

Memorandum

July 1, 2008

To: Shelly Martinez, Desk Officer
Office of Management and Budget

From: Lynda T. Carlson, Division Director
Division of Science Resources Statistics

Via: Suzanne Plimpton, Reports Clearance Officer, National Science Foundation

Subject: Notification of information collection under generic clearance

The purpose of this memorandum is to inform you that the National Science Foundation (NSF)/Division of Science Resources Statistics (SRS) plans to conduct focus groups under the generic clearance for survey improvement projects (OMB number 3145-0174) for the Postdoc Data Project (PDP).

Background

To better understand how postdoctoral (postdoc) experiences relate to educational and labor force outcomes, NSF/SRS is conducting the PDP. The PDP is a multi-year project to determine the need for and to assess the feasibility of gathering in-depth information on postdocs in the U.S. In Phase 1 of the PDP, SRS determined that very little is known about foreign degreed postdocs. Anecdotal information suggests that the reasons for pursuing a postdoc and postdoc experiences (including training opportunities and mentoring relationships) may differ between U.S. degreed and foreign degreed postdocs.

SRS proposes the use of focus groups to better understand the terminology used to operationalize key concepts related to postdocs that are not on current SRS surveys but that are important to data users and the postdoc community. The postdoc focus groups are designed to identify topics of salience to both foreign degreed and U.S. degreed postdocs, explore similarities and differences between them in their decisions to take a postdoc, postdoc training experiences, funding sources, transitions from postdocs to permanent positions, and mentoring relationships. The findings from the focus groups will inform the development of a questionnaire for individual postdocs.

Proposed Methodology

There will be a total of six face-to-face focus groups conducted in English for approximately 1½ to 2 hours. Each focus group will have between eight and ten participants. Groups will include participants who are foreign degreed postdocs and U.S. degreed postdocs. SRS will recruit from institutions in the Southeast Michigan area already known to employ both foreign and U.S. degreed postdocs. SRS selected Southeast Michigan to increase efficiency in the conduct of the groups given that the PDP contractor is located in this area.

Contacts to recruit and confirm focus group participants will be made by letter and telephone. The potential participants will receive an informational letter that provides a study overview. A telephone contact will follow the informational letter to determine an individual's interest/willingness to participate and to collect information about them and their postdoc status. During this call they will be informed of the following: their confidentiality rights; our plans to audiotape or videotape the focus group sessions; and the \$50 incentive to be provided at the completion of the session. The confirmed participants will

receive a second letter reiterating the study objectives and providing the logistics. Upon arrival, the participants will be asked to read and sign a research consent and confidentiality form.

Audio/videotaping of the focus group sessions will occur to allow the moderators to focus entirely on the group discussion and dynamics, rather than on taking notes. In addition, audio/videotaping will ensure that all of the information conveyed during the discussion is accurately recorded. The participants will be fully informed of the process. During the telephone contact(s), upon the participant's arrival, and at the start of the session, the audio/videotaping process and the consent form will be described. The participants will be informed that they are free to decline participation or leave the group at anytime.

The use of focus group methodology is essential to meeting the objectives of this research given: the immediate feedback provided on key issues related to postdocs, particularly foreign-degreed postdocs; the brainstorming and other interaction among the participants themselves; and the real-time probing on and exploring of the various issues. The focus groups will produce timely results to incorporate into upcoming PDP activities.

Proposed Protocol

The protocol is designed to gather feedback on how to obtain data/ask questions about the key concepts needed to develop a postdoc questionnaire. These concepts were developed from literature reviews, relevant questionnaires, and ideas vetted with experts in the field. The protocol covers topics related to professional and personal motivations for taking a postdoc appointment; perceptions and expectations of a "successful postdoc"; funding sources for the postdoc appointment; and current mentoring experiences. An outline of the moderator's guide is attached. Also attached are the following documents: the initial contact letter, recruitment screener questions, and the research consent and confidentiality form. The PDP Phase 2 contractor, the Survey Sciences Group, LLC., will conduct the focus groups.

Burden Information

There will be a total of six face-to-face groups, each group having between eight to ten participants. We expect that a focus group session will last no more than two hours. Thus, the estimated total burden is no more than 120 hours (6 groups x 10 participants x 2 hours maximum per group).

Incentive Payments

A \$50 incentive will be offered to respondents for their participation in this study.

Contact Information

The contact person for questions regarding this research is:

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