplinary research? How?*

    c. *Has IGERT connected you with other students, faculty, or other researchers outside your discipline? How?*

    d. *Has IGERT helped you to gain skills in interdisciplinary language research? Which skills?*

12:10pm

e. *Which IGERT activities were most and least effective in helping you learn to conduct interdisciplinary language research?*

3. The next questions will discuss how IGERT has affected your success in your graduate program.

   a. *Did the IGERT program affect your decision to attend the University of Maryland?*

   b. *Can you describe how IGERT has fit into your goals with your home department (including support from faculty advisors/etc)?*

   c. *How has the IGERT program impacted your understanding of language and your research area?*

   d. *How has your participation in IGERT activities influenced your career plans?*

12:25pm

(15 mins)

4. How effective has the IGERT program administration been with respect to communication, coordinating activities, and management of the overall program?

   a. *What suggestions do you have for better facilitation of the program?* [PROBE: HOW COULD STUDENTS DO A BETTER JOB WITH FACILITATION? FACULTY? IGERT LEADERSHIP?]

   b. *How do you feel about your (and other students') ability to contribute to program initiatives?*

12:40pm

(15 mins)

5. ThinKING ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES OVERALL WITH THE IGERT PROGRAM, WHAT HAS been most and least helpful? [IF RESPONDENTS ONLY ANSWER MOST OR LEAST, PROBE FOR THE OTHER SIDE]

   a. *Do you have any suggestions for improving the program?* [PROBE: HAVE YOU FOUND THE PROGRAM TO BE DOMINATED BY ONE PARTICULAR DEPARTMENT? IF SO, HOW HAS THIS AFFECTED YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH IGERT?]

12:55pm

(5 mins)

6. Before we conclude today's discussion, is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your experiences with 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 write your academic department, program, and whether you are an IGERT funded student on the inside of your name card to help us in our analysis of the group's discussion.