Clemson Link:
A Project to Support Underrepresented Students at Clemson University

A Graduate School Fellows Proposal From:

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Narrative

In order to further develop exceptional career and professional development for graduate students and improve the campus climate for students from diverse backgrounds we must listen to the voices of students to learn their experiences, needs, and aspirations. The experiences of underrepresented students at predominantly White institutions are different from majority students and marked by experiences isolation, frustration, blatant discrimination, lack of respect and belonging, and stereotyping from peers and faculty (Dahlvig, 2010; Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002; Morrison, 2010; Shavers & Moore, 2014). Thus, institutions must be willing to develop interventions and mobilize strategies that increase students’ social capital and offer them a sense of belonging on campus. However, decisions about such strategies and interventions cannot be made without student input.

As researcher who has studied the experiences of students of color at predominantly White institutions and the role mentoring and formal mentoring programs play in supporting students, I have designed a project that will provide the Graduate School with the information it needs to support underrepresented students at Clemson University and increase the profile of its professional development opportunities that aim to move underrepresented students into the graduate school pipeline.

The goal of the Clemson Link project is to bring together undergraduate and graduate students from underrepresented backgrounds at Clemson University to research and learn together while collaborating on a participatory action research project. The students will decide on the topic for the research relative to supporting the professional development needs of underrepresented students enrolled and interested in enrolling in graduate school, collect and analyze the data, and communicate findings from the research to relevant audiences with support and guidance from a faculty supervisor (Dr. Robin Phelps-Ward). The project will unfold during the course of the 2016-2017 academic semester and will emphasize research, professional development, and peer mentoring within the community of burgeoning scholars. Aligning an action research project dedicated to learning relevant information about student experience and needs is central to continuing to foster a culture of diversity in graduate Education at Clemson University.

As the faculty supervisor for this project and steward of Clemson University and Graduate School’s mission, I welcome feedback and remain open to revision of this project in terms of budget, timeline, and activities to meet the needs and scope of the Faculty Fellows program.

Clemson Forward Alignment

The proposed Clemson Link project aligns with Clemson Forward in three major areas:

1. **Research** – Through their involvement and leadership in a collaborative, interdisciplinary participatory action research project geared toward supporting underrepresented student professional development toward graduate school, students will develop a firm understanding of the research process, engage in discovery and exploration of nuanced phenomena, and dedicate their time to a meaningful project that can solve real problems.

2. **Engagement** – Through the research journey of identifying a significant problem worth investigating and thinking collaboratively with peers and others in the Clemson University community, students will inquire outside of the classroom space and get the real-world, hands-on, problem-solving experience of conducting research within a community of scholars.

3. **Living** – The sense of belonging fostered through communities of practice like Clemson Link will foster a space that provides underrepresented students an opportunity to engage in conversations about graduate education, learn the skills necessary for moving into and through pathways to doctoral and advanced degrees, and have conversations about issues of diversity among those whom they feel connected.
Outcomes

With the support of a faculty supervisor, discussions about research design, and regular conversations about professional development, students will be able to do the following:

- Design and conduct a participatory action research study;
- Devise and implement a SMART professional development plan;
- Demonstrate ability to effectively conduct quality research;
- Demonstrate ability to effectively communicate research findings;
- Develop a sense of community within the Clemson Link group.

Assessment of Outcomes

The table below outlines the activities and outcome measures to assess each of the programmatic, developmental learning outcomes related to the project.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Outcome Measures</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Design and conduct a participatory action research study</td>
<td>Monthly planning and learning meetings</td>
<td>Number of meetings and documented progress</td>
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<tr>
<td>Devise and implement SMART professional development plan</td>
<td>Workshops and discussions centered on professional development</td>
<td>Professional Development plans evaluated based on rubric</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demonstrate ability to effectively conduct quality research</td>
<td>Carrying out research tasks (e.g., survey development, interviews/focus groups, data analysis, etc.)</td>
<td>Output evaluated based on qualitative and quantitative research standards</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demonstrate ability to effectively communicate research findings</td>
<td>Presentation of findings in a scholarly venue</td>
<td>Presentation evaluated based on communication competency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop a sense of community within the Clemson Link group</td>
<td>Discussions and relationships formed during meetings</td>
<td>Observations</td>
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Timeline

July
- Meet with Graduate School to learn current resources
- Develop workshop training plans
- Create rubric for evaluating student applications for the program
- Establish relationships with student services outlets (e.g., Academic colleges, Harvey and Lucinda Gantt Center)
- Make connections with individuals in Clemson community who could help facilitate trainings on topics related to participatory action research, data analysis, professional development plans, IRB proposals, data analysis, etc.
- Communicate with stakeholders about future student recruitment in August
- **Deliverable:** Workshop training plans and support from academic colleges

August
- Recruit students via academic and student services outlets:
  - Academic colleges, Harvey and Lucinda Gantt Center, Graduate School
- Collect and review applications
- Notify applicants of decision (Up to 10 students will be included)
- **Deliverable:** Profiles of students involved in project and signed Memorandums of Understanding

September
- Hold initial meeting
- Engage in community building exercise
- Brainstorm topics for research
- Decide on research focus
- **Workshop:** Participatory action research
- **Deliverable:** Brainstormed ideas and logic model for research

October
- Develop IRB protocol
- Submit IRB proposal
- Collect data
- **Workshop:** Graduate school experiences and application process
- **Deliverable:** IRB Proposal

November
- Continue to collect data
- Clean data
- Analyze data
- Meet with stakeholders
- **Workshop:** Data analysis process
- **Deliverable:** Notes from stakeholder meeting and raw data

December
- Present at the Council of Graduate Schools Annual Conference
- Locate outlets for research
- **Workshop:** professional development plans
- **Deliverable:** Feedback from CGS Presentation

January
- Continue to analyze data
- Meet with stakeholders
• **Workshop:** Scholarly writing

**February**
• Finalize data analysis
• Meet with stakeholders
• **Workshop:** Writing research papers/reports
• **Deliverable:** Visualization of analyzed data

**March**
• Draft report
• Revise report
• Meet with stakeholders
• **Workshop:** Navigating graduate school
• **Deliverable:** Draft of report

**April**
• Finalize report
• **Workshop:** Navigating graduate school
• **Deliverable:** Final report with recommendations

**May**
• Meet and communicate findings with stakeholders
• Solicit feedback from students about involvement in the research project
• **Workshop:** Building supportive academic relationships
• **Deliverable:** Presentation of research

**June**
• Review research report recommendations
• Draft plans for changes based on recommendations
• Review student feedback for project
• Assess Clemson Link project outcomes
• **Deliverable:** Plan of action for implementing recommendations

**July**
• Develop report based on project assessment and evaluation with recommendations for the future
• **Deliverable:** Project Evaluation Report