



GSS Graduate Student Survey

Executive Summary: Doctoral Students

Data collected in Fall 2015; published April 2016

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Purpose & Method

In Fall 2015, the Graduate Student Senate (GSS) was informed that the Graduate College would be conducting an internal review of the Graduate College doctoral programs (Ph.D., D.M.A., D.P.T.). Currently there are approximately 2500 doctoral students on campus. The GSS Executive Council developed and administered a survey to obtain graduate student feedback about their experiences with graduate education at the University of Iowa (UI). The goal of this survey was to identify areas in which UI doctoral students feel they could be better served by their Departments or by the Graduate College. The survey was developed on Qualtrics Survey Software and distributed to UI Graduate and Professional students using a UI mass mailing. The questions included on the survey sought self-reported data on a variety of topics: perception of departmental support for graduate students, perceived quality and enrollment size of graduate students in a department, experiences with teaching and research assistantships, and estimates of workload for teaching or research assistantships. There was also an open comment field.

We attempted to achieve a depth of detail for the above topics without the survey being overly long. There are many limitations to this informal study. For example, there were no questions about the tuition scholarships, health insurance, and other benefits that graduate students receive as part of their paid assistantship contracts. These and many other factors contribute to graduate success at the UI and were not specifically asked about (although some of these factors were remarked upon in the open comment field, and contributed to our conclusions).

Participants

The survey was completed by 275 doctoral (Ph.D, D.M.A., D.P.T.) students (59.3% female, 37.5% male, 1.5% other or prefer not to answer). The number of respondents differed in the divisions of Biological Sciences (31), Health Sciences (45), Humanities and Fine Arts (63), Mathematics, Physical, and Engineering Sciences (43), and Social Sciences and Education (93). Respondents had spent an average of 3.64 years in their UI graduate programs.

Key Findings

1. *Do current graduate students feel that their programs are appropriately selective of new graduate students?*

Yes (Table 5). Across all divisions, on average students felt that the number of grad students in their departments was appropriate and that their peers were qualified.

2. *Are students satisfied with their departments?*

Generally, yes (Table 6). Across divisions, students were satisfied with academic progress support and student time-to-degree. Students felt there is room for improvement in how departments prepare



students for job searches.

3. *Are doctoral students being compensated for their work?*

TAs: 72.0% of doctoral students across all divisions have held teaching assistantships; Health Sciences students were the outlier (35.6%). Students with a 50% teaching assistantship (~20 hours per week) reported an estimated workload of **17.7±1.6 hours per week on TA-specific activities** (Table 9). Note that this does not include time spent pursuing non-mandated pedagogical training. 29.8% of doctoral students contributed to teaching a UI course without support from a teaching assistantship, and spent an average of 3.5 to 62.1 hours total doing so for a semester-long course (Table 10).

RAs: Research assistantships have been held by 53.4% of doctoral students across all divisions; students in the Humanities and Fine Arts were an outlier (20.6%). Students with a 50% research assistantship reported an estimated workload of **33.7±9.2 hours per week on RA-specific activities** (Table 12). 29.8±6.7% of doctoral students contributed to a research project unrelated to their dissertation work without support from a research assistantship, and spent an average of 18.4 to 43.4 hours total doing so (Table 13).

Finances: The majority of graduate students received support from their department or Graduate College, or from a federal granting agency (Table 17). A proportion of students have felt significant financial strain and frequently took loans or sought outside work. Some students on a 50% assistantship – generally assumed to be sufficient for basic financial support of a student – sought outside employment (31.5%, Table 18) or student loans (23.5%, Table 23). Fewer than half of these students were in the first 3 years of their programs. The most frequent reason for doing so was to cover cost-of-living expenses, and less-frequent reasons included student fees, books and supplies, recreation, and work experience (Tables 21 and 26). Finally, 14.1% of doctoral students were not sufficiently well informed of student fee obligations prior to enrollment in their programs (Table 14).

4. *How do students feel about current mechanisms for Fellowships from the Graduate College, and extra support for conference travel and research travel through GSS?*

Across all divisions, most students (40.5%) preferred to seek funding from the Graduate College at **each semester or summer** for which funding is needed, compared to on an annual basis (23.8%; Table 16), assuming the same overall amount of funds was available and divided differently. Comments revealed a proportion of grad students remained unaware of GSS-administered conference funding, feel that this funding is difficult to obtain, or feel that funding amounts are insufficient.

Conclusions

Doctoral students at the University of Iowa generally feel well supported by their professors, their departments, and by the Graduate College. Many are very satisfied in particular with the quality of the academic mentorship they receive from their faculty mentors, with their coursework, and with the recent improvements in professional development programming offered by the Graduate College. The first priority for students will always be excellence in research; as such, the high quality of University of Iowa faculty remains the foundation for student success.

Why do graduate students do all this “extra” teaching and research?

Both research and teaching experience are important for career development (Table 27). Because of this, students seek out opportunities to gain this experience even without financial support that is specifically supporting these opportunities. Some students may provide a single lecture on a topic in their area of



expertise. These guest lectures are excellent opportunities for professional development. Some graduate students are in a bind: their departments might not have any TAships available, but because students need teaching experience, they seek it out. In research, graduate students may be learning new techniques, mentoring (or being mentored by) newer graduate students in their research groups, starting their own collaborations, or embarking on new lines of research, all of which contribute to success. Finally, we note that some students may have done this work while supported by an internal or external grant, or may have funding that allows for both teaching and research.

Opportunities to do teaching or research outside of their limited assistantships can contribute to student success. Nonetheless, given the financial pressures graduate students face, it may improve graduate success at the UI to recognize this work with alternative funding models.

In an effort to continue the tradition of excellence at the University of Iowa, we propose a few key areas for improvement based on this data set.

Funding flexibility for student success

There are division-specific differences in how important it is for students to be listed as the PI on a fellowship or grant, and for how important it is to have teaching experience. Students would be well-served by a funding model that guarantees funding for a number of years but which allows them to select when to focus on research (e.g., during their first year when many are applying for fellowships) and when to develop teaching experience. This approach would require a high degree of planning in initial stages between the student, mentor, department, and the Graduate College, but students may benefit from early thinking about their research plan. Reductions of financial stressors (such as an actual reduction of student fees, or a recruitment guide that more clearly explains student fees to reduce unexpected financial strain) would benefit both productivity and morale.

Lowering the barrier to interdisciplinary work and mentorship opportunities

The majority of students are very satisfied with their faculty mentors; some are not, and feel academically trapped and socially isolated. Furthermore, many students are aware that interdisciplinary collaborations are becoming increasingly important for a career in academia, but don't know how to seek out opportunities. We encourage the Graduate College to find opportunities to continue to connect graduate students and faculty across disciplines (perhaps in ways that mimic the longstanding campuswide Jakobsen Conference), and to support students who develop approved interdisciplinary research or training programs.

Institutional support for career development

Graduate students are continually pressured to excel in our programs and graduate in a timely manner while simultaneously cultivating skills in teaching or non-academic career paths. A few initiatives could turn these stressors into opportunities. We commend efforts by the Graduate College to help students apply for external funding, which is important for many students' careers. Graduate students need more funding for conferences to be well supported for academic career paths. Faculty and departments should be more incentivized to value student exploration of alternative career options. The UI and Graduate College could facilitate connections between graduate students and non-academic local employers to increase awareness of these career opportunities and professional development. Additionally, Graduate College fellowship opportunities could allow students to develop 'alt-ac' skills at the UI.

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