

NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS

**Volume I**  
**Supporting Statement**

*NCER- NPSAS Grant Study – Connecting Students with  
Financial Aid (CSFA) 2017 Focus Groups*

OMB# 1850-0803 v.184

*December 2016*

***Attachments:***

- Attachment I - Recruitment Procedures
- Attachment II - Consent to Participate in Research
- Attachment III - Focus Group Confirmation Email or Text
- Attachment IV - Pre-Focus Group Review of Informational Letters
- Attachment V - Focus Group Protocol
- Attachment VI - Intervention Informational Letters

## Submittal-Related Information

The following material is being submitted under the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) generic clearance agreement (OMB# 1850-0803), which provides NCES the capability to improve data collection instruments by conducting testing, such as usability tests, focus groups, and cognitive interviews, to improve methodologies, survey questions, and/or delivery methods. This request is to conduct two to four focus groups with postsecondary students in order to guide development of communication material to be used for intervention experiments in the Connecting Students with Financial Aid (CSFA) study. The request to conduct the full scale study is currently in a 60-day public comment period and will be submitted to OMB for review in mid-December 2016 (OMB #1850-new v.1).

## Background

In 2010, the National Center for Education Research (NCER) and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), both within the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES), began collaborating on an education grant opportunity related to the cross-sectional National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS). Under the NCER-NPSAS grant opportunity, researchers could submit applications to the Postsecondary and Adult Education topic within the Education Research Grants program (CFDA 84.305A), under either the Exploration or Efficacy and Replication research goal. Consistent with these two goals, NCER supports research projects using NPSAS to: 1) explore relationships between malleable factors (e.g. information on benefits of financial aid and FAFSA renewal) and postsecondary persistence and completion, as well as the mediators and moderators of those relationships; and 2) evaluate the efficacy of interventions aimed at improving persistence and completion of postsecondary education (e.g., financial aid and FAFSA renewal advice delivered via mail and email). Researchers approved for funding through this program can obtain indirect access to a subsample of the national NPSAS sample (after the study's student interviews are completed) in order to conduct unique research projects that adhere to the guidelines set forth in the Request for Applications for the Education Research Grants Program, as well as guidelines set forth by NCES and the NPSAS program.

On July 1, 2016, two grants were awarded using a subsample of 2015-16 NPSAS sample members:

- *Could Connecting Students with Financial Aid Lead to Better College Outcomes? A Proposal to Test the Effectiveness of FAFSA Interventions Using the NPSAS Sample* (referred to as "Connecting Students with Financial Aid (CSFA) 2017"; <http://ies.ed.gov/funding/grantsearch/details.asp?ID=1853>), and
- *Financial Aid Nudges: A National Experiment to Increase Retention of Financial Aid and College Persistence* (<http://ies.ed.gov/funding/grantsearch/details.asp?ID=1848>).

The CSFA 2017 study investigates whether an intervention that provides financial aid information increases completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). In addition, for a subset of students, information will be provided on how the number of college credits taken can increase the amount of financial aid received to see if this information influences enrollment intensity (full- versus part-time status). The primary grantee is Bridget Long, Harvard University (Grant Award #R305A160388), and the co-principal investigator is Eric Bettinger, Stanford University. Data collection for the study will be led by the contractor, Research Triangle Institute (RTI).

This request is to recruit for and conduct with postsecondary students two to four focus groups for the CSFA 2017 study to obtain information on how students understand the communications, whether the letters prioritize the most important information to provide, how the framing and formatting of the message influences how the messages are received, and to refine the informational letters/emails to be used in the study's interventions accordingly.

## Design and Context

Dr. Long will conduct the focus groups using a protocol with both open-ended questions and targeted probes to explore participants' opinions, decisions, and understanding of the letter messages and terminology. Two focus groups will be conducted with current graduate students at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and potentially up to two more with undergraduate students from other postsecondary institutions in the Boston, Massachusetts area. For the two focus groups with graduate students, former students of Dr. Long's course "The Economics of Higher Education" will be recruited. The course attracts a number of students who have professional experience working with the target population of low-income and first generation undergraduate students and nearly all the students are interested in the issues of college access and success (the main topic of the course). Many are also first-generation students themselves and so can share that perspective from personal experience. Dr. Long will announce two focus group opportunities using the email listserv of her former class, which ended in October 2016, and will select a diverse set of focus group participants from among those that will respond.

To help ensure productive focus groups in which all voices can be heard, a total of up to 7 students will be selected for each focus group. The CSFA informational letters will be sent electronically to the selected participants for review at least two days prior to their focus group. They will then participate in a focus group to discuss whether and how they understood the information that the letters are attempting to convey, to provide input on how the letters may be improved to increase comprehension, and to consider whether the messages would be easier to comprehend if the formatting or framing of the messages changed. The focus group will be held in-person at the institution from which the students will be recruited, notes will be taken during the focus group, and will subsequently be summarized to reflect the common themes and insights learned. Dr. Long will conduct the focus group sessions and compile the results.

Attachment I in this submission presents the materials that will be used for recruitment of participants. Attachment II contains the Assurance of Confidentiality, Attachment III the focus group confirmation email message, Attachment IV information for the pre-focus group review of intervention materials, Attachment V the focus group protocol, and Attachment VI the intervention materials to be discussed during the focus group.

### Estimated respondent burden

To yield up to 14 graduate students (up to 7 per each of the two focus groups of Harvard's graduate students) an email will be sent to the 55 students from Dr. Long's fall course. It will take each student about 2 minutes to consider the offer and sign up to participate. Students who agree to participate in one of the two focus groups will be asked to review the informational letters prior to the focus group; which is estimated to take approximately 20 minutes. The focus group will last a maximum of 60 minutes. If need be, up to two more focus groups may be conducted with similar burden estimates.

**Table 1: Estimate of maximum respondent burden** (for up to 4 focus groups and up to 7 students per focus group)

Activity	Maximum number of respondents	Maximum number of responses	Minutes per respondent	Maximum total burden hours
Invitation	110	110	2	4
Pre-focus group review	28	28	20	10
Focus group	28	28	60	28
<b>Study Total</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>166</b>		<b>42</b>

**Estimate of Costs for Recruiting and Paying Respondents**

There will be no monetary incentive for participating in the focus group, but light snacks and drinks will be provided during each session.

**Estimate of Cost Burden**

There are no direct costs to respondents.

**Cost to Federal Government**

There will be no cost to the federal government for conducting these focus groups.

**Assurance of Confidentiality**

Focus group respondents will be informed that:

This study is authorized by law under the Education Sciences Reform Act (20 U.S.C., § 9543). All responses that relate to or describe identifiable characteristics of individuals may be used only for research purposes and may not be disclosed, or used, in identifiable form for any other purpose except as required by law (20 U.S.C., § 9573).

No personally identifiable information will be associated with respondents’s participation in the focus group discussion. Respondents will be assigned a unique identifier (ID), which will be used solely for summarizing input. The ID will not be linked to the respondent’s name in any way. The signed consent forms will be kept separate from the focus group files for the duration of the study and will be destroyed after the focus group results are compiled.

**Schedule for OMB requests and related activities**

Dr. Long will begin recruiting for focus groups immediately upon receiving OMB clearance, and the focus groups will begin within a few days of OMB clearance. Informed by the focus groups, a final draft of the informational interventions materials will be provided in the CSFA 2017 study clearance request (OMB# 1850-new v.1) and will be used with approximately 10,000 sample members, beginning in late January 2017. If needed, a change memo will be submitted to reflect the final intervention wording.

**Schedule for OMB requests and related activities**

Recruit participants	December 2016
Focus group	December 2016
Finalize revisions to the informational interventions	December 19, 2016
Change memo with final text message wording (if needed)	January 2017