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An Examination of Factors Contributing to the Retention and Success of
Female African American Undergraduate Students

Proposal for WOX Grant

An Examination of Factors Contributing to the Retention and Success of
Female African American Undergraduate Students

Amount requested: \$7220

Abstract

African American female undergraduates are at significantly greater risk of leaving Xavier prior to graduation than their African American male and Caucasian counterparts. Diversity is a hallmark of a Jesuit, Catholic liberal arts education. Consequently, it is imperative to address factors contributing to differential retention. Quantitative research suggests that academic, financial, and social factors affect retention, but do not explain how specifically the factors affect African American women's decision-making or the structures necessary to remove barriers to their academic success. Funds are requested for qualitative research focused on these issues. African American women who have recently left the University will be interviewed by telephone, and African American women enrolled at Xavier in the fall of 2010 will be asked to participate in either individual interviews or focus groups. Data will inform specific recommendations for implementing new or improving existing programs and resources that support retention.

Budget

\$3030	Graduate student to assist in developing interview questions, identifying and contacting potential interviewees, conducting interviews and focus groups, and analyzing data (10 hours/week for 30 weeks at \$10/hour plus 1% fringe benefits)
\$2200	Hiring a qualified typist to transcribe tape-recorded interviews and focus groups (200 hours at \$10/hour plus 10% fringe benefits)
\$1000	100 I-Tunes gift cards for all interviewees (assuming a total of approximately 100 women participating) as a token of appreciation for their time
\$435	3 I-Pod Nano's at \$145 each to be awarded by random drawing from all participants as an incentive to participate in the study
\$300	Postage (for gift cards), long-distance phone charges for interviews, and related materials
\$180	Pizza and beverages for 3 focus groups
\$75	Beverages and light refreshments for on-campus presentation
\$7220	Total amount requested

Narrative

The offices of the Associate Provost for Academic Affairs, Multicultural Affairs, Student Success and Retention, and Vice Provost for Diversity request funding for a qualitative study to determine why African American female undergraduates leave Xavier at rates much higher than their Caucasian and African American male counterparts. While Xavier's retention rate is high compared to similar institutions, the overall rate has shown a recent downturn, and most alarmingly, the retention rate for African American women is at its lowest point since 1997. Among first-year students in the fall of 2008, 25% of African American females did not return the next year compared to 17% of African American males, 15% of Caucasian males, and 14% of Caucasian females. This trend is likely to continue. Of the 1,174 students who entered Xavier in the fall of 2009, 71 did not return for the spring 2010 semester. Of those 71 students, 16 were African American, 13 of the 16 were female. The proposed study will involve interviews with African American women who have left Xavier as well as those who have stayed. This research is necessary before the University can implement programs and resources to increase the retention, academic success, and graduation of African American women.

This project is aligned with Xavier's Jesuit tradition of care for all students and, in particular, with its commitment to diversity. In the President's Statement on Diversity, Rev. Michael J. Graham, S.J. clearly states that as a Jesuit, Catholic University, Xavier is called to address issues of inequity and exclusion, and to embrace diversity in its many facets. Indeed, only through diversity can the University fully achieve its mission. To this end, Xavier's Diversity Vision states that the University "envision[s] itself as an equitable and inclusive community of learners." More specifically, the Vision Statement sets forth Xavier's commitment to "support the success of our students...without regard to race/ethnicity, gender, class," and other markers of diversity. Thus, it is imperative to address factors and conditions that contribute to differential attrition. The project is also aligned with the WOX Giving Circle grant program's mission to enrich the lives of students at Xavier. With a fuller, deeper understanding of factors that affect the retention of female African American students, it is possible to recommend and implement support structures that will ensure that a successful academic career at Xavier is accessible to all students, without regard to race and gender. If Xavier is not providing an environment in which African American women can feel welcomed and achieve success to the extent that other students do, the University needs to understand this problem and remove obstacles. Diversity is a critical hallmark of a Jesuit, Catholic, liberal arts education. Consequently, the entire student body suffers if all students are not given equal opportunities to achieve success.

The study builds upon quantitative data collected by the Office of Student Success and Retention suggesting that students who leave Xavier prior to graduating cite either financial, academic, or personal/medical issues as the primary reason for exiting. A study conducted in 2008 by the Offices of Decision Support and Diversity, supported through a grant from the Jesuit Network for Equitable Excellence, came to a similar conclusion. Analysis of quantitative data from 744 students from the 2007 cohort of first-time, full-time undergraduates concluded that first-year retention is a function of seven risk factors that cluster into academic fit, socio-economic fit, and *habitas* (a sense of belonging). Risk factors are additive; the more factors students experience, the more likely they are to leave the University. In addition, data from the Beginning College Students Survey of Engagement suggest that compared to Caucasians, African American

Students may enter the University with unrealistic expectations regarding the amount of time they may need to spend on coursework and the academic challenges they may encounter.

Retention is a function of multiple factors, including students' demographic characteristics, their abilities and experiences, and University resources and programs. While the quantitative surveys provide a general background on factors affecting retention, they do not illuminate how the factors actually play out in individual students' decisions to exit the University, why African American women are at a particularly high risk of attrition, or specific support structures and resources needed to retain them. These unanswered questions will be addressed by focusing on how African American women feel that they fit or do not fit at the University academically, socio-economically, and socially, and the decision-making processes they go through in deciding whether to remain at or leave Xavier. Approval for the study will be sought from the University's IRB. A graduate student will be hired to help develop interview questions, conduct in-depth interviews and focus groups, and analyze the results. African American women who have left Xavier in the past 3 years will be interviewed by phone, and those enrolled in the University during 2010-2011 will be asked to participate in either an individual interview or one of three focus groups with 8-10 participants each. Results will deepen current understanding of retention and will inform recommendations for programming and resources targeted at improving the retention of African American women.

Including staff in the project from four different areas of the University that provide support and resources to African American women ensures immediate impact by providing in-depth information that can lead to implementing new resources and/or improving existing ones. Systematic dissemination of the results on campus will broaden the impact of the study. After the study's completion in the spring of 2011, a presentation will be given to faculty and staff that will include a summary of the study results, a panel of students sharing their experiences, and a discussion of next steps. President Graham has asked that this research be undertaken, and expects that results and recommendations will be shared with the President's Cabinet. Ultimately the goal is to improve and/or implement programs that will positively impact the retention of African American women. Specifically, the goal is to achieve a retention rate for African American women at least equal to the overall cohort retention goal of 90%.

The project's success will be assessed in several ways. First, an interview participation rate of 75% or higher of African American women who have left the University before graduation in the past 3 years or who are enrolled in the University in the fall of 2010 will increase the representativeness of the data collected and will indicate a successful interview recruitment process. Second, success will be determined by implementation of new programs or improvements in existing programs following dissemination of the results. Finally, in the long-term the project will be successful if the retention rate of African American women is equal to that of the total cohort.

Any reports, presentations, or publications that result from this research will explicitly cite the support received from the Giving Circle. Also, the WOX Giving Circle will be recognized as a sponsor of the 2011 on-campus presentation, to which WOX members will be invited. In addition, members will receive an executive summary of research results and recommendations. Finally, the project team is available to speak to Giving Circle members.