

2017 Graduate Student Satisfaction Survey

Executive Summary

Survey Information and Findings

The 2017 Graduate Student Satisfaction Survey was designed to assess graduate students' perceptions related to satisfaction with various aspects of the Graduate School, and to inform initiatives by identifying areas for improvement. The survey was distributed during the Spring 2017 semester, to all resident-instruction graduate students (n=3,744); 781 students responded, for a response rate of 20.9%.

The survey included a variety of questions related to perceptions of the university, graduate school, and co-curricular environment, perceptions of department peers, staff, and faculty, and perceptions of treatment based on personal characteristics. Graduate students were also asked about institutional policies and resources, personal attitudes and behaviors, and their overall comfort in the graduate school. Also included were two open-ended questions that sought additional information specifically on improving department culture and more broadly asked for additional comments on their responses or any climate issue not addressed in the survey. Details of the survey, methodology, and survey results are included in the Appendices.

Major Findings from the Quantitative Survey Analysis

The following list represents major findings identified through the quantitative analysis of survey results. A detailed summary of the quantitative findings is included in Appendix A.

1. The majority of graduate students perceive CSU, the graduate school, and department as generally welcoming and respectful and feel their department peers, staff, and faculty treat students with respect. Higher levels of agreement, or more positive perceptions, were reported at the general department level than at the personal experiences level.
2. The vast majority of students agreed that cultural understanding is important to their career and agreed they are comfortable interacting with diverse backgrounds. However, almost a third (31%) of students disagreed that the university has individuals in leadership positions from diverse backgrounds.
3. Although gender differences were less pronounced and varied by whether females or males agreed more, overall, females had less favorable perceptions on items specifically related to their department/unit and diversity and inclusion items compared to males.
4. More than a third (37%) of students disagreed that they feel comfortable raising concerns related to teaching and advising, or diversity and inclusion to their department leaders. Females and PhD students reported less comfort raising concerns compared to males and master's degree students.

5. Underrepresented students and non-heterosexual students had less favorable perceptions than non-underrepresented and heterosexual students for nearly all survey items (59 of 66 items). This was particularly true for issues related to diversity and inclusion.

6. Students had the greatest disagreement to items related to fair treatment based on their gender, abilities/disabilities, and political ideology. Underrepresented, non-heterosexual, and female students had lower agreement than non-underrepresented, heterosexual, and male students when asked about being personally treated fairly regardless of their race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender respectively.

7. Underrepresented and non-heterosexual students reported 15% and 13% less agreement respectively, that they feel comfortable in the Fort Collins community compared to non-underrepresented and heterosexual students.

8. 26% of underrepresented students, and 29% of non-heterosexual students, have considered leaving their department because of an issue related to diversity and inclusion (compared to 18 and 16% of non-underrepresented and heterosexual students, respectively).

9. International students generally had positive perceptions of diversity representation among campus leaders, and agreed they felt comfortable with raising concerns to department leaders. However, there was a 7-11 greater percentage point disagreement among international students, compared to domestic students, of being treated fairly regardless of race/ethnicity or nationality.

Major Findings from the Qualitative Survey Analysis

Findings from the qualitative analysis of open-ended questions were in line with many of the survey question items, and revealed eight major themes. These were: Satisfied Students, Community and Cohesion, Communication, Faculty Relations, Advising, Recourse for Students, Diversity, and Financial Burden. Major findings are listed below (a detailed report is included in Appendix B).

1. Satisfied Students: 32 students provided positive comments that expressed satisfaction with their experiences and campus climate. Comments ranged from “my department is great” to “I feel comfortable as a graduate student at CSU”.

2. Community and Cohesion: Within the open-ended responses, participants consistently expressed desire for more community and cohesion within and across their departments. Ninety-five respondents addressed the need to build community and cohesion in their departments in order to build relationships, foster academic communities, and enhance their experience and learning at CSU.

3. Communication: Communication was a frequent source of concern among graduate students. Ninety-six respondents made specific notes about a need surrounding

communication. This theme took several forms, including accountability and transparency; power and communication; process, policy, and orientation; and opportunities for connection.

4. Faculty Relations: Ninety-four respondents provided comments that referred to faculty directly, and almost half of those related to faculty relationships with students. These 43 comments expressed concern regarding lack of faculty support, faculty contributions to a toxic work environment, and disrespect of graduate students.

5. Advising: A recurring theme was that students both expect that their academic advisor/mentor will be a guiding, supportive presence and that they are unsure of the parameters of the mentor-mentee relationship, including expectations of the mentor and the mentee. Sixty-two participants said they experienced a lack of support, reliability, or engagement from their advisors.

6. Recourse for Students: Fifty-seven respondents commented on the need for a clear path for recourse for students. Many of these students cited personal experiences of mistreatment coupled with a sense that there was nowhere for them to turn. The power dynamics of faculty and graduate students were highlighted, along with the sense that the experiences and voices of students were dismissed when placed in conflict with the word of a tenured faculty member.

7. Diversity: While 33 students indicated satisfaction with diversity at CSU or in their departments, 75 participants expressed dissatisfaction for campus efforts, and many stated that the University's responses to diversity and inclusion were insufficient with no intent for actual change. Others named very specific experiences of prejudice and oppression, including personal stories and experiences. Student respondents zeroed in on issues surrounding gender, sexual identity, race, ethnicity, religion and political ideology, and nationality as elements of diversity.

8. Financial Burden: Thirty-one participants indicated that financial stress was a problematic aspect of their lives in graduate school. Recurring themes related to financial stress included being paid insufficiently for the cost of living in Fort Collins and inability to afford mental health support, and support a family. This sense of being underpaid was framed on several occasions as a lack of support and as a contributor to a toxic work / learning environment for students.

Summary

In summary, the results were generally favorable, but highlight potential concerns about the variation in perceptions by underrepresented and non-heterosexual students. The survey also identified areas in need of improvement, including diversity and inclusion, community-building, communication, and student recourse. The survey results can be used as a catalyst to further strengthen the graduate students' positive experiences and perceptions of CSU, the graduate school, and their department, while focusing on improving department level areas. Further, the results should be used as a baseline for continuous quality improvement longitudinally.

Graduate School Recommendations

Based on these findings, the Graduate School recommends the following actions and best practices for implementation by departments, colleges, and the university. This list is non-exhaustive and will be a living document, to which additional best practices will be added as they are developed and brought forward.

1. Facilitate community-building among students, faculty, and staff.

- Department chairs should meet on a regular basis (e.g., once a semester) with graduate students for relationship-building.
- Facilitate frequent events to foster community-building, networking, and professional development. Events can range from informal socials to formal professional development workshops. Include multiple cohorts or lab groups to bridge divisions and reduce the culture of competition between labs. Have some events be alcohol-free and family friendly for inclusiveness.
- Make your events welcoming and inclusive by including an ice breaker activity at the beginning, so that students have an opportunity to speak and get to know each other on a personal level.
- Include graduate student representatives on department and college committees, either as a regular member or as a guest.
- Empower graduate students to create their own graduate student organization within the department.
- Encourage graduate students to get involved in student clubs and organizations, including the Graduate Student Council.
- Provide a physical space for graduate students to work or meet together.

2. Foster healthy mentor-mentee relationships.

- Sponsor mentorship trainings for junior faculty and for graduate students for their professional development. Utilize your college's faculty mentor who received training from the Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experiences in Research (CIMER) to facilitate mentorship trainings (see the Graduate School for a list of faculty).
- Encourage or require graduate students to develop an individual development plan (IDP) on an annual basis. The IDP will help mentees communicate expectations, set academic and profession goals, establish regular communications with their mentors, and help develop healthy mentor-mentee relationships. For examples of IDPs, please see the Graduate School's [IDP webpage](#), or Stanford University's [IDP](#).

3. Support marginalized and diverse student populations to ensure their success.

- Increase faculty awareness of issues facing marginalized student populations, including underrepresented, non-heterosexual, international, and female students. This can be done through mentorship training, and diversity trainings such as Unconscious Bias and Safe Zone trainings through the Office of Diversity and Pride Center, respectively.

- Utilize GCDA faculty as mentors for diverse students, including underrepresented minority, non-heterosexual, international, and female students.
- Identify specific faculty in the department and college who are allies for diverse students and who can provide mentoring support as needed.
- Mentor student populations on career topics including diverse career pathways and earning potentials, imposter syndrome, and salary negotiations. This is especially important for female students, where there is a known salary gap by gender.
- Make visible your department's commitment to diversity and inclusion by signage and wall décor (You Are Welcome Here, Principles of Community, Safe Zone ally, etc.).
- Refer students to university cultural centers, Pride Center, and other organizations such as Graduate Women in Sciences, to foster community-building.

4. Improve communication of department policies and procedures and campus resources.

- All departments should have a Graduate Student Handbook that details the departments graduate policies and procedures for transparency. Procedures should include a description of the process by which graduate students are annually evaluated on their degree progress should be included as well.
- Include in the Handbook a descriptive process by which graduate students can file informal or formal complaints. Relevant resources to include could be the department chair, Student Resolution Center, OEO, etc. The Handbook should also communicate policies related to anti-bullying, sexual harassment, and protection from retaliation.
- Consider adding content to the Handbook to communicate basic mentor-mentee expectations, the IDP, student responsibilities, timelines to degree completion, preliminary exam procedures, links to Graduate School policies, helpful campus resources, etc. Consider appointing a graduate student taskforce to identify other useful content for the Graduate Student Handbook.
- Identify a contact person in the department who can serve as a resource regarding policies and procedures.

5. Share best practices among department and college leaders.

- Department chairs should share their practices with each other on an annual basis, for example during a College Executive Council meeting.