Prospective Students' Insights: Identifying Barriers to Graduate School

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Abstract Given recent attention to recruitment and retention of marginalized students in Technical and Professional Communication (TPC) graduate programs, this study identifies barriers and expectations of prospective applicants. The study argues that academic institutions must prioritize the voices and needs of applicants to shape program design and recruitment practices. Drawing inspiration from the social justice turn, this research aims to decenter the recruiting institution by offering actionable recommendations that align with applicants' aspirations within the limitations of existing academic structures.

Focus groups conducted at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) reveal the challenges undergraduates face when considering graduate education, including institutional rigidity, inadequate institutional support, and financial burdens. In light of the broader context of anti-DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) laws, which complicate efforts to foster inclusive environments, this study underscores the importance of mentorship, institutional backing, and targeted recruitment initiatives in enhancing access to graduate education. We provide readers with actionable recommendations for mitigating participant-identified barriers to graduate education—even in politically restrictive states—aiming to create more supportive and welcoming environments for marginalized applicants in search of TPC graduate programs.

Keywords Access and engagement, barriers, focus group, graduate education, recruitment, retention

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The social justice turn has inspired academic programs in technical and professional communication (TPC) and related fields to recruit more students from underrepresented backgrounds into graduate programs (e.g., Popham, 2016). However, graduate faculty and program administrators cannot assume that merely diversifying graduate programs in terms of student demographics will lead to improved futures for such students, much less support the goals of justice. Gaps in support and shrinking academic job markets challenge such assumptions. For example, research shows that graduate student mentorship needs to be improved (Moeggenberg, 2022) and that the number of academic positions in rhetoric and composition and TPC-related fields have been decreasing (Ridolfo & Lindgren, n.d.). Yet many graduate programs may not be well prepared to support students who want to pursue careers outside of academia (Kelly, Tobin, & Linder, 2023), and many graduate students rack up significant debt in pursuit of a graduate degree[1] (Hanson, 2022). In this era in which graduate education does not guarantee a more stable or prosperous future, we must rethink recruitment as a social justice practice grounded in care, transparency, and structural support (Alexander & Walton, 2022; Popham, 2016).

Graduate students—particularly those from historically marginalized communities—deserve more than access to admissions; they deserve meaningful support throughout their programs to ensure the experience leads to opportunity rather than disillusionment. In other words, knowing that graduate education does not guarantee economic mobility or career stability, recruiting efforts must include sustained, meaningful support throughout the graduate experience. Our primary argument in this article is that graduate recruitment should not be about shaping students to fit the university—it should be about reshaping universities to meet the needs, goals, and lived experiences of students.

At the time of writing this manuscript, anti-DEI laws and the reversal of affirmative action challenge our collective ability to act boldly, but the approach we advocate in this article allows us to move with intentionality and care. Numerous states have enacted anti-DEI legislation that has the potential to prevent or hinder efforts to create inclusive and welcoming environments for underrepresented students within graduate programs. These laws also restrict the ability of higher education administrators to integrate diverse perspectives into curricula while limiting considerations of all relevant factors in admissions decisions (refer to Anabire et al., 2024 for a select list of these restrictions). Yet

[1] As of October 2022, the average debt among PhD holders was $132,268. Refer to Hanson (2022) for more statistical details.

these restrictions need not prevent TPC scholars from making targeted changes to our websites, curriculum, and student support services to address applicant concerns. Such targeted changes can make our programs more appealing to a wider range of potential applicants, including minoritized applicants. As Anabire et al. (2024) remind us, those with the power to reveal, reject, and replace injustice have the responsibility to do so—especially in graduate education, where the stakes are high, the labor is uneven, and the outcomes remain deeply stratified.

We argue for a flipped model of graduate recruiting that centers applicants' realities rather than institutional imperatives. While traditional recruitment models often focus on helping students navigate existing systems, we propose a both/and approach: supporting students in navigating current institutional realities *and* redesigning programs to reflect what students say they need. Such an approach acknowledges that successful recruitment is inseparable from retention (Alexander, 2023), mentorship (Moeggenberg, 2022), and career preparation—all of which require sustained institutional commitment and distributed responsibility across roles. In our flipped model, administrators must serve as strategic equity stewards: aligning resources, policies, and curriculum with evolving student needs. Recruiting professors must act as cultural agents who champion justice by advocating for applicants, mentoring with intention, and pushing departments toward curricular and structural inclusion. And graduate students, often overlooked, must be empowered as peer navigators whose lived experiences provide invaluable insight to prospective students, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds.

Academic institutions that lack flexibility and fail to accommodate the experiences and contributions of minoritized communities tend to create hostile and unwelcoming environments. With this in mind, we conducted an IRB-approved study (protocol #13098) in hopes of creating more ethical and effective graduate school recruiting and retention efforts based on the goals and expectations of prospective underrepresented applicants. Specifically, we conducted a series of focus groups at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) to learn about undergraduates' expectations of graduate school, what goals they hope graduate school could help them achieve, and what barriers they anticipate could prevent them from pursuing a graduate education (e.g., graduate certificate, master's degree, or PhD).

In the literature review below, we overview existing research on the importance of mentorship, institutional agents, and word-of-mouth recruitment in higher education. We then describe our research methods and present three findings identifying potential barriers that focus-group participants said could prevent them from applying to graduate

programs. We end with actionable recommendations that offer strategies for program administrators who are dedicated to inclusion, even in academic institutions affected by politically charged and restrictive climates. As you, dear readers, prepare to take a deep dive into the student perspectives highlighted by this research study, we ask that you give yourself permission to explore opposing viewpoints in hopes of enhancing your recruitment and retention initiatives.

Literature Review

When looking at ways to enhance or create inclusive recruitment initiatives, graduate recruiters must first explore their margin of maneuverability as an iterative process. For example, in Kristen Moore and others' (2021) piece, the authors explicated the relationship between inclusion and oppression by walking through the 4Rs: Recognize, Reveal, Reject, and Replace. Understanding that the 4Rs is an applied theory of inclusion, the authors provided an example of how to apply the theory to unjust academic paper reviewing but argue that this concept can be "deployed in a range of contexts…including the margin of maneuverability" (p. 1), which is what we have done for this manuscript. In other words, we used this applied theory to include the voices of potential applicants whose concerns should directly inform the design of our graduate programs and student-support services.

In similar fashion, Rebecca Walton and others (2019) called for TPC scholars to repurpose the use of power to address inequities. In the context of recruiting from an ethic of care, we argue that our power has the ability to influence change by creating better recruitment initiatives that center the marginalized. Relevant to considerations of recruitment and retention, self-concept[2] and self-efficacy[3] are two qualities that support the success of minoritized students in graduate programs (Meador, 2018; refer also to MacPhee et al., 2013). These qualities can be enhanced through effective mentorship and support by institutional agents who guide students through processes such as applying to graduate school. Through the support of institutional agents (Dayley, 2020; Ramirez, 2011), students get access to stakeholders who provide insider knowledge. When we say *insider knowledge*, we are referring to the information and understanding of how to successfully navigate higher education (e.g., degree timelines, where to access institutional support,

[2] In this context of graduate recruitment, *self*-concept relates to identity. In other words, our self-concept is a view we have of ourselves, which is often a different reflection of our true self and how we are perceived by the world (Hattie, 2014).

[3] When we say *self-efficacy*, we are referring to one's ability to accomplish academic tasks, which often affects educational interests (MacPhee, 2013). When recruiting from an ethic of care, it was important to us to conduct a focus group where potential applicants could explore, discuss, and share their interests, in order for us to better understand their perceptions of graduate school.

funding opportunities, to name a few). Jamal-Jared Alexander and others (2022) argued how "[m]any applicants, particularly [underrepresented students], have little access to insider knowledge" (p. 3). For example, a study by Audrey Meador (2018) examined recruitment and retention factors of minoritized students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields and highlighted the importance of mentorship programs and how "mentorship positively affected retention" (p. 68). Although Meador's qualitative case study focuses on retention in STEM fields, we contend that the same arguments can be made across *all* academic fields.

Specifically, Alexander (2023) provided TPC-related fields with a blueprint of how institutions can intervene to make their universities more socially just environments for graduate students with the programmatic implementation of mentorship organizations. These organizations often provide insider knowledge that aids students in navigating higher education. Alexander created programming for minoritized graduate students that provides them with mentorship and a behind-the-scenes look at how other underrepresented scholars (e.g., recently graduated students, all-but-dissertation [ABD] candidates, minoritized faculty and administrators, etc.) navigate higher education. Throughout his piece, Alexander asserted that having access to institutional agents who understand the lived experiences of applicants and new students is a key retention initiative that should be implemented at predominately white institutions (PWIs). Indeed, our focus group participants indicated trepidation about navigating PWIs specifically, a finding that aligns with this scholarship and reinforces the need for mentorship.

While Alexander's (2023) approaches for enacting socially just retention initiatives are fairly new, it is important to note that scholars in other fields have been enacting similar approaches since the turn of the 21st century. For example, computer science scholars, William Aspray and Andrew Bernat (2000), created a report to assist those involved in computing-related programs at research universities who are in need of improving their recruitment and retention of minoritized graduate students. They provided 25 practical recommendations in four categories for programs to consider, with each category containing a general discussion followed by a course of action. One recommendation highlights the importance of involving one's university in partnership with minority-serving institutions (e.g., HBCUs). This approach can help prospective students expand their personal networks to better prepare for graduate school while also gaining access to current graduate students to learn about the program and campus culture. Such partnerships therefore create opportunities for word-of-mouth recruitment. By *word-of-mouth recruitment*, we mean unofficial communication about one's own experience in a

program, often shared peer-to-peer. Similar to Meador's (2018) approach with STEM fields, we argue that Aspray and Bernat's research is applicable to the TPC field.

Word-of-mouth recruitment can address applicants' fear of insufficient institutional support because current graduate students can share their experiences navigating the institution. What makes word-of-mouth recruiting particularly effective is the experience level of the person offering the information (Van Hoye et al., 2016). Therefore, applicants are likely to value this information since it is based on personal experience. This social influence of recruitment can promote social capital and a sense of belonging, as those on the receiving end are often provided with a more holistic view of the school, town/city, and even the state. In a time where DEI initiatives are constantly being attacked, this holistic view is a major concern for many minoritized applicants, and certain federal laws can restrict how they maneuver and survive. Understanding that word-of-mouth is often how TPC programs attract students, we argue that using this as an applicable recruitment tool can help mitigate trepidations while also helping applicants have a better understanding of places and spaces that may (or may not) be challenging and scary—depending on their unique needs and circumstances.

Understanding that word-of-mouth can be an influential source of positive insights given by a current stakeholder at "various stages of the recruitment process, in which more immediate attraction outcomes mediate the effect on more distant outcomes" (Hoye et al., 2016; refer also to Jaidi et al., 2011), this method of recruitment provides more insightful and credible information since it often enacts the strategies of relational recruitment (Alexander & Walton, 2022). In other words, recruiting strategies that establish and build relationships can center around the lived experiences of potential applicants.

Methods

Data Collection

We designed a study to address the following research questions:

- What conceptions of graduate school are held by HBCU undergraduates who know or think they are interested in going to graduate school?
- What goals do they think graduate school will help them meet?
- What barriers do they anticipate could prevent them from beginning or completing a graduate degree?

We collected data using multiple focus groups to (a) maximize the number of participants with whom we could engage in a short period; (b) learn from the reactions, interactions,

and differences in perspectives as participants responded to each other; and (c) explore perspectives of a minoritized group that has become a focus of recruiting efforts in our field. We held a total of four focus groups, two focus groups each on two HBCU campuses in the Southeastern US in spring 2023. Every focus group was audio-video recorded and was approximately 90 minutes long.

We began by seeking common experiences likely to be shared by focus group participants: for example, asking how participants selected their undergraduate university. Discussing common experiences can build cohesiveness in a focus group, which can lead to livelier discussions (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2015). We then transitioned to the topic of focus, generally letting the conversation flow naturally as long as it was on topic. When we intervened, it was to draw quiet participants into the conversation to ensure everyone could contribute and to redirect the conversation back to relevant topics. As conversations wound down, we introduced a new question or a follow-up question to elicit more detailed responses. We asked the following questions of every focus group: What do you think grad school is good for? What do *you* hope to get out of grad school? Do you know where you might study? What information would help you choose schools to apply to? What might keep you from grad school? Refer to the appendix for the complete focus group prompt, including follow-up questions, to which we referred during data collection. During the discussion, we took notes on not only the spoken conversation but also nonverbal communication: e.g., surprised looks or expressions of agreement. We ended the focus group discussion by asking if anyone wanted to share something they thought we should know but had not had a chance to say yet. After the focus group discussion, we distributed brief paper surveys to collect demographic information.

For reciprocity, we gave each participant a $50 gift card and met with undergraduate students to share information about graduate school, preparing strong application materials, and selecting a graduate program. On one campus, this took the form of serving as guest speakers in an undergraduate technical communication course; on the other campus, we held an information session on graduate school applications open to any interested undergraduate (not just participants). We also shared our contact information with research participants for any follow-up questions and subsequently met with participants over Zoom to answer questions about selecting graduate programs.

Participant Demographics

Given the exigence of this study (i.e., efforts to diversify the field of technical communication in general and TPC graduate programs specifically), participant

demographics are highly relevant, so we asked about a range of characteristics on the paper survey. We requested some information, such as gender and race/ethnicity, with open-answer questions to enable participants to self-describe. Allowing participants to self-describe, especially for race/ethnicity and gender identity, follows best practices of inclusive survey design (ALBA, 2023), as does the practice of requesting as little information as needed to address the research question (Brown, 2023). Therefore, instead of requesting that participants write in a specific sexual identity, for example, we asked whether the participant identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, offering answer options including *Yes*, *No*, *I don't know*, and *Decline to answer*. We note that such best practices are essential for all studies involving survey instruments, not only those investigating inclusion-related research questions.

A total of 28 undergraduate students participated in the four focus groups. All participants self-described as Black (n=18) or African American (n=10). They ranged in age from 18–24, with both the average and median age being approximately 21 years. Eight participants identified as male, 16 as female, and four as non-binary[4]. Four participants identified as a person having a disability, nine as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, seven as first-generation college students, and 11 would be the first in their family to attend graduate school. These responses suggest that the focus group participants varied in meaningful ways, occupying multiple, layered positions of marginalization and privilege that may be relevant to graduate school recruiting and retention. For example, according to the most recent US census data, only 26.2% of Black Americans 25 years or older had earned at least a bachelor's degree (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2025), but a full 75% of our participants were not the first in their family to earn a college degree. This suggests that our participants may be better equipped with personal networks to help them navigate institutions of higher education than many Black Americans. Context such as this is useful for interpreting findings and for estimating the degree to which the findings may apply to underrepresented graduate program applicants more broadly.

Data Analysis

The recordings were transcribed first by AI, followed by two rounds of human correction, referencing the video as needed to confirm accuracy. We then conducted a thematic analysis, driven by our research questions. After individually reviewing the transcripts repeatedly, we jointly identified broad themes by which to code the data. To support

[4] All binary participants wrote in their sex, while the four non-binary participants wrote in their gender.

validity, we ensured that themes were not only prevalent in the data in terms of frequency (i.e., a sizable amount of data) but also in distribution (i.e., mentioned by multiple participants in every focus group). We jointly coded the data, coming to consensus on each application of a code and refining code definitions as appropriate. To support the analysis, for each piece of coded data, we included a brief restatement of the codable unit in our own words and a brief explanation of its relationship to the code. After the first round of coding, we reviewed the coded data to evaluate coherence within each code. Subsequently, we repeated the same analysis process for two of the codes to develop (and code for) subcodes.

Findings

This manuscript reports a subset of findings related to potential barriers to graduate school:

- **Finding 1: *Institutional Rigidity*** Participants were concerned that institutional structures were incompatible with the needs of their lives. Examples include narrow curriculum and rigid degree timelines that were not designed to easily pause one's progress toward the degree.
- **Finding 2: *Insufficient Institutional Support*** Participants were concerned about having sufficient support to navigate problems. Examples include poor advising and administrative snafus that affect students' progress toward their degrees.
- **Finding 3: *Financial Constraints*** Participants were concerned about being able to afford graduate school. Examples include high costs of housing and reluctance to take on additional debt.

Institutional rigidity: I'm concerned that institutional structures are incompatible with the needs of my life.

One of the potential barriers that participants mentioned could prevent them from applying to graduate school was that educational institutions are inflexible in ways that do not accommodate their lives. They spoke about this barrier in different ways: inflexible degree timelines, inflexible curricula, and geographical inflexibility.

Participants mentioned that flexible degree timelines would make graduate school more compelling. Most undergraduates may be required to take full course loads. This requirement can make it difficult to balance academic and personal commitments. This experience has led to participants' desire for graduate programs that offer flexible degree timelines. Often, it is scholarships or financial aid, not the university, that requires students to maintain full-time status. However, if students are unaware of this distinction,

they may not realize that attending graduate school part-time is a viable option. A participant was surprised when their father explained that with pursuing a master's program, they could decide the pace of their degree and complete the program on their own terms:

> I was on the phone [with] my dad yesterday, and I was like, "What, what if I have to, like, work full-time before I get to, like, start my master's? I don't wanna go back to full-time right now. Like, I'm having fun. I'm doing this." And my dad was like, "You don't have to take a full course load." And I was like, "I don't?;" he was like, "You don't. Like, you can do it at whatever pace you want to."

For this participant, programs with flexible timelines will appeal to them, making graduate school more immediately accessible since it would not necessarily require a full-time commitment. This participant had previously assumed that graduate school would mirror their undergraduate experience, with rigid requirements for full-time enrollment. As this participant demonstrated, misunderstandings about funding requirements versus university policies can shape perceptions of graduate education. In reality, part-time enrollment may be possible depending on the chosen funding sources. This comment highlights the need for mentorship in guiding undergraduate students through the realities of pursuing a graduate education. Mentorship about pursuing a graduate education can help dispel misconceptions by providing firsthand insights into the flexibility of graduate study, including options for part-time enrollment and self-paced degree completion. By engaging with mentors, undergraduate students can make more informed decisions about pursuing graduate education, alleviating apprehensions based on inaccurate assumptions.

Also, when asked where participants think they might go to pursue a graduate degree, some participants mentioned they wanted to go to programs that offer the ability to extend their degree timelines or pause their progress toward the degree:

> When it comes to my PhD, I'm looking literally anywhere and everywhere, um, and keeping my options open and looking for places that offer really good benefits and also offer, um, kind of extended time to finish. Like, one of the programs in Chicago offers nine years to finish your dissertation. I don't think it's going to take that long, but life happens. And if life happened real hard, then I, like, I have some [wiggle] room. And that is intriguing to me.

Earlier in this focus group, this participant shared that they were in remission from cancer, and their life experience had already made them aware that unexpected challenges could

slow their progress toward completing a university degree. While they may not anticipate needing the whole nine years provided by the program to complete their PhD, a flexible degree timeline provides the necessary wiggle room to accommodate unexpected life events, ensuring they can extend their program if needed to finish their degree successfully. The fact that they do not expect to take the full nine years but still find the option appealing underlines how inflexible degree timelines could create stress and uncertainty for students and can pose a barrier to getting a graduate degree.

Participants also expressed a desire for flexibility in resuming their studies after pausing their degree. One participant shared concerns about the challenges of improving their GPA after taking time off to give birth:

> When I came here in 2015—it's 2023 now, and I still haven't graduated, but—so when I first came here, I was very active. I was a student leader, everything. Um, I got pregnant my sophomore year, flunked out all my classes. […] I've already messed up so much trying to bring that GPA back up. Like, it's easy to let it go down, but trying to build it back up is twice as hard.

This participant's experience shows how inflexible degree timelines in undergraduate programs can create significant barriers to completion. After becoming pregnant in their sophomore year and not passing their classes, they found it difficult to recover academically. Even years later, they were still struggling to graduate, perhaps due to institutional constraints that did not accommodate non-linear academic journeys. The expectation that students progress within a fixed timeframe, without sufficient mechanisms for GPA recovery or extended degree completion, ultimately made graduate school feel out of reach for this participant. We searched the website of this participant's undergraduate institution but did not find any explicit information on how students can pause their degree when life happens. We suspected that institutions might have information or policies regarding pausing one's degree, but this information might be hard to find or for students to access, hence creating a situation where students think they do not have the option to pause their degree. The participant's concern highlights the need for graduate programs to be more flexible in timelines, and to be explicit and clear about such flexibility and the policies governing it to ensure that students have the opportunity to complete their degrees despite life's unexpected challenges.

Furthermore, participants expressed concerns about inflexible curricula, particularly the limited flexibility in course selection. Some participants shared a desire to engage in enrichment activities beyond their graduate programs, such as taking piano, skiing, and Taekwondo courses. These activities, often associated with the middle class, represent

opportunities for personal development and enjoyment that some students may not have had access to previously but are interested in pursuing as they approach graduate school. For some participants, the desire to engage in such extracurricular activities was not simply about hobbies; it reflected a longing for enrichment opportunities that an inflexible curriculum does not support.

This example highlights how inflexible curricula can limit students' ability to explore interests beyond their core academic requirements. The concern also emphasizes the potential disconnect between the experiences of minoritized students, who may not have had access to such enrichment activities, and the opportunities available to them in graduate school. Such opportunities need not be credit-bearing. Whereas a typical liberal arts undergraduate education is broad, including requirements well outside a student's major, one key difference between most graduate and undergraduate degrees is the stronger disciplinary focus of a graduate degree. We suggest that universities clearly communicate the range of enrichment activities available to graduate students whether they are credit-bearing or extracurricular so students can make the most of their graduate education and engage in well-rounded personal and professional growth.

Participants also appreciated programs that allow for specialization and the creation of academic paths tailored to their career goals. Many of the participants resonated with the direct quote below:

> The programs that have caught my eye the most are the programs that offer an umbrella and then, uh, certifications or, like, concentrations. Um, because that shows me that, like, there's a kind of like a pendulum that you can kind of ride through, um, to make it so it fits you more.

This participant expressed a strong preference for customizable programs, which suggests that inflexible, one-size-fits-all degree structures may not meet student needs. The ability to "ride a pendulum" implies a desire for flexibility in shaping their education to align with personal interests and career goals. Such flexibility need not be extreme but rather could offer a limited set of tracks or paths that could allow students to customize their degree toward a particular career goal. Such tracks could include courses both within and outside of technical communication programs: for example, drawing upon curriculum in data analytics, graphic design, or instructional technology, for example, to appropriately supplement technical and professional communication curriculum in support of students' professional goals. When graduate programs lack this flexibility, students may feel constrained by narrow academic tracks that do not fully accommodate their goals, and

such constraints can discourage prospective students from applying to such programs. Another participant speaking on the ability to specialize in a particular area of study said:

> I would probably say if there's an opportunity to do research, like, with a master's degree, like, under a professor or something like that [...] like, along with getting your master's. Like, I know some schools will allow you to actually go out if you want to do your own research on a certain subject or topic or whatever, and it can be, like, along with your master's.

This comment illustrates how the flexibility to pursue one's own research while completing a master's degree can significantly enhance a student's experience. The participant values graduate programs that allow them to engage in research projects alongside their coursework, seeing integrated research experience as a necessary element of a flexible curriculum.

Lastly, when asked what appeals to the participants in graduate programs, one participant compared the curriculum of two universities, explaining that more flexible curriculum makes the program at one university more appealing:

> [University name] caught my attention a little bit. They were talking about how you can, um, with your Bachelor's degree here at [University name], you can take that and transfer over to them and go into a graduate program.

This participant was particularly drawn to a university that allowed students to transfer directly from their bachelor's degree into a graduate program, suggesting that inflexible curricula at other institutions may make the transition to graduate studies more difficult. Some programs may require students to navigate complex admission processes, fulfill additional prerequisites, or repeat coursework, which can discourage prospective applicants. By contrast, institutions that offer clear, structured pathways from undergraduate to graduate studies remove unnecessary hurdles.

Finally, the desire for online or distance graduate programs was prominent among participants, as these options would enable them to stay close to family and avoid the need to relocate. One participant, who had experienced recent health challenges and was concerned about COVID-19 protocols, found online graduate programs offering a variety of courses and concentrations particularly appealing. Programs with flexible and extended timelines for completion also attracted this participant's interest:

> A big barrier is trying to find a place that I can do majority distance, and there aren't that many programs in the field that I want to enter that offer that. And it's hard to

> figure out who would be willing to be accommodating because I also don't wanna move right now. So trying to figure out how I can, like, stay in my community and also move forward, um, without, I guess, getting in over my head and, like, working with people who don't have the, um, like you brought up earlier, not having the infrastructure to support what it would mean to have distance students.

For this participant, staying within their community and avoiding situations where they might feel overwhelmed or unsupported was central to their decision-making when choosing a graduate program. The ability to remain geographically stable and close to home while still receiving the necessary academic and institutional support was a key factor in determining which programs felt accessible and viable.

This finding highlights the importance of institutions designing programs that acknowledge and accommodate the diverse lives and needs of students. Institutions with all the inflexibilities mentioned in this finding may discourage potential students from applying to their graduate programs or completing such programs.

Insufficient institutional support: I'm concerned I won't have the support I need to navigate the institution when I encounter a problem.

In this finding, focus group participants experienced two distinct scenarios:

1. Some participants encountered problems but did not receive sufficient institutional support to navigate them. This lack of support led to concerns about their ability to succeed in graduate school, particularly when considering attending a PWI far from home.
2. Other participants faced challenges but received adequate institutional support, which made them feel valued and confident in their ability to complete their degrees.

Some participants expressed frustration and anxiety over their inability to progress academically, describing a lack of effective support from institutional agents, such as academic advisors, as a primary barrier to achieving their academic milestones on time. For example, participants mentioned that they often find themselves unsure about which courses to take to stay on track for graduation. This uncertainty was compounded by the actions of some academic advisors who, rather than providing clear guidance, seemed ill-informed and unhelpful:

> I kind of take my education [in]to my own hands 'cause my school, they said, "Yeah, I'll get you an associate's degree." But as I got closer to achieving it, [...] when I started getting close to it, they, you know, it was, I would get emails back like, "I really don't know if you should take this." Or, "Yeah, you can take this," and then two weeks later, the class gets canceled or something like that.

This participant's experience with academic advising reflects a broader challenge faced by many students in the study. Unclear guidance, inconsistent communication, and last-minute course cancellations created unnecessary obstacles, ultimately forcing them to take their education into their own hands. Similarly, another participant recounted discovering, over a year later, that their advisor had retired, leaving them without an advisor to guide them:

> But, like, when I started out, my advisor, she was not that great. She had retired, and I didn't even know she retired and, like, I didn't find out 'til a year and a half later. So, like, I was, I've basically been my own advisor.

The institution didn't provide the support this participant needed in completing their degree; they had to navigate the institution on their own. The registrar's or advising office may have failed to inform the participant about their new advisor; this gap in communication seems to reflect a systemic, institutional problem. These experiences highlight the lack of support from institutions—where disorganization, poor communication, and bureaucratic inefficiencies make it harder to navigate degree requirements. When students can't rely on their institutions for clear advising and structured pathways, they face delays, frustrations, and uncertainty. This situation can lead them to believe that graduate studies is unattainable, fearing that they will encounter the same institutional failures that hindered their undergraduate experience, ultimately discouraging them from pursuing a graduate degree.

Another kind of problem that some participants encountered with insufficient institutional support was when an error on the part of the university directly impeded some participants from pursuing their desired major. A specific example was when a housing mistake by the university led to some of the participants being removed from their majors, causing uncertainty about whether they could get back on track to complete the degree they originally wanted or whether they should pivot to a new major:

> I truly do not know what it was, but something messed up to where the system was wrong. I just got screwed. I think it was me and one of my other friends, we, a couple people just got screwed. We got dropped from our majors. And either you had to run

> the risk—Like my friend [name], she didn't get housing until September, and that was because she decided to stick with her major and just work through it. I'm an out-of-state student. I was like, "I can't." [...] I was supposed to graduate this semester. But since I switched, I gotta graduate next fall. So I had to basically add an extra semester that I had to pay out of, out of my own pocket.

This participant's experience illustrates how a lack of institutional support can disrupt students' academic progress, sometimes forcing them to change majors at the last minute. A housing crisis led to the participant being dropped from all their biology classes, forcing a last-minute major change just to secure a place to live. Instead of receiving institutional support, they were left scrambling between departments, desperately trying to enroll in any available courses. The university's failure to prevent or rectify these errors had severe consequences: increased financial burden and an extended graduation timeline. The student who was able to major in their desired field had local support—they could live with family while waiting for on-campus housing. In contrast, the more vulnerable participant, an out-of-state student without those resources, was forced to change majors just to secure housing. This example highlights not only the consequences of institutional inefficiencies but also how they disproportionately impact the most vulnerable students. Participants expressed concerns that they would be even more vulnerable at a PWI far from home, without the networks they had relied on as undergraduates to navigate these institutional barriers.

This lack of support and the frustration of constantly navigating bureaucratic obstacles makes students question their ability to succeed in graduate school. If this kind of institutional failure happens at the undergraduate level, students fear it will only continue or worsen in graduate programs, discouraging them from further pursuing advanced degrees. The uncertainty and last-minute changes contribute to a sense of instability and distrust in the institution: (a) whether it provides accurate information, and (b) whether it cares about students. Further, participants expected to receive a higher level of care at an HBCU than at a PWI, increasing their trepidation regarding graduate programs at PWIs specifically.

In contrast, some of the participants highlighted several valuable resources, including counseling and development services, career services, student support programs, community engagement opportunities, tutoring, mentors who check in on them, and academic coaches who advocate for their success. Additionally, the TRIO Student Support

Services STEM[5] went above and beyond to assist students, particularly first-generation students, to ensure they receive the resources they need to thrive. These services play a crucial role in motivating and supporting students across all areas of their lives and helping them navigate institutions.

In summary, this finding revealed how lack of institutional support created significant barriers for some students. Participants reported experiences where they were subjected to poor advising, lack of communication, and administrative errors that disrupted their academic progress. These experiences often led to unnecessary delays, added financial burdens, and forced changes to their academic paths, ultimately affecting their confidence in the institution's ability to support them. These institutional failures not only hinder students' ability to graduate on time but also create doubts about their potential to pursue further education, especially graduate school. The availability of support where students felt they mattered to the institution also created an environment where students' needs are met and will be relevant to their decision on which graduate program to apply to.

Financial constraints: I'm concerned that I can't afford graduate school.

It did not surprise us that participants believed financial constraints could pose a barrier to grad school. However, the ways participants framed these concerns were insightful and sophisticated, adding nuance to our understanding. When discussing financial barriers, participants suggested that (a) they found paying for graduate school more daunting than paying for their undergraduate education, (b) that they want to be reasonably confident they can afford to complete a graduate degree before they apply to the program, and (c) that financial concerns are intertwined with mental health concerns.

Several participants suggested that paying for a graduate degree seemed even more challenging than paying for their undergraduate degree. For example, one participant's parents were paying toward their undergraduate expenses, but that was a stretch for their family:

> I have a twin brother, so we're always in school at the same time. And my parents have been struggling to, like, afford, like, our undergrad. So graduate [school] is just like a different animal, and I don't know if, like, we can afford it.

[5] TRIO SSS STEM is a federally funded student support service for first-generation college students and students from low-income families who are pursuing science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) and health science fields.

For this participant, their undergraduate education is possible with their parents' help, but if their parents are unable to contribute toward their graduate degree, then it seems out of reach. Relatedly, many participants have student loans and are reluctant to take on additional debt for graduate school:

> Well, I just spent all this money going to undergraduate, right? Now I'm in debt, right? And I have to start working, and I have to be a productive member of society. No one cares that I have aspirations and dreams to be something bigger. You know, I have to start, you know, paying taxes and making money. And I still have this burden of, like, "Oh man, I have to start paying for this [grad school] as well? I don't know how much this is gonna cost, as well as working on top of that!"

Comments like these suggest the strategies participants are using to pay for their undergraduate education may not be possible or palatable ways of paying for a graduate degree, making graduate school feel more daunting.

When participants were high school students looking ahead to college, their high school teachers and guidance counselors often played a key role in helping them locate and apply for scholarships. These support networks also proactively reached out to high school students and initiated this support themselves. In fact, several participants explained they selected their undergraduate institution largely because of its free application week *and* that their high school guidance counselor or a university representative met with students that week to help them fill out the application. Such experiences highlight the importance of outreach to share insider knowledge, such as applying to a particular university during a particular week. In contrast with their high school experience, many participants said they feel much less aware of how to pursue grad school funding:

> I feel like it just needs to be a better way for us to find those resources because everything, we hate to say, but everything trickles down to money at the end of the day. So, like, some people could use a grant and not know nothing about it.

In summary, the strategies that helped participants secure funding for their undergraduate degrees were not applicable to graduate school, which left many feeling uncertain about how they would find funding or even calculate the total cost of a graduate degree. This pattern in the data suggests that graduate program coordinators committed to diversifying their graduate student body should not assume that minoritized potential applicants can use the same support networks and strategies for securing graduate school funding that they used for their undergraduate education. It also suggests that proactive outreach and education about funding mechanisms specific to graduate education could be important

strategies for addressing the concerns of underrepresented potential applicants like our research participants.

A second point that arose when participants discussed financial concerns was that they wanted to be reasonably confident they would have the funding to complete a graduate degree before they apply to the program. For example, when we asked one of the focus groups what might make it hard to go to graduate school, the first response was, "[To] maintain the funds for graduate school. 'Cause I mean you, you could get to college here for the first year and then the second year roll around and then you're a fish outta water." Responses like this indicate that participants are concerned not just about initial financial hurdles, such as moving costs, but also about securing ongoing funding throughout their time in a graduate program. And focus group participants required information about ongoing funding earlier in the process than we had expected: when deciding where to apply. The response below is representative of what we heard across the focus groups in response to the question, "What information would help you decide where to apply?":

> Scholarship funding. Just benefits that are offered to students who enroll in their master's program or additional opportunities that can, like, make their program more, more opportune for you. Like, oh, you guys are offering money and just stuff that'll help me. It'll make the process of me being a master [student] in your program easier than someone else's program. I think if they just, you know, clearly state this information, and they put it somewhere that's easy to find, then it's gonna be easier for me to say I like this school better than this school.

In other words, focus group participants are seeking detailed information about funding packages when weighing various programs, and they are doing so *not* to decide which acceptance offer to take but to decide where to apply in the first place. This means when graduate program websites lack detailed funding information, they may be turning away potential applicants without even realizing it.

Some readers may think these potential applicants need to be educated about norms, such as applying to many graduate programs and awaiting acceptances before comparing funding packages. However, focus group participants helped us understand that such norms may not work for some applicants—especially those who lack financial safety nets such as savings accounts or family members who could cover their costs in an emergency. Focus group participants shared examples of emergencies—such as a health problem, unexpected pregnancy, or unanticipated caretaking demands—that could derail or delay their education:

> When you have a health scare, which happened to me last, uh, summer, the money that I was going to have to, like, take my GRE and, you know, housing and stuff like that was out the window. And I was like, "Oh my goodness, like, I'm gonna be graduating in May. I, I don't have time for this, right?!" So now I have to, like, wait a little bit longer, maybe like a year to actually go to graduate school. So I'm just trying to financially get back on my feet.

Participants are savvy adults who recognized the financial risks involved with delaying their entry into the workforce by making a multi-year commitment to attend graduate school. For such a risk to be worth taking, they wanted to be reasonably confident of sufficient ongoing funding before paying application fees.

Third, when participants discussed financial barriers to graduate school, they often linked financial concerns to mental health—a linkage which graduate program administrators should be sensitive to. Participants used words like *stressed, stressful, struggling, burden, hard*, and *biggest concern* when discussing financial considerations. When asked specifically what might make graduate programs at PWIs appealing enough to apply, responses often focused on financial support:

> Researcher: What would you look for from a PWI grad program? What would make you apply?[6]
>
> Participant A: Scholarships would make me apply.
>
> Participant B: Scholarships.
>
> Participant C: Grants. Money.
>
> Participant D: Scholarship. Definitely a scholarship.

Yet financial considerations were not the only relevant factor in deciding where to apply:

> I think sometimes it's hard to find particularly, like, grad programs at HBCUs that are not underfunded. Like, a lot of them, like, when I look at PWIs, it's crazy. [...] I think sometimes that can be stressful if you don't go to a school that's known and doesn't have the same resources. So you're, like, "Oh I don't want to go to this school because what if they treat me awful 'cause I'm Black or I'm a Black woman." And then you want to go to this other school 'cause you're like, "Oh, there's Black

[6] This question emerged based on the focus group's discussion, allowing for follow-up questions to suss out more information from participants.

> women that are graduates here." But they don't have the, the funding, and they don't have, like, the same safety net that a PWI would have.

The comparison above explicitly weighs the likelihood of experiencing racism but receiving more funding at PWIs versus experiencing more sense of belonging yet receiving less funding at HBCUs. Such comparisons illustrate how financial and mental health considerations can directly conflict, especially for minoritized applicants.

In contrast, other participants shared a cost-saving strategy that supports their mental health: selecting a university in a region where they can stay with relatives. When we asked one focus group, "What might make it hard to go to grad school?" the first two responses specifically focused on financial concerns, with one participant saying it would be especially challenging to attend a program where they couldn't save money by living with their parents. A third participant extended this idea by sharing their experience of transferring to an HBCU after experiencing mental health challenges at a school farther from home:

> Um, I'm lucky enough to be able to stay with my mom and come here. I, um, commute. I don't live anywhere near here and, um, life, it can be hard. Um, that's one reason why I did transfer here because when I was at my old school, my mental health was really bad, and I did not care if I, like, failed. I was just so worried about getting better. And now that I'm here, I can say my mental health is a lot better. Uh, there are struggles that I do have, and I do have a therapist to talk to, but even now it sometimes still is hard. But my grades are better. Um, and my mom, she sometimes, she sometimes get it, she gets it and other times she doesn't. And, um, it's just like, "Do I wanna continue to try and do this for myself or do I wanna, um, give up?" So I think just, like, being at home and being able to commute is a lot easier for me because I'm with someone who can, I can try to talk to rather than being cooped up into a small space and just, like, struggling.

This quote shows that for some potential applicants, living at home is not only a cost-saving measure but also a mental health necessity.

In summary, it's not surprising that participants were concerned that financial barriers could prevent them from pursuing their goal of earning a graduate degree. But thoughtful analysis of *how* participants discussed these concerns reveals important nuances. Specifically, participants felt that paying for graduate school seemed even more challenging than paying for an undergraduate degree, participants were seeking reasonable assurance that they could afford to complete a graduate program before they

applied to it, and participants often linked financial and mental health considerations. Understanding participant perspectives at this level of detail can help program administrators address financial concerns, potentially broadening the pool of applications they receive, improving the diversity of their graduate program, and conveying care to potential applicants.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Technical communication graduate programs have long been concerned with meeting student needs, particularly in terms of offering career-relevant curriculum (Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2001; Meese & Wahlstrom, 1988; Melonçon, 2009). Our focus group study demonstrated that this concern continues to be pertinent. In fact, additional findings of this research which are not reported here include participant concerns that graduate school should offer sufficient career advancement to be worth the investment of time and money. But in investigating potential barriers to both *applying to* and completing graduate school, we found that more comprehensive support is required to ethically recruit and retain underrepresented graduate students. The focus group participants helped us to understand both more fully and more concretely some of the potential barriers they believed could prevent them from applying to graduate school, or at least from applying to particular graduate programs. These anticipated barriers are summarized below:

Institutional rigidity can make graduate programs less compelling to potential applicants, particularly those who are caregivers, those who are paying for their own education, and those who experience life changes during graduate school. Yet we suspect that many university stakeholders do not realize their program website and other materials may signal that the design of their program or institution is incompatible with many potential applicants' lives. Indeed, not a single focus group participant indicated that they had reached out or were planning to reach out to grad school representatives to inquire about potential flexibility that was not mentioned on the program website. Rather, several participants said that if a program appears to lack the flexibility they were seeking, they simply did not consider applying to such programs. This suggests to us that institutions may be unaware they are turning potential applicants away.

Focus group participants shared multiple examples of problems that required **institutional support** to navigate—problems they had experienced firsthand and that friends, family members, or classmates had experienced. Participants related how difficult and frustrating it was to navigate problems caused by incorrect information or other institutional errors, despite being at an HBCU where many participants had longstanding

family connections and nearby personal networks to draw upon. Given these challenges, participants feared that navigating their institution in graduate school–particularly at a PWI far from home–would be even harder. It should come as no surprise to those of us who work at universities that these institutions do not always work as designed. Yet we suspect it is rare indeed for university websites and other materials to convey the institutional support systems that students can draw upon when mistakes are made. One possible reason for this gap may be that program administrators and other university stakeholders are unaware of this concern and its potential for preventing people from applying to programs where they do not know what resources to draw upon should they run into problems requiring institutional support.

The third potential barrier to graduate school was mentioned by every participant in all four focus groups: **financial constraints**. Participants were concerned they simply could not afford to earn a graduate degree. Although tuition costs were mentioned, it was living expenses that participants mentioned most frequently—particularly housing costs. In examining participants' language, we note they used the term "scholarships" almost exclusively when discussing desired financial support rather than terms more commonly associated with graduate school funding such as *fellowships, teaching assistantships* or *graduate instructorships,* and *research assistantships*. As we mentioned in the methods section, the percentage of research participants who were not first-generation college students was almost three times greater than in the broader US population of Black Americans. Thus, these participants may be better equipped with networks that can impart insider knowledge than most minoritized potential applicants, so we find this language pattern to be significant. Program administrators seeking to encourage applications from members of underrepresented groups should consider defining/explaining terms like fellowships and assistantships to more clearly convey available resources to help students pay for graduate school.

Given the potential barriers above, we recommend ways that programs and the institutions that house them could mitigate these potential barriers, and we explicitly note the importance of making potential applicants aware of these efforts. Below, our recommendations are organized chronologically, grouped by (a) actions targeting support for applicants before and during the application process and (b) actions focused on supporting graduate students during onboarding and across their time to degree.

Applicant support: Before and during the application process

Participants said they are seeking graduate degree programs that allow for the customization to tailor curriculum to their interests. We emphasize here that customizable curriculum should be communicated to *applicants*, not just to current graduate students, as participants shared that they are seeking information about how to customize their education to their own career goals as part of the process for deciding where to apply to graduate school.

Such customization could be enabled in a variety of ways. For example, revising more traditional master's curriculum into a suite of stackable certificates could not only allow graduate students to choose certificates that most interest them—thereby customizing their degree—but also could enable students to earn smaller credentials on the way to the final degree. If "life happens" and students find themselves unable to finish a master's degree, they could still complete a credential to enhance their resumes, making them more marketable for promotions or new professional opportunities even without completing a graduate degree. However, we recognize that a comprehensive redesign of graduate curriculum may not be possible at every institution, and targeted tweaks of existing curriculum also can create opportunities for students to customize their degree. So, we note as well that more traditional approaches to curricular flexibility could also be relevant: e.g., offering tracks within a degree, building in room for electives, offering directed studies, and facilitating graduate internships.

When faculty members revise graduate program curriculum to enable customization, they should also consider questions of career relevance. Given the expansiveness of technical communication and the fragmented nature of our field's graduate curriculum (Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2001), it can be challenging for a single program to adequately prepare students for diverse roles across industries. To inform curricular updates, Lisa Melonçon (2009) recommended that TPC graduate programs review their curriculum in partnership with stakeholders such as employers and alumni who have their fingers on the pulse of local hiring demands. She specifically suggested considering local factors in updating curricular foci, a recommendation that resonates with our findings in this study. Local factors are especially relevant to applicants hoping to attend graduate school close to home, since many of these graduate students would go on to seek careers within or near their communities.

The field of technical communication does not map to a corresponding job title like "technical communicator," nor even onto a single career path or industry (Brumberger & Lauer, 2020). So, it can be especially important to scaffold applicants in recognizing relevant career possibilities and, subsequently, in planning their degree to support specific career goals. For example, a student with coursework in user experience (UX), qualitative research methods, and visual design may be well positioned to pursue industry positions such as Interaction Designer or Information Architect, whereas a student focusing on inclusive pedagogy and writing with AI may be better positioned for an academic career or positions in instructional design. Therefore, in addition to simply conveying on a program website that degree customization is possible, we suggest programs illustrate such customization with a few example degree plans. Ideally, example degree plans would link to articles about corresponding careers as well as alumni spotlights, conveying how the degree prepared them for their current career.

We also recommend that, in online materials and conversations with potential applicants, program administrators share how existing structures can support graduate students, especially in navigating surprises or customizing their graduate school experience. For example, at Utah State University, the English Department director of graduate studies (DGS) meets individually with graduate students every semester to check on their progress toward the degree, review upcoming course offerings, and answer questions. This meeting is where the DGS can suggest strategies like applying for a leave of absence or registering for summer credits to allow for a reduced load in the fall. And because tuition costs are often calculated based on the number of credits for which students are registered, these meetings also allow the DGS to help students recognize how to minimize their costs: for example, registering for an additional course one semester to take advantage of tuition breaks. If a graduate program includes structured support such as annual or semesterly one-on-one meetings with the graduate director, program administrators should not save that information for orientation, but should share such information on websites and messages to applicants.

Focus group participants also told us that resource gaps can signal to potential applicants that the institution is not designed to support students like them. The most common examples we heard from focus group participants related to their needs as parents. For example, campus housing may be available for single students or for married couples with or without children, but not for single parents. Similarly, struggles with securing affordable childcare on or near campus can create barriers for graduate student parents. Healthcare coverage is another potential gap area: Certain types of coverage (such as gender-

affirming care, fertility treatment, and mental health support) may not be covered. We note that other resource gaps may disproportionately affect international students. For example, whereas many universities offer free income tax preparation for students who are U.S. citizens, international students are often excluded from this support despite the fact that their income tax preparation is likely to be more complex and they are less likely to be familiar with US income tax processes. Again, because focus group participants were discussing these resources in the context of selecting where to apply to graduate school, we suggest it is important for programs to share such information not only with current students but also make it available to potential applicants.

Of all the barriers focus groups discussed, resource gaps may be the most difficult to address because, ideally, they call for structural solutions at the university level. We hope this article will be useful to university administrators making the case for structural solutions to better support underrepresented graduate students, serving as research-based evidence of how resource gaps pose barriers not only to completing a graduate degree but even to applying for admission. In addition to advocating for structural solutions at the university level, we encourage faculty to intervene in tactical ways as possible. Such approaches could include posting information about non-university community resources on graduate program websites, for example, affordable childcare programs, housing support services, low-cost/no-cost tax preparation, affinity groups supporting veteran students or international students or single-parent students. We also encourage programs to get creative in using one-time money in ways that can have an outsized positive impact on multiple student groups. Specific needs and opportunities vary, of course, but as an example, several Utah State entities split the cost to offer a free student shuttle to international grocery stores in Salt Lake City. Such support not only meets immediate needs but also signals care for students, indicating to potential applicants that the institution could, indeed, be a good fit for them.

Student support: Onboarding through degree completion

Other information may be more appropriate for supporting current graduate students than potential applicants. For example, focus group participants said they wanted flexibility in their degree timeline. Some participants offered examples of life events that could pause their progress toward the degree, such as having children or falling ill, whereas other participants wanted to slow their progress toward degree to savor their graduate school experience by conducting additional research, taking electives outside their home department, and building up their professional networks. The specific circumstances experienced by graduate students and their specific funding sources will affect what

possibilities are available for modifying their degree timeline, so we suggest that addressing flexible degree timelines may be largely suited to current graduate students rather than applicants. In general, our recommendations regarding timelines are to make existing policies as clear as possible, including any cascading effects on issues like funding. For example, it is common for graduate programs to have policies in place regarding a leave of absence (the ability to pause one's progress toward the degree without incurring fees or losing one's academic standing and with the ability to take up one's progress toward the degree without financial penalty or reapplying to the program). We encourage graduate programs to make such policies easy to find and to define/explain terms like "leave of absence" or "hardship withdrawal" for first-generation college students and others new to this vocabulary.

Similarly, programs should make clear the implications of decisions like changing one's status from full-time to part-time. Such decisions can affect a student's eligibility for funding such as assistantships, scholarships, and federal financial aid, as well as related financial matters like student loan deferment. Some US states have laws prohibiting the awarding of financial aid for courses that are not required for the student's major, which has implications for students seeking to savor their graduate school experience by studying a wide range of topics. This financial aid constraint is another reason to consider building electives into graduate programs and promoting non-credit–bearing opportunities such as student clubs, internships, and affinity groups.

Utah State PhD students have an annual review with Technical Communication and Rhetoric faculty to assess not only their degree progress but corresponding goals relevant to each student's career objectives, for example, plans for publications, conference proposals, professional networking, and research design. These regular individual meetings offer built-in opportunities for students to share when a change in their circumstances may affect their progress toward degree. These meetings also offer opportunities to discuss any conflicting information or advice students may have received and provide institutional support to help students navigate problems. In these meetings, program administrators and other faculty can answer questions, interpret policy, and help students think about their options. Such regular support can also help students feel comfortable reaching out at other times of year if they encounter institutional problems and need support navigating them.

Graduate student peers are also valuable resources for learning how to navigate institutions. Often the most useful advice for navigating problems comes from a peer who has navigated a similar situation at the same institution. We note that peer mentorship can

take different forms and that each approach can have strengths and drawbacks: whether peer mentors should be assigned or student-selected, whether participation should be opt-in or opt-out, whether areas of focus should be identified by students or designated by the program, how to compensate the labor of peer mentors. We encourage TPC graduate programs to explore different models of peer mentorship in cooperation with graduate students to identify options likely to work well for your particular graduate student population, available resources, and other considerations.

In conclusion, many TPC academics, including the authors of this article, are committed to diversifying our academic programs by welcoming students who are members of underrepresented groups. This commitment requires that we center the needs of the potential applicants we are inviting and seek ways to meet those needs within the constraints of our academic institutions. In the current climate of anti-DEI legislation, enacting this commitment is particularly difficult, but also particularly important (Alexander, 2025). Additional research is needed to further advance this effort. For example, recruiters, graduate program directors, and researchers could co-design studies with marginalized communities through participatory action research to identify how best to modify existing programs or design new programs to meet community needs. Other future research could analyze comparative case studies of institutions that have successfully implemented equitable recruitment practices to identify potentially transferrable findings. Together, approaches like these could enable TPC programs to focus on specific local and geographic contexts, supporting more targeted and community-responsive recruitment efforts that center students within those areas. Meanwhile, we hope that the research reported in this article will be useful to program administrators and graduate faculty who are seeking ways to make their programs more inviting and supportive of graduate students—especially those who are members of underrepresented groups.

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Appendix: Focus Group Prompt

Focus Group Questions:

- What do you think grad school is good for? or what is grad school for? or why do folks get graduate degrees?
- What do *you* hope to get out of grad school?
    - What are your career goals?
    - Follow ups on other implied goals: for example, if they say it could give me an edge: "Why might getting a master's degree give you an edge? What kind of edge?"
- Do you know where you might study?
    - Why there? How did you hear about it? Why does it appeal to you?
    - How will you go about choosing a school or a program? Whom will you ask? Where will you look? Why?
- What information would help you choose schools to apply to?
    - Where can you get that info?
- What might keep you from grad school?
    - If you decide not to go, why might that be?
    - What might make it hard to go to grad school?
    - What concerns do you have about going to grad school?

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