



# **President's Taskforce for Opportunity & Equity**

## **Subcommittee on Graduate Students**

## About the Subcommittee

- Co-chaired by Dean George Flowers (Graduate School) and Dr. Jared Russell (College of Education).
  - Comprised of graduate students, staff, alumni and faculty.
  - Charged with developing data-informed strategic and actionable priorities and recommendations.
  - Focus was on the contextual experiences and perspectives of Black / African American graduate students.
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# Subcommittee Data Review Process

- The Committee's efforts began with an institutional student demographic and academic data review.
- **Specific data reviewed by the Subcommittee:**
  - Black student enrollment by department, academic major & term, and state of origin
  - Degree awarded by ethnicity/race within respective academic programs
  - Student retention percentages by academic program
  - Demographic data for faculty across academic programs



# Graduate Student Survey

- A survey was developed using the data reviewed by the Subcommittee.
- **Purpose:** Obtain student perceptions in five key areas:
  - Academic Experiences
  - Mentorship
  - Financial Support
  - Access to Resources
  - Climate/Culture
- **Sample:** 111 graduate students self-identifying as Black/African American or two or more races, one of them being Black/African American



# Graduate Student Focus Group Listening Sessions

- Emergent themes from survey results were subsequently used to develop targeted questions for focus group listening sessions.
- 6 focus group listening sessions were held via Zoom.
- **Focus:** Capture participants' perceptions of factors impacting their well-being and graduate studies experience
- **Participants:** 20 graduate students self-identifying as Black/African American or two or more races, one of them being Black/African American



# Key Findings



# Academic Experiences

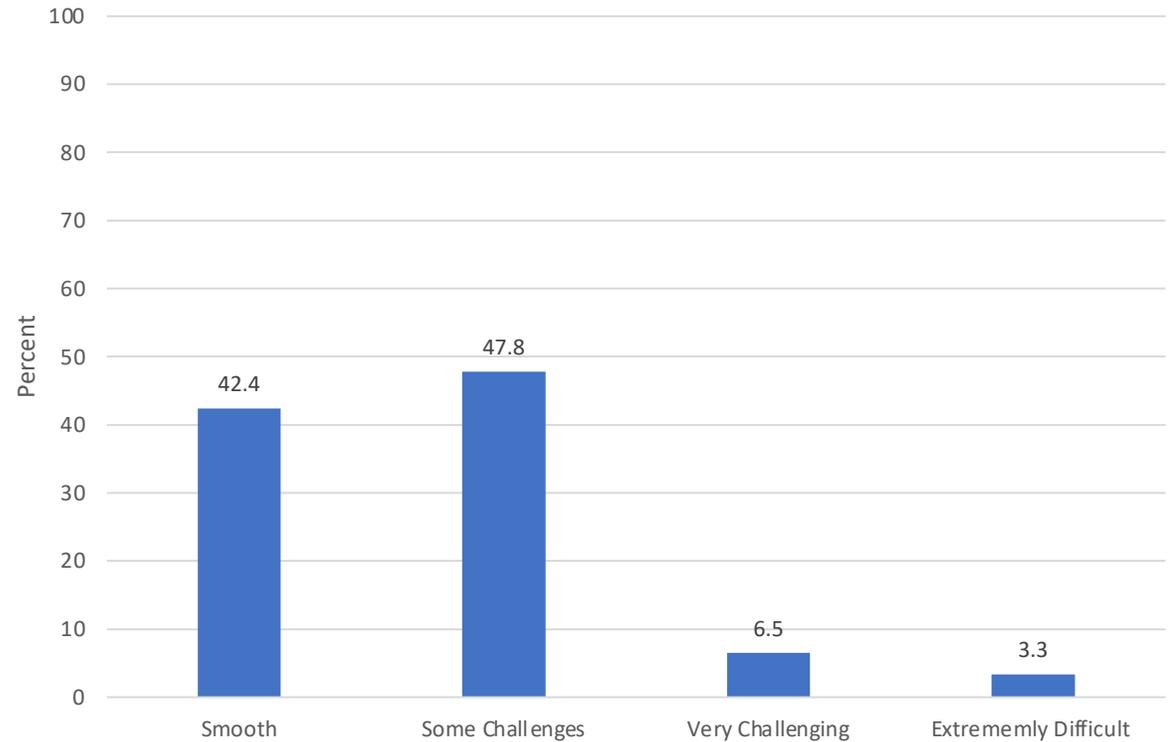
- 83.7% believe that they are receiving the educational experience that they expected from their program.
- 76.1% are confident that they will complete their degree; however, 22.8% reported believing it will take them longer, much longer, or that they are less likely to complete their degree.
- 67.7% reported having challenges while pursuing graduate education pertaining to:
  - Being a first-generation college student, veteran, parent, full-time employee, and/or active member of the military or reserves
  - Supporting individuals other than their children
  - Physical or mental health
- When asked about their expectations of Auburn: *“Need more diversity representation; did not ‘know’ AU was ‘so white’; wanted more community engagement opportunities.”*



# Transition to Graduate Study

- Only 42.4% described their transition to graduate study at Auburn University as smooth.

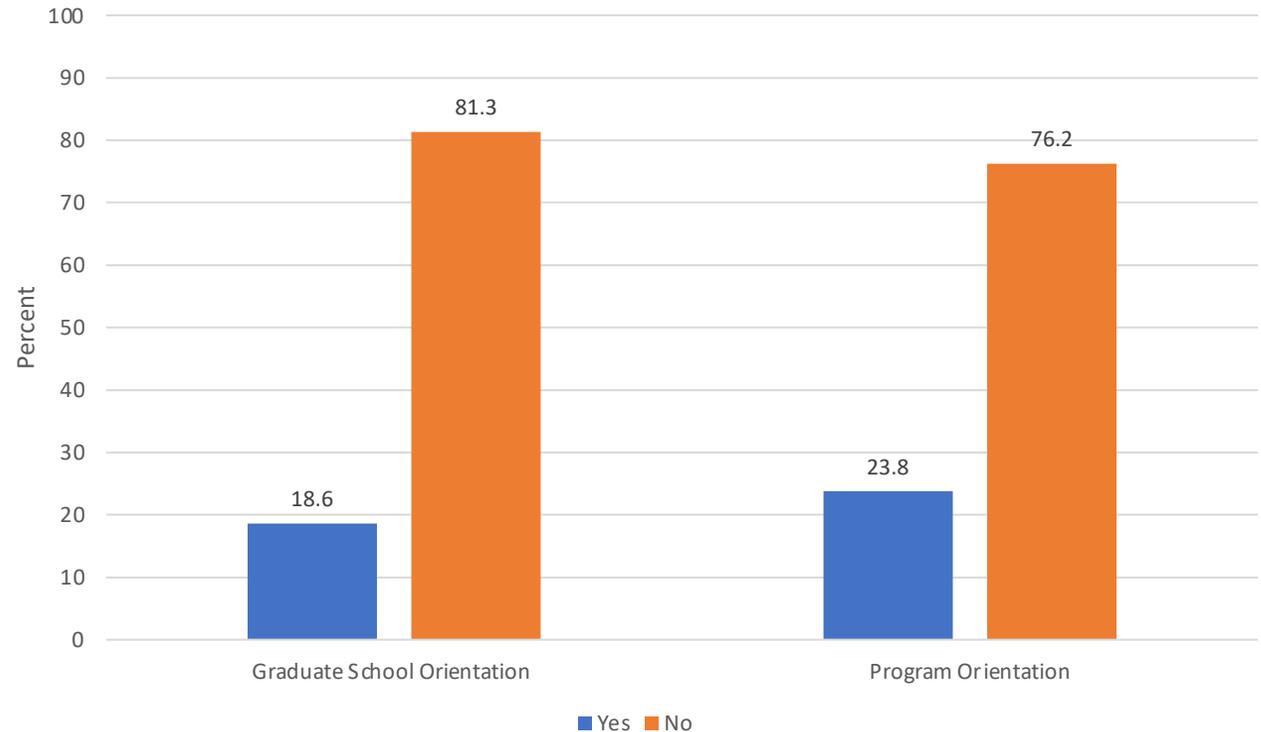
Transition to Auburn University



# Transition to Graduate Study

- Many found the orientations within the Graduate School or their program of study to be ineffective at addressing their concerns.
- When asked about their satisfaction with Auburn's resources: *"We need a camp war eagle for adult students."*

Orientation Effectiveness in Addressing Concerns



# Mentoring Experiences

- 71.7% believe they can approach AU faculty with academic concerns; however, some have challenges when trying to identify a mentor.
  - 29.3% reported problems with finding the wanted/needed mentorship opportunities.
  - 7.6% felt they couldn't approach faculty for mentorship needs.
- 83.7% felt that they definitely or mostly receive the needed guidance and support from their major professor.
- When asked about mentorship opportunities at Auburn: *"I feel that I am made to wear many hats, but I don't have anyone to show me how to wear them all."*



# Financial Support and Access to Resources

- 88.2% rely on some form of external assistance to finance their graduate education.
- 57.6% agree that they have the same opportunities, equipment, space, and mentorship as other students in their academic unit. (25% neither agree nor disagree and 17.4% disagree)
- When asked about financial resources while at Auburn: *"It is defeating to go from a full-time job to a student."*
- When asked about their satisfaction with Auburn's resources: *"I didn't get the chance to take advantage of the amenities as a distance student, but I still had to pay for it."*



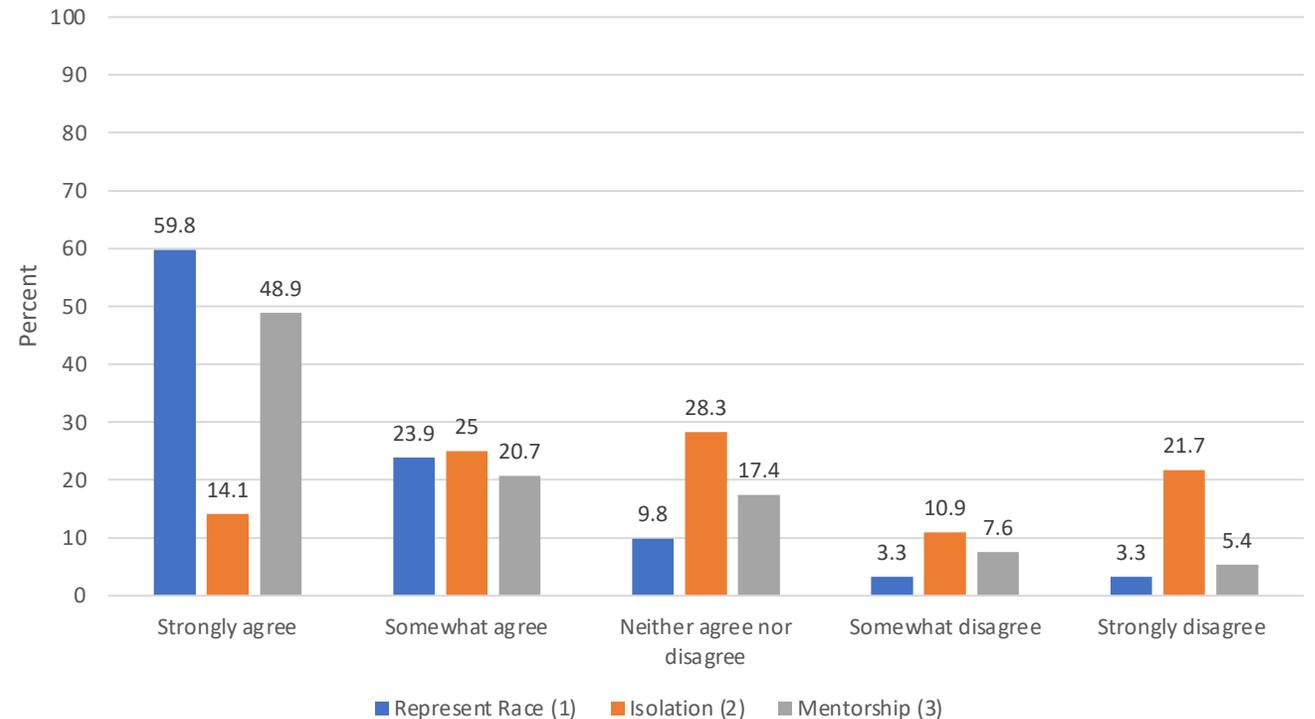
# Climate/Culture

## Black Faces in White Spaces

Students were asked, “To what extent do you agree with this statement?”

1. “I feel obligated to represent my race as a graduate student.”
2. “I feel isolated from people who look and talk the way I do.”
3. “It is difficult to find a Black/African American mentor in my program.”

Orientation Effectiveness in Addressing Concerns



# Climate/Culture

- When asked about any potential barriers to diversity equity and inclusion: *"Most students are scared to say anything... they don't want to get blackballed and won't get support to help them to navigate the process."*
- When asked about the current DEI climate of Auburn:
  - *"I see it in email, [but] I don't see it actually in a systemic level and the climate and the number of Black faces."*
  - *"Auburn needs to look hard at their Fraternities and Sororities."*



# Recommendations



# Academic Experiences

- **(Mid-high cost): Create off-campus small group meetings in areas with a proximal density of students enrolled in an online course.**
  - Develop networking and internship opportunities with local businesses
  - Create professional development opportunities (virtual or in person) that are hosted by members of the Auburn University community (i.e., alumni and faculty)
- **(Low-mid cost): Expand offering of nontraditional courses (i.e., online and evening courses)**
  - Provide Zoom-based electives scheduled in the evening.
    - Lectures are recorded and assignments and grading are completed on canvas.
- **(Mid-high cost): Increase the number of Black faculty and staff, especially in departments with low faculty diversity.**
  - Incentivize students of color who complete post-doctorate programs with tenure track position offers.
  - Develop an evaluation process that helps place high-performing professors who represent vulnerable groups in tenure-track positions sooner.
- **(Mid-high cost): Increase the number of Black graduate students.**
  - Develop recruitment events with local feeder schools
    - Select multiple 4-year universities (with focus on universities and HBCUs in AL) whose demographics feed the diversity gaps experienced on campus.
    - Track the students coming into these schools, see what they need and are interested in, follow up with workshops, special events, and professional talks from current Auburn University students or alumni.



# Transition to Graduate Study

- **(Low-mid cost): Develop a "first campus experience" program for graduate-level students.**
  - **Pre-enrollment modules addressing:**
    - Expectations of the Graduate School
    - Merit-based funding opportunities
    - Resources related to identifying and managing stress
    - Challenges experienced by Black graduate students as reported in the survey
  - **Summer Orientation (Face-to-Face and Virtual)**
    - Identify and highlight campus resources and points of interest for incoming graduate students
    - Provide networking opportunities for new students.
    - Ensure campus visits are representative of the University's current progress in achieving DEI
      - Explain and articulate Auburn's current success and areas of improvement
      - Avoid simply matching minority student tours with minority staff
  - **Academic Advising**
    - Ice-breaker with a member of faculty and/or currently enrolled student from the same department.



# Mentorship

- (Low-mid cost): Develop a peer mentoring program
  - Regularly scheduled orientations and workshops to encourage communication between students at different stages in their program.
  - Mentorship assignments based on students' current stage in their program.
- (Mid-high cost): Offer multiple mentoring options to include professors, advisors, peers, alumni, prospective job candidates, University partners, etc.
  - Formal networking and connection points to address students' feelings of isolation.



# Financial Support

- **(Low-mid cost):** Develop a merit-based financial assistance dashboard/website that tracks and displays fellowships, grants, and other funding opportunities.
- **(Low-mid cost):** Provide incentives to increase availability of Summer assistantships.
  - Fund matching for joint student and faculty research.
- **(Low-mid cost):** Review current fee structure and fee communication approach including:
  - Concerns of accessibility
  - Transparency guidelines for communicating fees with students.
- **(Mid-high cost):** Review the University's funding mechanisms to determine if current funding levels are adequate to support students, particularly those who report special situations.
  - Ensure adequate funding for travel and research projects.
  - Consider need-based grants for students with children and caregiver responsibilities.
- **(Mid-high cost):** Revisit previous human resource decisions including:
  - Compensation/work capacity ratio for GRA and GRA assignments.
  - Cost/quality comparison for health insurance options



# Climate/Culture

- **(Low-mid cost): Develop an online coping dashboard for minority students.**
  - Include cognitive exercises and suggestions for single and group counseling.
- **(Low-mid cost): Develop inclusion zones and safe spaces for students of color.**
- **(Low-mid cost): Integrate DEI into curriculum and campus life.**
  - Provide additional support for the Diversity Campus Experience (DICE) program.
  - Implement a mandatory DEI interactive learning course for all faculty and student workers.
  - Develop undergraduate and graduate-level diversity studies courses
- **(Mid-high cost): Improve University response to all racially-driven behavior perpetrated in or around campus by Auburn University students including:**
  - Immediate investigation of racially-driven behavior
  - Improved transparency regarding the investigation process and ultimate behavior consequences



# Questions?

