CAMPUS
ASSESSMENT
WORKING GROUP

Exploring the UM Senior Experience Through Academics, Diversity, and Transition

A Focus Group Project

Jen Meyers
Graduate Assistant, Individual Studies Program

Sharon A. La Voy
Assessment Coordinator, Office of Institutional Research and Planning

Denise Shipley
Graduate Assistant, Career Center

Felicia Mainella
Graduate Assistant, Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs

Table of Contents

I. Executive Summary

In the spring of 2000, the Completions subgroup of the Campus Assessment Working Group (CAWG) turned its attention to the senior year experience at the University of Maryland. The group was interested in sponsoring a focus group project to give seniors a chance to speak about their college experiences in their own words as they were about to leave UM. A research team of graduate students in College Student Personnel from the Counseling and Personnel Services department in the College of Education was gathered under the direction of the Assessment Coordinator of the Office of Institutional Research and Planning and CAWG. They were interested in exploring three areas, in part guided by the University's recently released Strategic Plan. The research team decided to ask students about their academic experience, the experience of being at an institution that has stated its commitment to racial and ethnic diversity, and their preparedness for post-graduate life. A summary of these results follows.

Academics

- Faculty commitment to students as evidenced, for example, by their enthusiasm for teaching and by interaction with students individually, was important to students. Students related varying experiences regarding their perceptions of faculty commitment.

- Students related their dissatisfaction with academic advising at UM due to issues such as transient advisors and lack of accurate information. This dissatisfaction led many students to rely primarily on themselves rather than advisors when making academic decisions.

- Students conveyed the importance of faculty evaluations as a tool for ensuring quality educational experiences and emphasized the need for consistent evaluation procedures.

Diversity

- Students think UM is diverse, numerically, compared to other institutions. Although a positive step, some think that the 'surface' diversity is not enough. Though many races and ethnicities are represented on campus, there is a sense that individual groups 'stick' with each other and do not intermingle, further enforcing the lack of truly diverse campus-wide community.

- The representation of faculty from diverse backgrounds differs among colleges and programs. Some students stated that they had consistent exposure to diverse faculty, while others believed that there was little to no diversity exhibited in the faculty in terms of race and ethnicity, as well as gender.

- Many students noted a lack of commitment to diversity from UM administrators. They stated that they rarely see administrators take part in activities promoting cultural diversity and awareness.

General Transition

- Students' thoughts about graduating ranged from excitement to nervousness. They feel varying levels of confidence and anxiety, seemingly dependent on the extent of their experience and preparation.

- Students expressed support for various ideas of how UM might better help to prepare them for their transition out, including capstone courses, topical seminars, and career development seminars and courses, but acknowledged that getting students to access such opportunities might be a challenge, since they themselves didn't realize they might need such resources until it was too late.

- Through in-class and out-of-class experiences, students realize that they are gaining valuable knowledge and skills that will benefit them in just about everything they do following college. The skills mentioned included planning and organizational skills, communication, critical thinking, research skills, and the ability to work with others in group settings.

II. Background

In the spring of 2000, the Completions subgroup of the Campus Assessment Working Group (CAWG) turned its attention to the senior year experience at the University of Maryland. The group was interested in sponsoring a focus group project to give seniors a chance to speak about their college experiences in their own words as they were about to leave UM. A research team of graduate students in College Student Personnel from the Counseling and Personnel Services department in the College of Education was gathered under the direction of the Assessment Coordinator of the Office of Institutional Research and Planning and CAWG. They were interested in exploring three areas, in part guided by the University's recently released Strategic Plan. The research team decided to ask students about their academic experience, the experience of being at an institution that has stated its commitment to racial and ethnic diversity, and their preparedness for post-graduate life.

Specifically, the research team was interested in answering the following research questions: How do seniors describe their academic experience at the University of Maryland? What is the experience of being a senior at an institution that has stated its commitment to racial and ethnic diversity? And, what is the experience of being a graduating senior at the University of Maryland with regards to preparedness for postgraduate life?

III. Method

Focus groups were used as the data collection process, and were conducted from the middle to end of the spring semester, 2000. Focus groups can help in obtaining background information about a topic, generating research hypotheses that can then be tested using quantitative approaches, and learning how respondents talk about a phenomenon of interest (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). In this design, focus groups allowed the research team to explore the senior experience at the University of Maryland in relation to the students' general experience with their upcoming transition out of the institution, with their academics, and with diversity on campus.

Participants were recruited to participate in the focus groups through an e-mail to a senior listserv maintained by the coordinator of the Senior Council, in the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs. See Appendix A for the invitation e-mails. They were offered a $15 gift certificate to one of three local stores for their participation. When they responded, they were asked to sign up for one of ten scheduled focus groups. They were informed of the focus group time, location, and topic. Three focus groups were canceled due to the low number of scheduled participants, and one was rescheduled, resulting in eight completed groups.

The research team conducted eight focus groups over the course of three weeks. Three explored the students' feelings of preparedness for postgraduate life, two explored the students' academic experience, and two explored the students' experience at an institution that has stated its commitment to racial and ethnic diversity. The demographics of the groups can be found in Appendix B.

The groups were asked a series of exploratory questions using standardized open-ended interview instrumentation. Please see the Appendix C for the facilitator introduction and specific questions. Each group was conducted by three researchers, one facilitating and posing questions while the other two recorded the proceedings by taking notes and audio-taping.

The main research team consisted of four principal researchers. As in any research study, researcher bias is a concern, both in collecting the data and identifying common themes. To combat this as much as possible, five focus group facilitators (including the four principal researchers) were employed in data collection, as were eleven note-takers. Because of the length of the focus groups and the varying amount of time each participant took to answer questions, some questions were left unasked. Facilitators also used some latitude in asking follow-up or clarifying questions to further explore an important point, so some participants were asked a few more specific questions. The note-takers took notes throughout the sessions, paraphrasing the entire discussion by hand and then

typing them later, listening to the audio-tape for clarification. The four principal researchers examined the data to determine common themes. Each set of results was thematized by a pair of researchers, and then independently checked by a third. The four principal researchers then collaborated in writing the report.

The project met with a few minor limitations. The small size of a few of the focus groups was a cause for concern, in that the true nature of the focus group might not have been realized. One of the diversity groups only contained four students, and although conversation in that group tended to flow freely, the small size was not optimal. Some of the focus groups contained a few students who knew each other prior to entering the room. This was particularly true of the students of color focus group on diversity, probably because many of them held leadership positions in their respective student organizations. Focus groups are usually more effective if the respondents do not know each other (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Friends or acquaintances may have formed cliques, and may reinforce the opinions of one another. They also may come to consensus more quickly, and be more likely to engage in side conversations that may disrupt the flow of the discussion. And finally, it was the principal researchers' plan to make sure that every group had the participation of at least one of them as the facilitator or note-taker to provide consistency across the groups; this goal was attained in all but one of the sessions. All but one focus group were facilitated by one of the principal researchers.

Despite these minor limitations, the study provided us a rich picture of the senior experience regarding these three topics. The results are summarized below.

IV. Results

The results of each set of focus group topics are presented in the following three sections, and then discussed as a group.

IV. A. Academics

The 1996 and 2000 Strategic Plans stated that the University of Maryland should become, "One of the nation's preeminent public research universities, an institution recognized both nationally and internationally for excellence in research and instruction, which makes the results of its research available for the use and benefit of the State of Maryland and its people." The University of Maryland judges whether it is meeting these goals based on assessment outcomes such as graduation rates, GPAs, and job placement. Another way to determine if the University is meeting its stated goal of providing an excellent academic experience is to ask graduating students to reflect on the quality of their experiences.

When asked what constitutes a solid and rewarding college experience, one student commented that she wanted to feel challenged and supported so that she could develop not only academically but personally as well. Another student agreed with this statement, saying that at the beginning of his college experience, he was very dependent on his parents and friends for support, but as he moved through the college experience, he began to foster a sense of academic and social independence. Another stated, "A solid education is one that is based on your efforts."

Academic Success

The overriding consensus among the focus group students was that the University is a very large institution with many academic opportunities at one's disposal, but if one is not willing to take the personal initiative to embrace these opportunities, they can easily "fall through the cracks." If one expects a great deal of personal attention, they will not find it here, since "the University of Maryland won't hold your hand because the school is too big." The large size of the University does not impede graduation, according to one student. "I think the requirements to graduate are very slack. It's easy to graduate with a degree from here. A lot depends on your internal motivation." Another concurred, saying Maryland has the proper yet general path to academic success "all laid out for you" upon entry, so your academic experience "is what you make of it." Some felt that one

needed to know specifically what they wanted out of their college education so they could independently seek out the proper resources. One student summed up the overall thoughts of the group regarding the ability to succeed academically by saying, "The University of Maryland gives you all the tools you need to succeed, and success depends on what you do with those tools. You must be proactive by seeking out resources through friends, advisors, RA's, etc."

To succeed academically and to graduate feeling academically fulfilled, the students discussed certain skills that should be enhanced during the college years. As an entering student, many felt that prior high school preparation in areas such as math and reading skills play a large role in the academic success of students when they get to the University. "Math and reading preparation matter so much," one student stated. Once in college, students expected to build upon their existing critical thinking skills and experience academic growth in the sense that they achieve "mastery" in their major area.

Some students expressed concern that they were not learning as much as they would have liked or expected for a number of reasons. First, selectivity of the student population was a concern. One student said, "I expected it to be harder academically. Many professors had to slow down the courses academically to keep up the students who were slower. I expected it to be more high powered, and if you couldn't keep up, you were out." Another student felt the University was academically selective when choosing incoming freshman, but relaxed the rules when it came to admitting transfer students, which affected the overall caliber of the University's students. Concern was also expressed at the faculty level in that some instructors allow individuals to pass with A's and B's when the individuals do not deserve grades that high. "Some of my friends have no clue what is going on in our biology classes, yet they still pass with a B. A lot of people slide by without really knowing what they are doing." Another concern expressed was that "some courses are so easy that everyone can get an A, and if the students can't get A's, the professors will curve." A few students stated many courses are taught in an inconsistent manner. One student said that he had problems with courses where "the textbook was different than the instructor's lectures, the lectures were different from the test material." A final comment concerned the lack of an honor code at Maryland. This student stated that, especially in lower level courses, there is a large amount of cheating going on from collaboration on homework assignments to tests. "The cheating is so blatant."

Advising

Advising was a component of academic success that the students had a great deal to say about. This topic was also mentioned during the general focus groups; see section IVC. The feedback regarding advising was very mixed. Students expressed that depending on department, advising "ran the gamut from excellent to poor." Some suggested that switching majors and thus switching advisors, or having the department change your advisor all the time, can be very frustrating since they receive conflicting advice. The constant switching of GA's from year-to-year was a specific example mentioned by one student that led her to deliberately not go to her department for advising since she never saw the same person twice. One individual stated that "advisors need to make students aware of special academic opportunities" available on campus. Finally, another student mentioned that "some departments have different financial resources and the opportunities do differ because of that. There needs to be more equity of distribution of funds [between departments]."

The students had very strong feelings regarding their first-year advising experiences. They felt that the advising sessions during Orientation were situations where advisors needed to be extremely direct in their approach and aid students in their adjustment to the University, something that these students felt they did not receive. "When coming in as a freshman, you need the most help and guidance and you're not getting it. Whoever is available is the one who advises you and that is a major problem." One student in particular expressed his dissatisfaction with the advising he received as an incoming student through Letters and Sciences. "I did not have a clue when I was a freshman…during summer orientation, I met with a guy who gave me a bunch of courses that would have killed me if I had actually taken them!"

It was a common theme across the various focus groups that advising is one of the major challenges facing the University in regards to providing services. The students recognized that size of institution was a large contributing factor to this problem. "I think there are definitely challenges at a school this size. It's hard for advisors to develop a relationship with every single student. In addition to campus parking, advising is the most disappointing service I've encountered here." One student was particularly displeased with Letters and Sciences where she said she "felt bounced around [from advisor to advisor], was in and out, and they did not care." Another viewed the advising process as being "like a factory," while another stated advising sessions were only 15 minutes long, which is not sufficient. One student suggested using tools such as the MBTI to "learn more about the student and to be able to plan the meeting around the student's needs and interests."

Incompetence among advisors was another theme that emerged in the focus groups. A number of students said they did not trust the advice their advisors gave since the advisors were often unsure of the information they were dispensing. "Advisors are not aware of everything they should know in order to be helpful." One student who had been in four different colleges and never had a permanent advisor recalled, "Every time I went to advising, I got sent all over campus because my advisors didn't know what they were doing." The comment about inconsistency in advising due to the fact that students' advisors are switched each year surfaced again, and many of the seniors agreed with one student's statement, "I think I could be a better advisor than a lot of the advisors I've been to. The advisors just don't know." Two or three students stated that after utilizing advising in their first year, and upon choosing their major, they became self-sufficient in respect to advising. It was easier to advise themselves than to go to advisors who may be confusing and unclear in their directives. Peer advising was briefly mentioned as a technique used in the Psychology department, but one Psychology student commented the "peer advisors usually don't have a clue" either.

Despite the negative comments directed toward specific academic advising units and academic advising in general, many students were quick to offer up some positive experiences they have had with their advisors. Students mentioned advisors from Arts and Humanities, the School of Music, and the Smith School of Business as being "great," "wonderful," and "very efficient" respectively. Another student specifically mentioned the positive experience he had as an incoming freshman in the Honors Program where his advisor spent a great deal of time with him and was extremely helpful. This student truly appreciated the very personal experience he received.

Impressions of Faculty

The question of what has the students' interaction with professors been like elicited a wide variety of responses from "mediocre to great" or "good" experiences. One individual made an interesting comment that during her four years at Maryland, she only had four full-time professors. The rest were general instructors or TAs, so she stated, "In that sense, I haven't had many opportunities to interact with professors." In one focus group, students discussed the difficulty that some have establishing relationships with faculty. "There are so many students who don't know what they want to do after graduation. Therefore they can't really talk on an intellectual level as easily with the professors because they don't share similar interests." Another person felt the lack of student/faculty interaction was the fault of faculty members. "Professors don't really seem as interested in people who want to explore their [academic] interests. They focus their attention more on those people who know exactly what they want to do." Another student agreed saying, "It depends on how the teachers perceive you. If you are not going on to graduate school, the professors treat you like a second-class citizen. I've had a great experience because I am going on to pursue my Ph.D."

Students made many comments specifically mentioning their in-class interaction with faculty. One student stated that in certain classes, the professors made no effort to get to know her while in other courses, professors made an effort to get to know her on a more personal level. "It makes me feel good knowing I have professors who support and care about me. I feel like a number in large classes." Another individual had a similar experience in that he's had professors "of opposite extremes – some are really good and some are really bad." Despite this incongruence, he was excited by a cyberpsychology course he was currently taking where "the professor even holds office hours

on-line!" a method that allows him a greater level of interaction with the professor. Some students felt the level of student/instructor interaction depended on the particular class, the type of people in the course, and how much they fed off of one another, while another person felt good interaction "totally depends on the professor" alone. "I had one teacher who wouldn't even let us ask him questions – he referred us to the TA. But on the totally opposite extreme, I had one teacher who stayed for hours after the evening class was over just to socialize with the students and impart his knowledge. You could really tell he cared about the students. Overall, I don't think my professors have gone out of their way to interact with students."

When comparing the level of student/instructor interaction across departments, another student commented that he was taking an advanced studies Psychology course even though he is a computer science major. "I really feel like I can compare the two majors," he said. "In my psychology classes, the TAs always ask if the students have questions, but in computer science, there is no support. I guess it depends on the major." An Honors student felt her greatest faculty interaction came through his Honors seminar. "I was hesitant about interacting with professors after having bad experiences, but the Honors professors changed that."

Several adjectives were mentioned when they were asked to describe the qualities students would like faculty to possess, including: caring, helpful outside of the classroom, good listeners, attentive to student needs, and understanding of students' out-of-school commitments. Having a professor call her by name when seeing her outside of the classroom would be a small but sufficient enough gesture for one student to constitute a good interaction between herself and the faculty member. Another senior stated, "A good interaction with a professor would entail feeling comfortable when asking for a favor and knowing that the professor would feel comfortable helping out. Just feeling comfortable with a professor is the definition of a good interaction." Finally, one individual made a statement regarding how faculty and administrators treat students: "I wish more administrators would look at their job as more than a job. Some of them don't even seem to like students. Why would someone work in a higher education environment if they don't like students?"

While many students in the focus groups felt that interaction with faculty is important and that faculty should make themselves available to students, they also discussed the importance of the students themselves reaching out to the faculty to establish relationships. One woman said, "If you make an effort to talk to the professor, you can really benefit [from the experience]." Talking to professors after class, taking advantage of office hours, and going "straight to the source" with questions or concerns was the best way to ensure positive interactions and experiences with faculty.

Student Learning Styles/Pedagogy

A discussion on various class formats ensued when each of the focus groups was asked if classes were taught in a manner that best impacted their learning. Some students complained that professors, especially those teaching large lecture courses, simply lectured at the class directly from the book. One senior stated this format is "uninspiring and not interesting. The professor seemed bored too." Another student then commented, "The professors need to be committed to student learning. If the professors are really interested in what they are saying, it makes a difference. It is possible to have a big lecture where your learn, but it is a rarity." The University's commitment to research interferes with teaching quality, according to one individual. "Some teachers read to you from the book and do not conform to your learning style. Some are flexible and can conform to how the students need to learn, but those who are research-oriented generally are not [flexible]." A final comment regarding teaching style was, "I have taken a course on how to teach, and some of the professors here need to take that class!"

One factor regarding academics stood out as a source of contention for many students and that was class size. "With CORE courses it is impossible to address specific learning styles. Five hundred people in a class is too large to learn anything. I am an active learner, so that format didn't work for me. Only those who were exposed to the material beforehand or who taught themselves learned anything. I feel more connected now that I am in smaller classes." Others stated that they were more successful academically when taught in smaller, discussion-based courses while they

struggled to do well in large lectures. Personal interest in the specific topic was the only thing that ensured learning in a large class for one student. "If I hadn't been interested in what I was learning, I would have been in trouble."

Despite many negative comments regarding pedagogy and the influence of class size, there were a few positive comments regarding faculty teaching styles. "I was in a large ethnomusicology course where the professor included films, listening exercises, and demonstrations. That broke up the course and we did group activities despite the large class size. It was an interesting course because it was not straight lecture all the time." Despite this student's successful experience with a large lecture course, another student said she felt "teaching techniques are more important than size, but a smaller size helps." Finally, one senior commented that her learning style was accommodated by professors who taught well. "I've had professors who obviously liked what they are talking about and brought the material down to our level. They were animated about what they were teaching and being well-organized also helped."

Working in groups was a specific teaching technique that was discussed amongst the groups and with many mixed emotions on the topic being expressed. Those who had negative reactions to group work described their experiences as being "major stressors," difficult to complete due to conflicting schedules and prior time commitments, difficult because motivational levels vary within groups, and problematic because situations often arise where only one or two individuals did the majority of the group's work. The enjoyment of group work was a "personal preference," according to one student. "Ninety to ninety-five percent of my groups have been a failure," she said. "Lectures work better for me because I can speak for myself on the homework and on tests."

Students who had enjoyed their team projects offered up some suggestions that made their experiences positive ones. "I had a successful group project experience because the professor allowed us to work on the project in class. The professor floated from group to group, answering questions and we were able to work. If someone wasn't contributing, the group could vote to eject them and they would have to do the work on their own. The groups then submitted questions for the final exam, which encouraged attendance at the presentations." A different professor met randomly with one member of each group every week to ensure that everyone in the group was staying involved with the project. Another senior suggested being "given the opportunity to be flexible [with requirements] and [allowing students] to tailor their projects to their liking."

Research Emphasis

Research was a topic that came up not only in the academic focus groups, but in the general focus groups as well; see section IVC. The University of Maryland, as a Research I institution, has a strong commitment to innovative and continuous research, and although many students are drawn to this type of intellectual environment, they described some of the downfalls of the research emphasis that undergraduates face. "Professors who are up for tenure focus on their research. They are hired to do research, not teach. Teachers who know how to do research don't necessarily know how to teach an introductory course to a 500-person class. This is definitely more of a research environment than a teaching environment." Others expressed concern that professors put so much emphasis on their research that they have no concern for the welfare of their students.

Teaching Assistants

Students are very involved with their TAs as well as professors since there are so many departments and courses that utilize graduate students to educate the undergraduate population. The seniors in the focus groups expressed frustration with language barriers they found between themselves and some TAs, which impede learning. "The TAs are brilliant, " said one woman, "but they cannot teach well because the don't speak our language." Numerous other students agreed, saying they could not understand the foreign TAs when they went to their office hours or had them in discussion sections. "The TAs are needed to help reinforce things, but some cannot even speak English. They were of no help, so I ended up doing poorly in classes that were very important to my major."

Faculty Evaluations

Many of the issues and concerns regarding faculty seemed to be things that the students felt could be remedied if there were proper channels to take action. Course and teacher evaluations were suggested by the students as ways of becoming aware of issues and the first step toward correcting these issues. Although many courses require evaluations, the students felt they "were not being taken seriously." According to one individual, "I had a bad class where the students had to go to the administration in order to fill out the course evaluations because the teacher would not pass them out knowing he would get a poor evaluation. Although the teacher was not rehired, we were not given help to make up what we lost. I think evaluations should be mandated." By "focusing on quality control" via methods such as course evaluations, e-mails, surveys, and focus groups, the students felt the University would have enough information to make necessary changes in the academic structure.

Departmental Community

In relation to having a successful academic experience, some students mentioned that they thought it important to have a sense of community within their academic unit as well as a sense of connection to the University as a whole. Not knowing what one wants to major in when they enter the University was a factor that some felt kept them from establishing solid connections to the school. Once students picked their major, many of them felt as if they had found an academic home that they could connect with. "Being in a smaller academic college made it easier to succeed due to upperclassmen who acted as mentor-types. I was able to talk to older students about classes, switching one's major, etc. Also there was a smaller student/advisor ratio which helped." Another student concurred, saying, "I now have the same advisor and I know the faculty, which helps me have more confidence when I'm feeling uncertain about something." A commuter student and a transfer student both discussed their difficulty forging a strong connection with the University. "Getting connected to campus resources was much more challenging than I expected."

Course Availability

Registering for classes outside of one's major appeared to be an issue for a few of the focus group participants. "I wanted to take a lot of courses in a lot of different areas outside of my major, and I found that very difficult to do here because of roadblocks. That was very frustrating for me." Others commented that they were blocked from certain courses because they were reserved for Honors students only, which was "a little unfair." Problems also arose when they could not register for a course as a senior because it was outside of their major and designated for freshman and sophomores. Another individual said she felt that professors "pick and choose" from the waitlist, a practice another participant in that focus group then described as "political and elitist." While some had difficulty getting courses, other students voiced that they had had positive experiences getting courses outside of their major. "Most of the time, in my experience, there were plenty of seats in the courses I wanted to take," one said, while another student stated, "I have never experienced turbulence in trying to get courses outside of my major. I just slid right in. It depends on luck and on the department."

Specialized Programs

There were a large number of individuals in the various focus groups who were members of specialized programs such as Honors, College Park Scholars, and Gemstone. They had many positive comments regarding their various Honors experiences, including that they have a special closeness with other program students and faculty, "The Honors Program gave me what I needed in the early years," and, "The specialized programs had strong academic commitments from the students." Regarding College Park Scholars, one student commented that she was afraid to be in the program at first but was glad to have done it in the end while another student said, "I got into the Honors Program and declined so I could get a broader experience in the College Park Scholars program. The coursework was fluffy, but I was interested in the community service and other opportunities it offered." A Gemstone RA said that her only complaint about that program was that their exposure to other students outside of the program is minimal. A few non-Honors students expressed their

displeasure that they were not considered for the programs upon entry into the University. "…I'm a little bitter about this. I came to this school having a lot going for me, but my test scores were not high enough for me to get into the Honors Program or classes that I thought were interesting." Another student stated, "It's not fair to discriminate based on SATs because not all people have the opportunity to take a $1000 SAT prep course."

Stemming off of the Honors experience was the discussion of residence halls, in particular living-learning communities. Some felt that living-learning opportunities should be afforded to all students, especially in their first year since that is a very important time developmentally. Others agreed saying that the University "should not underestimate the role of residential life in academics" and that they had wonderful experiences living with people in similar majors and with common interests.

Importance of Campus Involvement

The students were quick to point out that while academics is a significant chunk of what makes college a solid and rewarding experience, becoming involved socially though extracurricular activities is an important part of the developmental process through the college years. "Extracurricular activities should be emphasized more at the beginning [of the college experience]. Not all extracurricular programs were accessible. Students need help getting more involved in the campus community." The students stressed the importance of maintaining a good balance between social life and academics. By doing so, upon graduation, they hope to "feel as if you are fulfilled, have accomplished a lot socially and academically, and feel as if you've grown, matured, and are a different person."

IV. B. Diversity

The newly released 2000 Strategic Plan states that the University of Maryland has had a goal of creating a "model multi-racial, multi-generational, multi-ethnic community" for the past two decades. To see if students believe this goal has been accomplished, three focus group sessions were held regarding the issue of diversity, with one group comprised solely of students of color. Most of the themes reflected students' beliefs on how diversity is exhibited on UM's campus. For the purposes of this study, diversity was defined in terms of race and ethnicity.

Ideal/Optimal Diverse Environment

When asked to describe an optimal diverse college environment, many students stated that it would be an atmosphere comprised of multiple races and ethnicities simultaneously. Furthermore, some students said that these various groups would be open to different cultures and others' beliefs. "Various ethnic backgrounds, educated people with different beliefs. People know what they believe and respect others' beliefs/points of view." Another person said, "The optimal situation would be to not have conflicts, hate crimes, no actions against beliefs or backgrounds, people were more open to other cultures." One student of color stated that an ideal diverse community would be one where, "I wasn't the only [person in the] majority or minority. Not the only black female, not the only one of something."

A few students didn't believe that this type of environment existed anywhere or that it ever could. However, other students said it exists at UM. "UM is the most optimal community I've seen so far, but it's not ideal." The latter comment expressed the sentiment that a few students shared: the University of Maryland is better than most schools, but it has a lot of work left to do. Overall, though, the mixture of responses seemed to reflect students' pessimism about the level of diversity in larger society, as well as at the institutional level.

Pre-College Exposure to Diversity

Another theme that arose was the amount of exposure students have to diversity prior to arriving at UM. One student commented on how it is easier to connect with people of different cultural backgrounds in college even if one has not been exposed to them before, because everyone is

going through the same process of "identity formation" and transition. Therefore, this student implied that the commonality of the college experience was helpful in bridging cultural gaps amongst students.

There were comments, however, which spoke to the belief that it is hard to change students' minds about diversity once they arrive at college. "Students come in at ages 17, 18, 19. I think it's really hard to change [their] views on diversity by that time." Another commented, "Just because we have a melting pot here, doesn't mean everyone that came to this school was raised in a melting pot atmosphere. So, while we are diverse at UM, you are still around people who don't understand or appreciate it. They are of the same mind frame—goes for those raised in the city or a small town. I think this doesn't just apply to American students, but even international students who might have been raised in small towns." One student stated that even though UM is diverse, other atmospheres are not, so it's hard to spread that mentality to others "who don't understand or appreciate it." However, another student commented that she likes to challenge the beliefs of other students by making them rethink their views and misconceptions, which helps them learn a little more about other types of people.

Beliefs about Diversity at UM

A significant amount of discussion ensued regarding students' views about the actual level of diversity at UM. The overall perception was that UM is very diverse especially when compared to other institutions. One student stated, "You realize the diversity here [at UM] when you talk to people from other schools." Another concurred; "This campus is such a melting pot compared to other campuses I've been to." Although numerically the University of Maryland is a diverse environment, a senior commented, "We have a wide variety of cultures at UM, but I have heard of various conflicts that have occurred on this campus and that is not optimal." Another person made a similar comment, saying, "I have seen articles that we do have diversity especially in comparison to other schools in general, but at the same time, I have gone to places [on campus] where there wasn't diversity - I have felt that way in some classes. I felt like the minority." There were a few negative comments made regarding the approachability of certain student populations (e.g., white students) and how conservative the campus is on a whole. "There is not enough tolerance of diversity…or education as there should be." Given the comments of the students, it may be inferred that UM is diverse, at least on a surface level, but that is not sufficient. "I just think there is a lot more that could be done. We are doing ok [in terms of numbers], but we don't do much with that in terms of understanding others. I don't think we have diversity in that sense or a sense of community."

Diversity amongst Faculty/TAs/Administration

An interesting range of responses were garnered when students commented on their beliefs about the level of diversity amongst UM's faculty and administrators. A number of students believe that UM is very diverse at all levels. One person commented, "I think the faculty is pretty diverse. The percentages of different types of people are pretty good." However, other students felt there is a lot left to be desired in terms of diverse faculty and staff as evidenced by comments such as, "The faculty is not diverse," and, "[The University has a] predominantly white faculty." A few students made an important observation: the amount of diverse faculty and staff differs between the colleges and programs (e.g., the College of Life Sciences, the Dietetics program, etc.) "I think different schools have different levels of diversity." One student said, "I don't know who's in charge of hiring professors, but in my Econ classes I've never had a professor who wasn't white. I wonder why that is. I'm sure there are reasons, but it makes me question the [University's] commitment [to diversity]."

It also should be noted that two minor themes occurred regarding faculty and staff diversity. Though many students think there is a lack of diverse full-time professors, numerous students believe that diversity exists amongst TAs. "I've had TAs from all cultural backgrounds." Also, a number of students believe that there exists a lack of diversity in terms of the gender of their professors. One student observed that classes are taught mostly by males. As previously stated, this perceived lack of diversity may depend on certain disciplines. For example, a discipline, like Engineering that has been

historically dominated by white males, may still exhibit less diverse faculty compared to a discipline, which has historically been open to different types of people.

Several students noted that they consider the administration to not be very involved with issues of diversity. A few commented that they don't see the administrators taking part in activities specifically devoted to promoting cultural diversity and awareness. There seemed to be a sense of resentment towards the UM administration for that, some of it aimed directly at the President. "I think that if UM really wanted to follow through with its mission, [President] Mote would show up at more cultural events." It may be safe to assume students think the upper-level administration does not appreciate or fully respect the necessity of diversity on campus.

Diversity in the Classroom

In regards to the level of diversity in classroom settings, a number of students said that there is little to no diversity in classrooms, while others disagreed. Another frequent comment was that a lot of classes are taught from a Western/American/Republican point of view. Once again however, it may be safe to assume that it depends on the discipline or type of class. Interesting comments were made pertaining to the level of students' interest in diversity. Some students note an apparent lack of interest in diversity by other students. "I don't know if it's [their] background…or what, but some students don't look beyond their own world." Some students don't understand why others aren't excited to learn about different cultures.

CORE requirements

Students expressed appreciation for the CORE diversity class requirement. Several students believed that exposure to another culture or one that has typically been underrepresented is a good experience. "I think that it is great that UM has a diversity requirement." One student did state surprise that there is only *one* class required. This senior went on to say, "I think with the numerical diversity that we have, we could do so much more with our diversity. Diversity is another element of knowledge that you have that can help you with your career and life in general. You can't force people to appreciate it, but I wish there were more opportunities and ways to help people to get it."

Residence Halls

Students noted the level of diversity found in residence halls and their comments reflected positive feelings regarding their experiences. "I lived in the high rise dorms for the first two years and they were very diverse. It was a good experience." The students believed the residence halls were a good place to meet new people of different backgrounds.

Cultural Groups/ Racially or Ethnically-Based Groups

There were two prominent areas of discussion that arose in reference to ethnic/racial-based groups and organizations on campus. The first theme was the necessity of these types of groups or clubs. While some students think ethnically- or racially-based organizations are a means of separating certain students from the majority of the student body, other students, particularly students of color, believe that these types of clubs are still necessary. "Cultural groups have both positive and negative aspects. It's good because you can learn about your culture, but bad because it pulls you away from the larger. The positives outweigh the negatives, though." A white student commented on the perceived segregation and lack of intermingling between groups. A comment that illustrates the second discussion area of the tendency for like racial or ethnic groups to socialize amongst themselves. A number of students stated that even though there are a lot of different races and ethnicities who have their own communities, there is a not a sense of campus-wide community due to lack of interaction. This point was reiterated by numerous students. However, a number of students (all students of color) thought there really is no way to change the lack of interaction. One senior commented, "It's difficult to do because it's innate to stick with your own culture," while another student stated, "There's nobody to blame because it's in our nature to affiliate with people who are like us."

Fitting In

A few of the students of color mentioned issues regarding the idea of fitting in. Some individuals stated they feel like they are automatically the spokesperson for their racial/ethnic group, even if they do not want to be. "We are actually forced to represent our people…we walk around with an uncomfortable burden on our shoulder." Another obstacle to belonging can occur when students are from more than one racial/ethnic background. "I have a problem: where do I fit in if I am not a member of one particular group alone?" There may be heightened sensitivity to this perceived burden because there is not enough interaction and understanding of each other's cultures amongst the student body. Without an understanding or appreciation of another culture, discrimination can occur. A few seniors commented how other students and administrators had discriminated against them. "I'll never forget the …advisor who kept telling me that I would only to take a test [regarding spelling/grammar] once." Another recalled, " I was once asked if I was here on scholarship."

How to Promote Diversity

Students were very forthright with their comments about the levels of diversity reflected at Maryland, and they were also open about ways to improve it. Lack of interaction between students and faculty was clearly perceived by some of the students. To alleviate this, students believe that faculty should make efforts to participate in cultural activities outside of class. "[Faculty should] sponsor events or work with different student clubs to be more active." Also, some stated that faculty could promote diversity by expressing the need to learn about others as well as possibly assigning work, which would make students attend events based on diversity.

These ideas many have been easy for the students to generate because they did not feel UM has realized that "diversity is an ongoing process [and] if you are going to go for diversity, you should go for quality." Some of the seniors also thought that in order to promote diversity campus-wide, "in your face" techniques like fliers or ads in the Diamondback may be useful. Also, some students feel that more community-oriented activities such as showing cultural movies outside would be helpful. Students noted, too, that location of events is important. Holding events or passing out information in central locations where many students frequent would be wise because students would be "forced to walk by." Another idea came from a student who said, "[We should] try to reach out to students and faculty in some creative and fun way to get people to learn about others and to interact. We talked about promoting [diversity], but there should be some sort of campaign or slogan…like we are promoting "global people"…it should be something that before you are on campus and while you are on campus, you just know. It should be like Testudo…you just know it. Maybe the DBK should sponsor a column regular on what people eat, what they wear, what their families are like, how they are, what they do which is something that you can learn from."

One final statement encompassed what appeared to be the view of many of the focus group participants: "I think UM is diverse, but I sure didn't know they were committed to it until I came to this group. If UM is really committed then this should up in the Diamondback on bulletin boards or in the Union. This may not be appropriate but they send out the salary report every year, maybe we should have [departmental] racial breakdowns publicized yearly. How many people in each college and of what race/ethnicity in each class? If they [the University administration] are committed to it then show the commitment by facts."

Advice for Students

The focus group participants also had advice for future UM students. A majority of comments received regarding the role of students reflected the belief that it is also up to the student to seek diversity. "Keep your eyes open for diversity. Be aware and have a good time." Because of UM's size, students have to be proactive and seek out their own experiences to make their time here as enjoyable as possible. Another reoccurring comment was "get involved." Evidently, students think that it is useful and maybe necessary to become active on campus to learn about diverse cultures. While students need to be looking for diversity, the University can assist in this process by "putting the seed in students' minds that we aren't here just for a career, but that we are here to learn more about students and different cultures, other people who are around us. If we are given that

understanding then maybe no matter where we have come from this is our chance to take strides for a more peaceful community…and maybe this will help promote action."

IV. C. General Transition

In the collegiate setting, administrators and faculty often discuss how to help incoming students adjust to life at an institution of higher education. At the University of Maryland, for example, extensive orientation programs are conducted every summer, First Year Focus clusters are developed, and residence halls work hard to help students to adjust to adjust to life without their parents. While much attention is paid to those entering into the collegiate experience, what developmental challenges are facing those preparing to graduate? One of the goals of our research team was to examine the experience of being a graduating senior at the University of Maryland with regards to preparedness for postgraduate life.

Feelings Regarding Graduation

As an opening question for those participating in the general focus groups, the students were asked, "With only a few weeks left in the semester, how are you feeling about graduating?" The overwhelming majority of the responses involved the students indicating their excitement about moving from the academic community to the working world. Responses included statements such as, "I'm excited about diving into my field," "I'm excited to be done, to be getting into a real life. I look forward to living on a regular schedule, not a class schedule," "I'm ready to move on with my life and get into a more professional environment," and "I'm restless here and am looking forward to trying to make money."

While most students were excited to be continuing on in their life journey, others expressed some apprehension. "I'm scared. I am happy that the schoolwork is over, but I've been a student for eighteen years." This student went on to indicate the she does not know any other life except that as a student. Others indicated that they are concerned with their financial situation since "mom and dad will stop signing the checks," and they are unsure of how they will support themselves. Another student added some other post-graduation worries such as how she will finance her car, what state she should live in, and where she should go for graduate school. Although most students seemed ready to leave the University, they expressed many concerns regarding post-graduation life.

How to Be Successful at UM

"I came from an all girls' small high school. I was misinformed coming to a large school, thinking I would be reached out to." Although some students coming into the University of Maryland are disenchanted by the size of the school, many quickly learn ways to make the campus feel smaller as expressed by the seniors in the focus groups. "Students need to be assertive about their education, but not all can, especially the freshman. You must take initiative to figure things out for yourself and establish a connection to the University." Another student made a similar comment saying, "You have to find you niche. You go from being a 'big kahuna' in high school, running all the clubs, and you step in there and you are lucky if you get to give your input. You have to make your own way. It's an adjustment, but you learn to contribute where you can."

The students also contributed ideas and ways that they "found something to connect with" here at the University. One student created her own major in order to make her stand out from other majors as well as to graduate schools. Another found her niche in the Honors Program, while another joined intramural sports teams in order to meet new people. "I do campus tours and I always tell students that they need to take on the college experience. You get out of college what you put into it." These sentiments were echoed by others who came here, were "presented with so many opportunities," and found something to connect with at the University.

Valuable Skills Learned at UM

When asked the types of skills students obtained while at Maryland, a myriad of responses were given. Six primary skill areas were mentioned, the first being time management. Planning is

essential, mentioned one student, "especially if you have three 15-page papers due in one week or three exams." "Juggling a whole bunch of things at once," the hallmark of an active college student, also requires one to develop time management abilities.

Coupled with time management were planning and organizational skills. "I've learned how to sort through materials, how to write, and how to work smart rather than hard." Being at such a large institution, one of the seniors said he has learned to "plan for things to fail. What will you do if no parking is available or if you lose your computer files?" Another commented in a similar fashion that, "Being on a campus this large with this much bureaucracy has taught me how to finesse the system."

The third skill area that students felt that they had developed which would enhance their professional and graduate school careers was that of writing. While one said, "Being forced to take junior English was a really good thing because it was helpful," another stated that he "hated junior English because I had poor teacher. I learned more from professors in my major who stressed less academic writing and more professional writing." Others agreed with this statement because although the English department, particularly those teaching Junior English, give students the freedom to write about topics related to their major, the English professor or TA could not be as adequate a grader as someone within their particular major who would more fully understand the content of the paper. Another student mentioned a helpful class taken through BSOS which taught, "writing skills that prepare you for writing graduate school essays and applications," a course that really helped him to refine his writing skills.

Communication skills were also considered essential. Students felt they learned this skill both in and out of the classroom. "I lived in the dorms for four years. You learn communication skills and how to get along when you're living closely. In high school you are more or less alone, but here you have to deal with roommates." For enhancing communication skills within the classroom, one student stated that, "Communication skills should be incorporated into the core of all majors. Even if you hate it, you need to get used to doing it." One final caveat to communication was the benefit gained by increasing one's networking skills, since "it's the people you know versus what you know." Learning to deal with professors on a "professional" level and "identifying what professors want, how to respond to a particular professor's test or write in the style they prefer" prepares one to face the work force.

Critical thinking and the ability to analyze given situations comprised another skill area discussed. The students recognized the importance of asking good and thoughtful questions to get to the root of a situation.

Developing research skills was a very important area for many of the students, especially those planning to further their education through graduate work. This was an area of contention for students who really wanted to be involved in undergraduate research, but "didn't figure it out [that research opportunities were available] until my junior year. I didn't begin looking for it until too late, and by the time I found it, the opportunities were spoken for." Some voiced concern that research opportunities should be advertised more clearly and early on in one's academic career. "I serve on the executive board for Psi Chi. I have found lots of students want to do research but don't know where to look. They thought it would be too competitive." While some were upset by not getting involved in research, others passed up the opportunities. One stated, "Faculty and staff would love to turn undergrads into their personal research slaves," while another commented that, "I wasn't willing to do all that work for no credit."

The ability to work with others in group settings was another skill area discussed by the focus group participants. "I learned from being in such a diverse environment," one student said, while another commented, "Gemstone was interdisciplinary, and I was able to learn from people who were outside of my major." When questioned further as to the types of experiences the students had had which enhanced their abilities to effectively work with in groups, the students provided a wide range of campus organizations that influenced their growth and development. A journalism writing group, Golden Key National Honor Society, being a member of the cheerleading squad, serving as a DJ for

WMUC, and sorority and fraternity leadership positions were all mentioned as activities or positions that enhanced their group communication skills. "I was a club president, which I can put on my resume. I gained so much leadership experience. Before this, I couldn't speak to a group, and now I can talk to anyone." Numerous students mentioned how these skills will be "selling points" to potential employers and graduate programs.

"Web and computer skills," "study skills," "leadership skills," and "becoming more in tune with my interests" were all final attributes that these seniors felt they had gained while at the University of Maryland. One student in particular mentioned practical skills gained while living off campus such as "how to pay bills and how to rent an apartment. The things you learn living away from home are essential." While skills mentioned by the graduating seniors ran the gamut from academic-related to practical, all of the skills combined helped them to, as one student put it, "learn about myself and help me become a better person."

Skills from "Real World" Experiences

The skills areas discussed above were all areas developed by the students while in the academic or campus setting. The seniors were quick to point out, though, the wonderful benefits of the experiential learning opportunities they had participated in while attending the University of Maryland. In particular, many students voiced that they felt experiential learning activities increased their marketability. "Internships look really good on your application [for professional positions]. They raise the level of the application," said one student, while another commented, "Internships are better than another class because you learn and make connections versus just taking another class from the University." Working with "real-life problems" made the academic material come alive for students.

Others also felt that internships showed they possesed true and tested skills rather than simply academic knowledge. "I interned at the Smithsonian which helped with grad schools. Working at a renowned organization showed that I have serious skills, and it helped me to know what I want to do and don't want to do in my field." One student who almost did not do an internship but then had a very positive experience commented that," [Internship] should be required, at least for one semester, to learn how things really work [in the real world]."

While most students were satisfied with their experiences as interns, a few commented that they were upset that it was difficult to receive academic credit for their experiences since often the internships are unpaid or volunteer. "Paying $700 to volunteer for credit is ridiculous." One senior also emphasized the importance of pure volunteerism and community service as being vital to a good and high quality resume. Another shared her experience in recent graduate school interviews where those speaking with her were impressed with the internship and volunteer experiences on her application. "It showed that I had taken initiative….I really felt that the experiences that I had were things that people who read my transcript and my essays were drawn to. Their eyes glued in on it and they were things I was given a chance to elaborate on. You can take an experience here and make it your own. If you have really taken something and put you stamp on it, employers and professors like to know that you took the initiative and have passion and enthusiasm."

Capstone Courses

One question posed to the students was, "Other institutions offer classes for seniors that relate academics to preparation for life after college (often called capstone course or culminating experience course). If the University of Maryland offered such a course, would you be interested in enrolling?" This question elicited excited responses and many ideas as to the content, structure, and timing of such a course.

The students had many ideas as to the topics that could be incorporated into a capstone course. Two themes emerged amongst all of the suggestions. The first set of ideas dealt with preparing students for job searches. A course partially dedicated to topics such as writing resumes and cover letters, seeking out desired positions, developing contacts and networking, and preparing oneself for interviews were areas of interest for these particular students.

In regards to interviewing skills, a few students mentioned not only discussing the skills required, but also practicing these skills using situational examples. One student stated, "I went to the career fair last week. I didn't feel the tension until I made eye contact, and then I crumbled. I just clammed up. I would like to have more practice. I knew what I wanted, but didn't know what to say. I need more preparation." One student suggested getting UM alumni involved in the interview preparation process. "Mote is very interested in getting alumni involved. They could be used as interviewers, which would be an excellent way to promote the image of the University as well." Another senior liked this idea, agreeing that it would be a good to increase alumni networking opportunities, something she would like to see more of since she is moving across country and would like to be placed in touch with other UM alums.

Adjustment to life after graduation was the other theme that emerged as an area to discuss in a capstone course. For those who do not currently live off-campus, they will need to learn how to "find housing, handle a lease, connect phone lines, and pay bills. The needs of on-campus students will be different than commuters, many of whom are already living independently." Others suggested information sessions on how to find doctors, dentists, and other services when one moves to a new area as well as how to purchase life, car, and health insurance. As one student put it, "I've been a student for 18 years," so they never had to deal with such complicated matters before, and assistance through the process would be very beneficial.

The structure of a capstone course was also discussed, and numerous suggestions surfaced. First, a few students stated they would like to see the course run by each individual major, since job searching needs and strategies vary from major to major. Others wanted the course to be mandatory of all seniors, but this could only be accomplished if there were numerous sections available to accommodate scheduling conflicts. Regardless of whether the course was required, having sections at many different times throughout the day was emphasized. The seniors indicated that they would like to see the class be worth one credit, but graded pass/fail with no "busy work." "I don't want it screwing up my GPA." Along the same lines, one student said, "I took EDCP 108O, which is the same thing for freshman. If you did that, make it info sessions. I don't want to stress about going to class for information I might already have."

The sequencing or placement of the course was very important to these students as well. "Offering the class in the senior year would not help. You're working on other things and finishing up coursework, and would not be interested in taking another elective-type course because you are too busy." The overwhelming consensus was to offer a capstone course in the second semester of one's junior year. "Call it career development, life development…."

Thoughts on the Career Center

The discussion of the capstone course led the students to express their opinions of the Career Center and the experiences they have had there. Students voiced concern on the limited breadth of jobs posted as well as the age of some of the resources. "The Career Center is not very up-to-date on things. It helps you to choose a career, but I want job announcements *now*." Regarding TERP Online, one student commented that it "is more for engineering and business students, while there is not much out there for majors like journalism and government." Others who were looking for placement in the sports and entertainment industry as well as environmental activism agreed. One senior commented that there is "lots of focus on the private sector in the Career Center, and not very much information on government jobs. Considering we are in the DC area, I was surprised and confused that there was so little information on how to get a government job." A final comment was, "TERP Online is supposed to help, but I didn't have the time to attend the classes. I think it's ridiculous that you have to take classes just to use the services that are provided for free. I've been up there [to the Career Center], but it wasn't very helpful."

Business majors raved about their experience with the career center located in the Business School. "[The Business School's career center] offers career classes and it's mandatory that you take it your junior year. It makes a big difference. I live in my sorority house and, unless you're a business major, everyone else is lost. The business majors are totally on top of it. All of us have jobs

and know what we're doing [after graduation]. It has to do partially with the field, but it also has to do with how we were prepared. There was a lot better preparation."

Academic Advising

Advising was an area that came up in every focus group as an area or service where students felt improvements could be made. Similar comments were made during the academic experiences focus group sessions; see section IVA. Despite a few students saying that they had never experienced issues with advising ("I never had a problem with advising in the Journalism School,") and had had wonderful experiences with their advisors ("My advisor was a model of what all advisors should be like. There is not a person on this campus she doesn't know or can't get you in touch with. If there's a problem, she can help you."), the majority of the comments regarding advising at the University of Maryland were negative.

The comment, "Advising needs a step up here," was greeted by one large focus group with many head nods and approving laughs. In particular, students expressed that "advisors don't know the answers" and they need "more counseling training. We need competent and available advisors." Students were concerned by the fact that advisors were not available during their scheduled times and some were unable to be useful guides through the registration process. One student stated, "I have had a mixed experience with the whole advising thing. Government and Politics had good advising, but I had a horrible experience in History. I guess it's a hit and miss process."

There was a common theme of mistrust of advisors expressed by the graduating seniors. Some complained of being advised to take CORE courses, which it turned out the student did not need so it "set me back." Another stated, "I've been made to take a lot of useless classes, and that's time that could have been better spent." Students had a tendency to consult not only advisors, but their friends as well when deciding which courses to take. "I had an idea of what I needed to take and if my advisor told me different, I would ask about it."

Another area of contention regarding advising at UM was the impersonal nature of the process. Students felt that frequent changes in advising staff was a major contributor to this issue. "That's why advising is so bad. There is such a huge turnover so there was no connection to who I was [within the advising office]." The seniors wanted to see advising become a more personal process for the students who will proceed them. "We need more advisors so one advisor is assigned to particular students, so you don't have to start from scratch each year. We would benefit from having an advisor who knows your case."

Peer advisors are not an adequate solution to the problem, according to one student. "Psychology emphasizes peer counseling with juniors and seniors serving as advisors for underclassmen. This is not a good system because they only talk about their own experiences. I finally found out after several semesters that a course I needed had been discontinued and would not be offered again. In one of the bigger departments, you don't get much personal attention…it's sort of like we're the bastard children." Another suggestion to improve the situation included training professors to be good advisors so they too can assist in the process. One final comment came up as one student observed the obvious frustration others felt when discussing advising. "This sounds like you all fought for your education and it should be an open arms experience. I took two personality tests at Shoemaker too late. We need to know about these tests earlier because I had to discover them on my own. An education should be offerings, not finding out things ourselves."

Relationships with Faculty

Due to the large size of this institution, students have experienced a great deal of variation in the quality and quantity of interactions with professors. Similar accounts were discussed in the academics section; see section IVA. Students said, "Teaching is random and you have wide discrepancies even within the same course," and, "Professors make or break classes. The subject matter in an area might not be as interesting, but the professor determines how you do in and respond to the class." Accessibility to instructors and professors appeared to be a large concern to some of these students. One stated, "In a huge college like mine, students don't have any rapport with the

professors. I've been in some really large classes with 500 people, so to the professor, I am just a social security number. My only small classes have been senior year, and they were taught by TAs." This lack of interaction with faculty members led to the issue of recommendations. "I don't have anyone to ask for recommendations. How do I get to know professors? I go to office hours, but it doesn't really help. I think it would be good to have profs present some outside lectures on things they are involved with."

Some students felt the lack of student/faculty interaction contributed to decreased quality of instruction. "I had a professor in a 400-level class who didn't know anyone's name. He cancelled the last three weeks of class because he said, 'I've given you all of the material.' I've been to the Dean about this because it is ridiculous. I've wasted money on this course." Another contributed the poor instruction style to the emphasis that is placed on research over teaching. "Classes have not prepared me to apply the stuff in my head. My department is mostly geared toward research. Research departments don't know how to show you how to use it [your knowledge]. They need teacher training. Many professors just want to get back to their research, so you'll have 15-minute classes."

While some professors seemingly make no effort to interact with their students, there are others who go out of their way to get to know their pupils. "I had a professor in Physics who actually gives 10 points of credit on the final exam if you visit him five times before the final. It's your responsibility to go, but he wants to get to know you. He describes it as a partnership. Getting to know professors gives you the benefit of the doubt." Another student described how her professor had coffee hour once a week. "We had the best discussions, and the professor got to know everyone in a class of 50 by name."

Teaching Assistants

At the University of Maryland, teaching assistants are an integral part of the educational process. Similar comments on TAs were made during the academic experiences section as well; see section IVA. The seniors in the focus groups were discouraged by their inability to communicate with some of their TAs due to language barriers. "I had to drop a course because the TA couldn't understand the questions. She couldn't even read our names." Another individual stated, "I had a similar situation in an Economics class. The TA pronounced a word as 'ecrease' which could mean either increase or decrease. That's a pretty important [discrepancy] in Economics. You can't even take notes [when you do not know exactly what the teacher is saying]." One way to alleviate this situation, according to one student, would be to have teaching assistants go through an interviewing process to see if they are able to effectively teach and communicate with the students.

Teaching Evaluations

In order to provide the University with feedback on their satisfaction with courses, the students emphasized the importance of teaching evaluations. The subject of faculty and instructor evaluations was also discussed in the academic focus groups; see section IVA. The students requested that it be mandatory to fill out evaluations for all courses. One student mentioned that he took an extremely poor course in which no evaluation was done, something that was very frustrating to him. Other students echoed the similar experiences of not being given the opportunity to fill out evaluations. Two suggestions were brought forth as ways to improve the evaluation process. First, course evaluations should be done mid-semester to assess how the course is going since it is too late by the end of the semester to help those enrolled in the class. The second suggestion was to publish the faculty evaluations online so that students have the opportunity to view what other students think of particular courses and professors. The student who made this suggestion also added that the process should be done in a positive way though, emphasizing the positive qualities of the instructor.

Foreign Language Requirement

One piece of feedback that some of the students wanted to provide to University administrators was their feelings regarding the foreign language requirements. While some felt there should be not be any sort of foreign language requirement because certain majors do not have time

given the stringent and time-consuming demands of their majors, others felt being familiar with a foreign language is an important skill that everyone should hold. One student pointed out that knowing a foreign language helps create a more diverse environment when people speak multiple languages.

Accessing Campus Resources and Information

There was an overwhelming assertion that UM is teeming with opportunities, events, clubs, and organizations. The seniors were quick to acknowledge this statement, but found it hard at times to access all the special programs. "I miss so many things because I didn't know about them, " and, "It's a daunting task looking for resources so you give up," are two quotes exemplifying the feelings and comments of many of the focus group participants.

There was a call amongst the students to have a centralized location for getting information on campus events and resources because right now the information is scattered from being on the web, to posters on kiosks, or to chalk drawings on the sidewalks. "Information needs to be centralized and integrated so information is not obtained at the last minute." Suggestions were given as to how to spread information such as a campus-wide listserv, flyers, and ads in the Diamondback. Some commented that these methods were already being utilized so something new should be tried. One student suggested a "central information source that says everything that is happening on campus. [Have this information source] in a physical location or on the web." Another student piggybacked off this idea by saying, "I can customize my Netscape site to be 'My Netscape,' including things I such as headlines or weather. We need something similar with the UM website, so one could create 'My Maryland.'"

Administration Concerns

When asking students if they had final thoughts that they would want shared with the administration, the notion of students not being listened to by the "powers that be" was addressed. These particular students wanted to play a more active role in policy decisions. One gave the example of the plus/minus grading decision. "Students aren't listened to at all. That's why I came here today. With the plus/minus grading, most students thought it was bad, but they are doing it anyway. As a general policy, students have no voice." Others mentioned SGA not having much clout with or respect from the administration. A solution suggested was to create a student think tank, which can supply the administration with ideas and lobby for change.

Students were also discouraged by the ways in which the administration is more concerned with making money rather than meeting the needs of the current students. Comments included the following: "The University pays attention to 'icing.' They show the outside world that this campus has good programs, but there is no substance behind some of them, which is a big concern. It's a PR push. For example, I lived in the Civil Society house, but the program was nothing." "I've felt very strongly since my freshman year that the University's first priority is to make money and then, oh yeah, we should teach. [Dr.] Mote was brought in because he's a fundraiser." The students were discouraged that President Mote and other senior administrators are not a visible presence on campus, an absence that causes the students to feel less of a connection to the University. "Most offices don't care about students, they just want UM to be #1 in U.S. News and World Report."

V. Discussion

An important job of researchers in doing focus group projects such as these is to interpret the results of the projects within the context of the institution, and to identify the implications of the results in helpful ways. Walking the line between what the students say they need, and what we as administrators believe they need given our experience with other students, is sometimes a challenge, but us nonetheless necessary.

One of the most important aspects of academics at UM from the students' perspective is the faculty commitment to undergraduate education, a notion that is echoed in educational literature as

well (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996). Focus group participants expressed concern regarding faculty commitment to students in a number of different contexts. First, these students believe that a faculty member's willingness to share their passion for their field enriches classroom interaction. Some stated that even large lecture classes can be quite effective, if taught by a professor who is animated, excited about the material, and interacts with the students on an individual basis. Another context mentioned was the faculty evaluation realm, where students value the ability to give feedback to faculty, but are frustrated by the relative inconsistency of that process, and skeptical of its effectiveness. Still another context mentioned was their personal expectations of faculty, and what these researchers noted were the relatively attainable expectations of students for faculty, i.e., that students expressed great appreciation for faculty who even just know their name, take a minute to ask how they're doing, and express an interest in students as individuals. With the increasing reliance on teaching assistants, and the ever-present challenge of research being of utmost importance to faculty, individual attention from faculty seems rare for these students, all of whom were seniors.

The other most important factor in academics from these groups was the perceived lack of consistency in the advising system, and the students' acknowledgement that they were better off relying on themselves than trusting the advice of advisors at UM. This sentiment is found not only at Maryland, but also at other institutions of higher education across the country (Kramer & Spencer, 1989; Winston, 1996). A few of the participants reported exceptions, but for the most part, students were very unhappy about advising. They were groups representing many majors and experiences, and several years away from first-year advising, so stating generalities about the current state of advising would be erroneous. However, their criticisms were consistent, that transient advisors who knew nothing about their individual cases were of little help, and advisors who did not have up-to-date information about requirements and options did more harm than good. Many of the students were adamant that focusing advising resources on the first year or two of the college experience is imperative, that upper-class students are fine on their own, but first-year students aren't yet able to make their own way. The researchers in this study observed that the advising system is stretched to the limit already, and yet students still believe they are not sufficiently served.

These reflections of students having to navigate their own way permeated through the advising comments as well as the other comments. Students believe they are their own best navigators, and that to succeed at UM, they have to know what they want, and have a sense of how to get there. Translating that perception into helpful feedback for designing the student experience is challenging, as these were students at the close of their academic career, comfortable with being responsible for their own experience. The challenge will be for administrators here to make meaning of these comments in relation to how to best prepare our students to make decisions for themselves, giving them support when they need it and backing away when they don't. In other words, the seniors in this study were very comfortable navigating their own way, but had we asked them those same questions when they were first-year students, they may have answered differently.

The first step in preparing college students to live and work in a democratic, pluralistic society is to provide an environment with a diverse student population (Chang, 1999; Gurin, 1999). The majority of students in this study view University of Maryland as quite diverse on the student level and they realize the potential benefits of that diversity. Although the students found the student body to be diverse, they did not necessarily find the faculty and staff to be truly committed to diversity and multiculturalism, and they did not find that the student body embraces interaction among the different groups. In interpreting these comments, these researchers believe that UM appears to be on the right track towards creating a learning environment that can prepare its students to be productive citizens in a diverse society. However, a genuine commitment at all levels of the institution is necessary for diverse student populations to feel appreciated and supported, as well as for all students, staff, and faculty to become aware and appreciative of different cultures, views, and beliefs.

One way these researchers believe UM staff and faculty might address this issue is to intentionally provide opportunities for students to interact and learn from one another, not only in

settings where diversity is the main topic, but in any setting where students interact, in class and out of class. Although students of color expressed the importance of having support and interaction with students who share similar culture and background, they also expressed frustration with the lack of interaction among the various diverse student populations. The interaction between students and others from various ethnic and racial backgrounds is where the learning and personal development can occur. If these interactions permeate every learning environment, it may affect every other environment as well.

A challenge that many institutions of higher education face is the faculty and staff not always reflecting the diversity of the student body. Although students of color appreciate having other students of color as a support system, they would like to see their cultures and backgrounds represented in some of the faculty and staff they associate with on campus (Allen, 1992; Turner, 1994). Students of color can feel alienated if all of their professors are of a different cultural background. Students from this study were cognizant of the fact that there is a lack of diverse faculty, staff, and administrators at UM, and perceive this to be another example of the campus not having a genuine commitment to diversity. However, despite the relative current lack of diversity, University of Maryland's faculty, staff, and especially upper level administrators can still be effective role models and advocates of diversity by not only providing and supporting diverse learning experiences and opportunities, but also by being active participants in many of these experiences themselves. These students stated that they notice who comes to programs and who doesn't, and that they appreciate even small efforts on the part of administrators to be supportive of their activities.

University of Maryland has embraced diversity structurally with the student population, which is an essential first step; however, it cannot stop there (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1998). First, efforts should be made to increase numbers of faculty and staff of color. With structural diversity in place, the next step is to infuse issues of diversity in all aspects of the institution. Classes and workshops on diversity and multiculturalism should not be the only places where these issues are addressed; diversity can be incorporated in the planning and implementation of all the courses, decisions and initiatives of the university.

A good step in making more of a commitment to diversity is for faculty and staff to assess their current teaching methods and programming efforts. Are faculty and staff providing opportunities for students to interact? Are they specifically addressing the topic of race and diversity in their discussions, activities, and programs, regardless of whether diversity is the main topic of the conversation? Are they using books, resources, and materials that provide a variety of perspectives? If there are obvious efforts being made for students from various racial and ethnic backgrounds to interact and to discuss issues of race and diversity, students may then view that as one way the University is showing their commitment to diversity. Making sure that policies, practices, services, and pedagogical methods are inclusive is another excellent way for faculty and staff to convey a sincere interest and commitment to diversity.

When constructing the focus group questions to assess the senior experience at UM, the general questions were designed to elicit information on multiple topics: feelings of preparedness to face the "real world," skills developed during college and the situations in which these skills were obtained, types of services seniors wish had been available, and interest in a senior capstone course. These topics and others were elaborated on, and other salient information arose through the conversations as well.

In an increasingly competitive job market, many of the students commented upon the beneficial skills they gained while participating in internships, extracurricular activities, co-ops, and study abroad. The students felt the acquisition and refinement of these skills would place them a step ahead of others when job searching and applying to graduate schools. This research team derived two recommendations to increase the emphasis on the internship or experiential learning here at the University of Maryland. First, colleges and departments should ensure that they have resources available that can help students seek out internships and experiential learning opportunities related to their field. Although offices such as the Career Center and Study Abroad offer this type of assistance,

having resources available in advising offices specific to one's major would be extremely useful. For example, the Engineering Co-op Office already exists to provide such services to students, and could be used as a model for other departments and majors who have less developed facilities. Experiential learning opportunities and services should be widely advertised and emphasized to students so they can take full advantage of the opportunities. The second recommendation is that all majors establish course designations giving credit for internships when accompanied by an academic component such as journals and a final paper. Some majors already have such courses set up, and to ensure equality across academic units, other majors could follow suit. Again, advertisement of such course designations is crucial, so that students are aware that credit can be earned for a variety of learning experiences including out-of-classroom experiential opportunities.

The focus group participants expressed a great deal of excitement upon their graduation, but apprehension as well. For some, post-graduate responsibilities such as getting insurance, finding housing, and securing medical services were causing stress while for those who had yet to find a job, interviewing and career placement services were on their minds. Other institutions across the country have implemented capstone courses to address the concerns of their students preparing to graduate (Smith, 1998). The idea of a capstone course for seniors, that addressed all the issues facing those graduating, was well-received by the students, and two potential course topics were discussed: job search, and other transition issues. The students seemed more interested in a transition type of course, rather than the discipline-specific capstone courses offered already in a few of our colleges and at other institutions that seek to synthesize academic material learned over a student's career. This might be a reflection of the fact that we were asking them more about their transition than about their academics specifically in that set of focus groups.

Several of the comments about the limited resources of the Career Center might be misdirected; that is, several students noted their apprehension about the job search process, and their criticism of the available resources might be reflective of that apprehension. The researchers wondered whether many of the students had taken the time to learn about all of the available resources. Helping the students make the job search more manageable could be the topic of a course, or of a department or college-based seminar series, and the focus group participants tended to agree. Many of the students didn't believe, though, that seniors would take the time out of their busy schedules to sign up for such a course, and suggested offering it during the junior year. This course could emphasize resume writing, interviewing techniques, and searching out jobs related to certain majors. The focus group participants emphasized the challenge involved in "selling" such a course, since they themselves did not realize the importance of such preparation until they entered their senior year and started the job search and graduate school application processes. Departments and advisors would need to be very persuasive and directive when presenting the course to juniors who may not yet realize the value of obtaining such skills and competencies.

Many of the students in this study expressed anxiety about leaving UM, and the second type of course discussed might be helpful in that regard. A series of seminars addressing the concerns students have regarding life after graduation might help them transition into the "real world." These topics could be interwoven into the capstone courses that some departments already offer to seniors, while departments without capstone courses could collaborate with the Senior Council to organize transitional seminars for the seniors in their departments. By attempting to alleviate some of the stresses associated with job searching and transitioning out of the University, we could help seniors enjoy their last few semesters at the University of Maryland, both academically and socially.

VI. Conclusion

This research study was undertaken to hear some of the 'voices' of University of Maryland students as they prepared to graduate. After conducting focus groups covering the topics of academic preparation, campus diversity, and general transition, it has become evident that some seniors at the University of Maryland have strong opinions on their experience at the institution. Although positive comments were made, the participants did not hesitate to be honest about what they disliked

as well. Furthermore, the participants were forthright in providing suggestions on how to improve certain areas.

Given the nature of qualitative research, the seniors in this study were not representative of the whole student body. Instead, this study provided students the opportunity to give their input and express their thoughts in a structured format, in order to help us understand their experiences as they get ready to graduate. The researchers believe that actual student voices can be as rich a source of information as other forms of research. Therefore, interested University of Maryland faculty and staff should read this study thoughtfully, and take into consideration the thoughts of UM seniors as they relate to the courses, programs and services offered here. By looking to students for feedback, the UM can continue to improve and enrich the experiences of its students.

VII. References

Allen, W. R. (1992). The color of success: African American college student outcomes at predominantly White and historically Black public colleges and universities. Harvard Educational Review, 62 (1), 26-44.

Astin, A. W. (1993). What matters in college: Four critical years revisited. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Chang, M. (1999). Does racial diversity matter?: The educational impact of a racially diverse undergraduate population. Journal of College Student Development, 40 (4), 377-395.

Gurin, P. (1999). Expert Report of Patricia Gurin. [On-line]. Available: http://www.umich.edu/~urel/admissions/legal/expet/concl.html.

Hurtado, S., Milem, J. F., Clayton-Pederson, A., & Allen, W. A. (1998). Enhancing campus climates for racial/ethnic diversity: Educational policy and practice. Review of Higher Education, 21(3), 279-302.

Kramer, G. L., & Spencer, R. W. (1989). Academic Advising. In M. L. Upcraft, J. N. Gardner, and Associates (Eds.), The freshman year experience: Helping students survive and succeed in college (pp.95-107). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1991). How college affects students: Findings and insights from twenty years of research. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Smith, B. L. (1998). Curricular structures for cumulative learning. In J. N. Gardner, G. Van der Veer, and Associates (Eds.), The senior year experience: Facilitating integration, reflection, closure, and transition (pp.81-94). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Stewart, D.M., & Shamdasani, P.M. (1990). Focus groups: Theory and practice. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Terenzini, P. T., Pascarella, E. T., & Blimling, G. S. (1996). Students' out-of-class experiences and their influence on learning and cognitive development: A literature

review. Journal of College Student Development, 37 (2), 1499-162.

Turner, C. S. V. (1994). Guests in someone else's house: Students of color. The Review of Higher Education, 17 (4), 355-370.

Winston, R.B. (1996). Counseling and advising. In S.R. Komives & D.B. Woodward (Eds.), Student services: A handbook for the profession (3rd ed.) (pp. 335-360). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

Appendix A
Focus Group Invitations

Dear Senior,

What's better than receiving a $15 gift certificate for just sharing your thoughts about UMCP before you graduate? Nothing. So, why don't you agree to participate in a 90 minute senior focus group that will provide the University administration with feedback about your thoughts and experiences. Participants will receive one $15 dollar gift certificate to their choice of several local establishments.

If you are interested in participating, please respond to this e-mail by Tuesday, April 4th. You will be contacted with details by April 10th.

Dear Senior Focus Group Participant,

Thank you for your interest in the Senior Focus group project. Your role as a focus group participant would include attending only one 90-minute session with about 10 other seniors to verbally share your thoughts and feelings about specific aspects of your college experience. Each focus group will have a stated topic, and a facilitator to provide structure and direction to the discussion.

Below are the dates, times, locations, and topics of the scheduled focus group sessions. Select two or three times that fit your schedule and call Kathy at 301/405-8045 (x58045 from a campus phone) to sign up. You may also email your choices to cqi@umail.umd.edu (or by reply). As there are limited slots for each focus group, you will need to respond as soon as possible to make sure you get placed in a group. We will notify you of your group placement.

1. 4/17 - 1:00-2:30 p.m., 1131G Glenn L. Martin Hall (Diversity)
2. 4/17 - 5:00-6:30 p.m., 3135 Hornbake Library (Academics)
3. 4/18 - 9:00-10:30 a.m., Maryland Room, Marie Mount Hall (General)
4. 4/19 - 7:00-8:30 p.m., 0108C Hornbake Library (Diversity-students of color*)
5. 4/21 - 1:30-3:00 p.m., 3135 Hornbake Library (Academics)
6. 4/25 - 2:30-4:00 p.m., 2164 Glenn L. Martin Hall (General)
7. 4/26 - 4:00-5:30 p.m., 3135 Hornbake Library (Diversity)
8. 4/27 - 2:30-4:00 p.m., 3135 Hornbake Library (Academics)
9. 4/28 - 9:00-10:30 a.m., 3135 Hornbake Library (General)
10. 5/4 - 1:00-2:30 p.m., 3135 Hornbake Library (Diversity)

*All students are welcome to sign up for any group that fits in their schedule, except for group #4. We ask that only students of color sign up for that session. Students of color are not limited to that group, however, and are free to sign up for another session instead.

In appreciation for your participation, you will have the choice of receiving a gift certificate from Target, Blockbuster, or Borders. When you respond, please state which gift certificate you would like to receive. If you are unable to make it to a focus group, you will not be eligible for a gift certificate.

Thank you again for your interest in this project! If you have any questions or concerns, please contact us.

Sharon A. La Voy
Campus Assessment Working Group
Office for Continuous Quality Improvement

Appendix B
Demographics of Focus Groups

Note: Where available, below follows the students' gender, major (including double majors), special characteristics, plans after graduation, and ethnicity (specifically suggested in the Diversity – Students of Color group)

Academics (Group #2)
4 females, 1 male.
Majors represented: 2 Journalism, Music Education and Composition, Community Health, Communication.
Other: 3 in Honors, 1 College Park Scholar, 1 transfer student.
Plans: job with a newspaper, teaching and master's program, going to nursing school, seeking job in advertising, will work in a law firm and then attend law school.

Academics (Group #5)
6 females, 3 males.
Majors represented: 3 Psychology, 2 Biology, 2 Finance, Computer Science, Economics, Marketing, Romance Languages, Spanish Literature.
Plans: 2 going to medical school, 2 unsure of plans, seeking a job in urban planning, returning to home country, working for consulting firm, going to grad school.

Diversity – Students of Color (Group #4)
6 females, 1 male.
2 African/International that identify with the African Students' Association, Latina, Black, Afro-American, Asian American, Indian.
Majors represented: Biochemistry, Decision Information Systems, Individual Studies, Finance and International Business, Government, Government/Politics, Neurology, Physiology.
Plans: 2 going to graduate school, applying to law school, will work as a consultant, looking for a job, going to medical school, looking for a job in a non-profit.

Diversity (Group #7)
3 females, 1 male.
Majors represented: Biology, Criminal Justice, Economics, Kinesiology, Sociology.
Plans: 3 currently job searching, attending medical school, plans summer travel

Diversity (Group #10)
3 females, 1 male.
Majors represented: 2 Dietetics, Economics, Electrical Engineering.
Plans: 2 have internships, starting job next week, work for a year then grad school.

General (Group #6)
5 females, 3 males.
Majors represented: 2 Psychology, Art Studio, English, Hearing and Speech, Microbiology, Theater, Women's Studies.
Plans: 3 going to grad school, 2 looking for job, already has a job, plans to work for a year then go to grad school, will work for a while then wants to go to law school.

General (Group #9)
6 females, 4 males.
Majors represented: 2 Decision Information Technology, 2 Finance, 2 Journalism, Computer Science, Dietetics major, Government, Government & Politics, History, Kinesiology.
Plans: plans to take a year off then enter graduate school, 2 will attend graduate school, 3 have a job, looking for a job, will work at a non-profit organization, will be a consultant.

General (Group #11)
3 females, 1 male.
Majors represented: Economics, Finance, Individual Studies, International Business, Kinesiology, Political Science.
Plans: 3 seeking employment, attend grad school

Appendix C
Facilitator Introduction and Questions

Introduction for Senior Experience Focus Groups

Hello, my name is _____. I am a _____ (doctoral student, staff, etc.) at the University of Maryland. I will be moderating the discussion today. These are my colleagues _____ and _____, who will be taking notes. (Either introduce the notetakers, or let them introduce themselves, with a brief description similar to the moderator's). If you haven't checked in yet, please take a moment to do so now. We've invited you here because we are studying the experiences of seniors at Maryland, specifically looking at your academic experience, the climate of diversity on campus, and your preparedness for graduation. This is a focus group, which is a research method useful for gaining information about a topic in a comfortable environment. This conversation will be kept confidential. With your permission, we will record this conversation so that we can go back and listen to make sure our notes accurately reflect the conversation. Your identity will only be used to track the distribution of the gift certificates. We will provide a summary (no names included) of what we find to interested UM administrators.

In order for this to be a productive session, we would ask that you speak clearly and one at a time, and that you think about the questions and answer candidly. 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 graciously for their time, hand them their gift certificate, and have them sign the sheet saying they received it.] If you have any questions about this study, we can be reached through the person in charge of this project, Sharon La Voy, and I will hand out her business cards now.

Topic: ACADEMICS

1. Please introduce yourself to the group including name, major, and what you are planning to do after graduation.
I will now start recording the session.
2. Describe what you think are the characteristics of a solid and rewarding college experience.
3. Is succeeding as a student difficult here? How so or why not?
4. Have your academics at the University of Maryland met your expectations? How or how not?
5. Were classes taught in a manner that best impacted your learning?
     Clarification:
          Lecture
          Group discussion
          Small group work
          Lecture/discussion combination
          Hands-on activities
6. How would you describe the interactions you've had with professors/instructors during your time here?
     Clarification:
          Frequency of contact
          Types of interactions (phone, e-mail, face-to-face, class only)
          Quality of interactions
7. What has your experience been with your academic advisor?
     Clarification:
          Frequency of contact
          Useful and accurate information
          Inform student of outside opportunities
          Accessible
          Professionalism/knowledge of area
8. In your opinion, are all students at the University of Maryland offered the same academic opportunities?
     Clarification:
          Special academic opportunities such as internships
          Differences in various colleges, departments, majors
          Opportunity for specialized programs (Honors, Scholars, clusters, EDCP courses, etc.)
9. If you could give one piece of feedback to University administrators about how to best meet the academic needs of students, what advice would you give?
10. Is there anything else that we have not discussed regarding academics at the University of Maryland that you would like to share at this time?

Topic: DIVERSITY

1. Please introduce yourself to the group including name, major, and what you are planning to do after graduation.

I will now start recording the session.

2. How would you characterize a community with an optimal balance of racial and ethnic diversity?
3. How close does the University of Maryland match the picture we just painted of a diverse community?
4. Do you feel the University of Maryland is a diverse community at all levels from students to faculty to administrators?
5. What situations (i.e. residence halls, class, student groups, etc.) have been effected by the ethnic and racial diversity of the campus?
    Follow-up:
        Did you find these situations to be enriching or not, positive or negative?
6. The University's Strategic Plan includes an initiative to "ensure a university environment that promotes diversity and fosters a spirit of community among faculty, staff, and students." Given everything we have discussed today, do you think the institution is meeting its stated commitment to ethnic and racial diversity?
7. How do you feel the University of Maryland could improve upon their commitment to racial and ethnic diversity?
8. Is there anything else that we have not discussed regarding ethnic and racial diversity at the University of Maryland that you would like to share at this time?

Additional questions for Students of Color:
1. What has been your experience at the University of Maryland as a student of color?
2. How has the campus benefited from your presence?
3. What advice would you give first-year students who are similar to you?

Topic: GENERAL

1. Please introduce yourself to the group including name, major, and what you are planning to do after graduation.

I will now start recording the session.

2. With only a few weeks left in the semester, how are you feeling about graduating?
> Follow up:
> What are you nervous about?
> What are you looking forward to?

3. Reflecting back on your time at the University of Maryland, what skills do you feel you have developed that will enhance your professional or graduate school career?

4. What skills do you wish you had further developed while at the University of Maryland?

5. If you participated in an extracurricular academic experience (i.e. internship, research project, service learning, etc.), how do you think the experience will impact your marketability upon graduation?

6. Describe other out-of-class experiences that you've had which you think future employers or graduate schools will be particularly interested in.
> Clarification:
> Student groups
> Athletics
> Community Service

7. What services or experiences were not available that you wish had been provided?

8. Other institutions offer classes for seniors that relate academics to preparation for life after college (often called capstone course or culminating experience course). If the University of Maryland offered such a course, would you be interested in enrolling?

9. If you could give one piece of feedback to University administrators about how best to prepare students for life after graduation, what advice would you give?

10. Is there anything else that we have not discussed regarding preparation for life after graduation that you would like to share at this time?