

**Westat Moderator’s Guide**  
**NCES 2015 Gainful Employment Focus Group**  
**For Students Enrolled In Proprietary Schools**  
**and Community Colleges**

Revised September 17, 2015

**Welcome**

Good evening. My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am a researcher at Westat. I will moderate tonight’s focus group. Thank you for taking time to participate. First, let me remind you that your participation in this focus group is voluntary. If you choose to participate, the information you provide will be confidential in that we will not include your name or the name of your school in our study report.

Now, let me tell you about the purpose of this study.

**Introduction to the Study**

Westat, a social science research company in Rockville, MD, is working with the U.S. Department of Education on a project to help schools provide better information to current and prospective students about their career and training programs that lead to a certificate. Most of the session will focus on reviewing and discussing information contained in a few draft web pages developed by the Department of Education. Schools that offer Gainful Employment (GE) programs are required to provide specific information about their programs on their web sites.

Therefore, the Department of Education would like to hear from students, like you, to determine if this information is clear and easy to understand before finalizing the web pages. We would also like to know which pieces of information are most important to you. The information you share in this group will be summarized in a report and shared with the Department of Education’s Office of Postsecondary Education. It will be used by the Department to help students make informed decisions about the programs and schools before and during enrollment.

## Focus Group Guidelines

1. There are no right or wrong answers. We value a variety of opinions and experiences.
2. Please talk one at a time.
3. Talk in a voice as loud as mine.
4. Avoid side conversations with your neighbors.
5. I need to hear from everyone; however, you do not have to answer every question.
6. It is OK to piggyback on someone else's comments.
7. Work for equal "air time" so that no one talks too little or too much.
8. Information shared in the group will remain confidential; the report will only summarize the responses and will not identify you by name or school. Help us protect your confidentiality by only stating your first name and NOT mentioning the name of your school.
9. Please do not share the information discussed with anyone outside of the group until all the data have been collected and the web pages are finalized by the Department of Education, which will not occur until 2017. *[Get verbal agreement from everyone.]*
10. Staff from both the Department of Education and Westat are observing and taking notes on the discussion behind the one-way mirror and the session will be audio recorded.
11. Please turn off your cell phones/Blackberries, etc. or turn them to vibrate. And please, refrain from texting or checking email during the focus group.

**Any questions before we begin?**

## I. Warm-Up and Opening Questions

OK, let's get started by going around the table and introducing ourselves.

Please give your **first name only** and tell me:

What career or vocational program of study you are currently enrolled in and how long you've been enrolled in the program.

Please do **not** share the name of the institution you are attending or your last name. Now, let's begin by talking a bit about how your current program and school.

1. How did you first learn about this program?

*[Probe to learn if it was based on a prior job, course work in high school, a person who told them about it, or something they read.]*

2. How did you learn which colleges or schools were offering this program?

3. What type of information did you look for when selecting a program of study?  
*[Probe if not mentioned:*

- *type of career or vocational program or certificate offered*
- *cost*
- *geographic location*
- *length of program*
- *reputation of school (probe on how determined?)*
- *job placement (services, record?)*
- *other]*

4. What in particular made you choose the program at the school you currently attend?

4a. Looking back, was there information you wished you had known about the **school** before you enrolled? If so, what? How would you have used this information?

Thank you very much. For the remainder of the discussion, we will focus our attention on reviewing draft screen shots of a few web pages. I will ask you specific questions about each of the items in the screen shots. At the end of each section, you will be asked to rank them.

For purposes of our discussion, let's assume that all schools that offer GE programs would be required to provide some or most of this information on their college web sites.

Please note that we will be using a made up example for our discussion. This example is for a program in Baking and Pastry Arts. The information and data used in the example are not real.

## II. Program Information

### First let's look at the area labeled "program length"

In our example, it says the program takes 12 months to complete. It also says that the program has 24 credit hours.

1. What does the number of credit hours mean to you?
2. What is more helpful to you: the number of credit hours in the program, or the number of months it takes to complete?
3. How important is this information about program length to you? (Very important, important, somewhat important, not important) Why?

## III. Student Debt

Now let's look at the information under **Student Debt**.

4. Please look at the part of the example where it says 77% of students enrolled in 2014-2015 received a Title IV **or** private loan.
  - 4a. Do you know the difference between a Title IV and a private loan?

A Title IV loan is a loan through the federal government. A private loan is through a company or organization.
  - 4b. How important is it to you to see what percentage of students received (1) a Title IV (federal) loan, (2) a private loan, or (3) either a Title IV or private loan?
    - Of these three options, which is most important to see? Why?
  - 4c. How would you use this information?

## Median Debt

5. Now look where it says “median loan debt for those who completed the program”:

Median loan debt refers to the loan debt amount in the middle of the student loan distribution. That is, if you lined up – in order - the loan amounts of all students who enrolled in the program, the median would be the middle point of this line. This is different than the average, where you add up all the loan amounts and divide by the number of students.

The median loan debt shows you the ‘middle amount’ of loan debt for all students in the program – about half of students have loan amounts lower than this, and about half have loan amounts higher than this.

- 5a. You might have noticed that the first example focused on students who **completed** the program.

*Moderator note: show example table on next slide and explain the three columns.*

If instead the example said, “median loan debt for students who **withdrew from the program,**” is this information: as important, more important, or less important to you than the loan debt for students who **completed** the program? Why?

**[Ranking Exercise #1] I’m passing out a handout now. In the part labeled ‘A’, you will see a list of the data elements we just talked about and saw on screen. The first section is labeled ‘median loan debt.’ Please take a moment to select which of these measures (groups) are most important or useful to you.**

## Loan Repayment Rate

Moving to the next description under student debt:

6. What do you think it means when 75% of all students who **enrolled** in the program are making payments to repay their student loans? *[If students struggle with the correct concept, tell them what it means: When students are supposed to be making payments on their loans and are successfully making those payments toward the principal amount they borrowed (i.e., not just toward the interest)]*
7. How important is it to also see loan repayment rates broken down to (1) students who completed the program, and (2) students who withdrew from the program?
8. How important is this information on loan repayment to you? (Very important, important, somewhat important, not important)

9. What, if anything, does this information tell you? (Probe on whether it says something about the institution or program of study or if they perceive it says something about the student?)

**[Ranking Exercise #1] Ok, back to the handout. Please take a moment to select in Part B which of these loan repayment rate measures is most important or useful to you.**

### **Program Default Rate**

10. Show of hands. Who would say they understand what it means when a student defaults on student loans?
- 10a. For those of you who raised your hands, can you please explain what you think it means? *[If students are struggling with the accurate meaning, tell them that default means when students fail to make payments on loans for an extended period of time]*
11. Now that you know what default means, in the example, it says that 11% of students who left or completed this program have defaulted on their student loans. What, if anything does that tell you?
- [Probe if not mentioned on what it says about cost of the program and/or ability to find a decent paying job after leaving/completing the program]*
12. Would you use the information about the program default rate in your decision-making about enrolling in a specific program of study or institution? How would you use it?

**[Ranking Exercise #2A] Now, I want everyone to think about all four of the items we discussed that relate to student debt. I am passing around another handout. On this one, I would like you to rank, in order of importance, with 1 being most important, the order in which these different measures are important or useful to you.**

## **IV. Program Success**

**Now let's look at the Program Success section.**

### **Completion Rates**

13. In our example, it says that 60% of full-time and 20% of part-time **students who enrolled in the program in 2012-2013 finished within 1.5 years.**

13a. Could someone interpret what this means in their own words?

*[probe to ensure students understand this was within 150% of program length; differences between FT and PT students]*

14. What are some ways you might use this information when thinking about a program of study or institution?

14a. How important is this information? (Very important, important, somewhat important, not important)

15. In our example, you also see a table. This table has the breakdown of current completion rates for all students who enrolled in the program in 2012-2013, including full-time and part-time students.

15a. How helpful is it to see time to completion compared between full-time and part-time students?

15b. It says that 80% of **part-time students** who enrolled in the program in 2012–2013 completed the program within 2 years.

*What does this mean to you? [Probe to ensure students understand this means 50% of students completed the program in 200% of the program length]*

15c. There are four different times to completion listed. If you had to choose only two of these time periods as information to provide to prospective students, which would you choose? Why?

1 year (100%); 1.5 year (150%); 2 years (200%); or 3 years (300%)?

**[Ranking exercise #1] Back to that original handout. Please look at C and select 2 different times to completion for full-time students AND D and select 2 for part-time that are most important to you.**

### **Withdrawal Rates**

16. In our example, it says that 5% of all students who enrolled in 2012-2013 withdrew from the program within 12 months. It also says that 10% of students withdrew from the program within 18 months.

16a. When you think about the withdrawal rate, what does that mean to you?

17. What is the difference between the two withdrawal rates?

17a. Is it helpful to see more than one rate? What makes you say that?

- 17b. How important is the withdrawal rate to you? Is it as important, less important or more important than the completion rate? What makes you say that?

**[Ranking exercise #1] Now, can everyone take a moment to mark on their handout under E ‘withdrawal rate’ section which of these two measures is most useful or important to them individually?**

**[Ranking Exercise #2B] Now, I want everyone to think about both of the items we discussed that relate to program success. I am passing around another handout. On this one, I would like you to rank, in order of importance, with 1 being most important, the order in which these different measures are important or useful to you.**

## **V. Program Outcomes**

**Now, let’s talk about program outcomes.**

### **Job Placement Rate for the Program and/or the Institution**

18. This item in our example states that the placement rate for the **program** is 55%. What does placement rate for the program mean to you?

18a. What are some ways you might use this information when thinking about a program of study?

19. In our example, it says the job placement rate for **the institution** is 68%.

19a. What differences do you see between this job placement rate for the program and the placement rate for the institution? (*Probe for institution v. program; lower rate*)

19b. What are some reasons the program might have a lower rate than the institution as a whole?

20. If you had to choose, would you say it is more important to know about the job placement rate for the program of study or the institution?

20a. What are some reasons for that choice?

20b. How would you use job placement rate information?

**[Ranking exercise #1] If everyone could again mark their selection for which is more useful – program placement rate or institution placement rate – on their handout under F.**

## Mean or Median Earnings

21. In our example under mean and median earnings, it says that the mean earnings for all students who enrolled in the program in 2014–2015 and completed was \$45,037.

Mean earnings are the **average** earnings of students who completed the program. This means we would add up the earnings of all students and divide by the number of students.

Median earnings refers to the mid-point in the distribution (arc) of earnings. If we put each salary in order in a line, it would be the middle salary, where half were above and half below. This makes the earnings less susceptible to small numbers of students who make far, far above (say \$150,000 – or far, far, below – say, \$0, most students) which would skew the average.

21a. Now that we've discussed the difference in mean and median earnings, if you had to pick one, which would you pick?

22. In our example under mean and median earnings, it says that the mean earnings for all students who enrolled in the program and completed or withdrew in 2014–2015 was \$43,214.

22a. How important is it to see the mean earnings that include both students who withdrew and who completed the program?

22b. Would you rather see the earnings between these two groups (those who completed and those who withdrew) broken down separately, or as they are presented in this example?

23. How might you use information on mean and median earnings in thinking about a program of study or college?

**[Ranking exercise #1] Please look at G and H make a selection again regarding which items are most useful and important to you.**

## Annual Earnings Rate

24. In our example, it says that among students who completed the program in 2014–2015, their annual earnings rate is 6.5%.

24a. What does 'annual earnings rate' mean to you?

*[Moderator note: you will likely need to explain this. Annual earnings rate is the annual loan payment divided by the higher of the mean or median annual income.]*

25. How might you use information on annual earnings rate in thinking about a program of study or college?

26. How important is information on annual earnings rate?

**[Ranking exercise #2C] Now, I am passing out another handout. Thinking about the three items under program outcomes, I am going to ask you to rank these three (annual earnings rate, job placement rate, and mean or median earnings) in order of importance.**

## **VI. Ranking Exercise**

*Ranking Exercise Using the Department Template [use Ranking Form]*

**[Ranking exercise #3] Now, I would like you to look at this screen and this information again. Thinking across all the concepts and information we discussed, on the form I am passing around, I want you to consider what would most affect your decision whether or not to enroll in a specific program. Please rank these items in order from 1 – most important to 10 – least important.**

➤ *[Moderator asks students to pass their completed Ranking Form to him after they are finished.]*

## **VII. Close**

Thank you. Now let's wrap up by inviting any suggestions for other information you or students like you might want to know prior to enrolling in the career school/college.

27. Are there any other suggestions or topics we have not discussed about the web page or your experiences at your current school that you would like to bring up now?

### **False Close [If time]**

Thank you so much for being here tonight. Before we conclude, I need to step out for a few minutes to make sure we have everything ready for you.

*[Moderator checks with observers for up to two additional questions to pose, time permitting.]*

### **Final Close**

*[Upon return, moderator will pose questions from observers, if any.]*

This concludes our discussion for tonight. Again, thank you so much for taking time out of your very busy lives to be here with us tonight. The facility has your envelope ready for you. Please enjoy the rest of your evening and travel home safely.