

Graduate Student Experience at Boise State: Fall 2017

The Graduate College at Boise State University is committed to offering an inclusive and supportive environment for all students. Our goal is to provide a climate where each graduate student feels accepted, valued and affirmed, with everyone thriving in a setting that is free of hostility, negativity, and discrimination.

A better understanding of the current experiences of graduate students at Boise State was necessary to help inform the Graduate College on future practices, initiatives, and policies. Data was collected through a survey that was sent in November of 2016 from the Graduate College to all enrolled master's and doctoral level students. Graduate students were asked to share their honest answers about the occurrences in their daily lives and their views of their educational experience.

The survey was designed based on a review of the literature and on instruments utilized by other graduate schools, and was organized in sections that inquired about overall department/program climate and general dynamics, as well as the climate at the university. For the purpose of this survey, climate was considered to be the "current attitudes, behaviors and standards of faculty, staff, administrators and students concerning the level of respect for individual needs, abilities, and potential" (Rankin & Reason, 2008, p. 264). Although the survey was anonymous, demographical information was included to help provide a context for the results. As in all survey research, limits to the present results included self-selection bias, response rates, and social desirability. In particular, caution must be extended in generalizing results for constituent groups with lower response rates.

The survey was completed by 604 graduate students. Of these, 63% were female. The majority (81%) of the students identified as white, with 55 (9%) identifying as underrepresented ethnic minority (URM) students. Seven percent indicated they were international students. The majority of the respondents were master's students, with 84 (14%) indicating they were in a doctoral program. The majority (77%) were in their first two years of graduate education. One half (51%) of the students reported they did not take any of their courses online; 184 (31%) indicated they were in fully online programs.

To gain a better understanding of the climate as it related to the mentoring and advising experiences of graduate students, a second, briefer survey was sent to all enrolled graduate students in February of 2017. This survey was completed by 595 graduate students, with 77% identifying as white, and 11% (n=61) identifying as URM students. Nine percent indicated they were international students. Slightly over half (60%) were female. Similar to the first survey, the majority (75%) were in their first two years of graduate school and 32% indicated they were in fully online programs. Slightly over half (60%) reported their advisor was female.

Below is a summary of the results for how graduate students at Boise State described their current experiences:

The majority of students (82%) were satisfied with the climate in their program, with no difference reported between female and male students. URM students indicated a noticeable lower satisfaction with the climate in their programs, as 72% reported they were satisfied/very satisfied with the climate in their program.

Of all the respondents, 13% indicated they had considered leaving their program because of the climate in their program, with women (13%) slightly more likely than men (11%) to have considered leaving their program in the past year due to climate issues. A larger number of URM graduate students (28%) indicated they had considered leaving because of the climate in their department or program. When looking at degree level, slightly more doctoral students (18%) indicated having thoughts of leaving when compared to their master's level peers.

Four percent of students reported hostility being prevalent in their department. One student who considered leaving wrote, *"Some teachers treat females differently."* Another shared,

Difficult to define, other than a "tone" or "sense" of frustration from faculty. Difficult to determine if this is directed specifically to one student or the student body. It's more of a sense of your words say you are supportive, but your actions don't reflect you are.

The majority (86%) of the students reported that sexism and unwelcomed attention or innuendo were not prevalent or frequent in their program. However, 20 students indicated this was not the case, with 14 students sharing they had experienced unwanted sexual attention, remarks, touching or pressure during the past year. Of these 14 students, nine did not make an official report. Reasons that were shared for not reporting included,

I felt too "small" to be taken seriously, and I did not want to deal with negative social repercussions.

I talked about it unofficially and was met with victim blaming and support for the male. I did not feel like I would be supported in a formal claim.

Twenty students indicated discrimination was prevalent in their program, and 38 students (6%) reported being discriminated against during the past year. Of these 38 students, 35 (94%) did not make an official report. Themes in the reasons for not disclosing were 1) concerns about retaliation or negative consequences, 2) not being aware of where to report these incidents, and 3) a belief that nothing would be done. One student wrote, *"I did not know where I could report it and who I could talk to"* and another simply summed it up, *"Consequences."* One student explained,

I was afraid that an official report would hurt my chances to finish in my program and I didn't have any proof or solid evidence of the discrimination.

Overall, students appeared satisfied with the faculty in their programs and departments. The majority (93%) of the students reported their faculty treated students with respect; 88% believed faculty were respectful of diverse backgrounds, identities, and perspectives. Although the majority (93%) indicated faculty were welcoming to students, relative areas for improvement included 1) being committed to mentoring students, 2) setting clear expectations of students, and 3) being receptive to hearing students concerns. Only 60% of students felt they could bring concerns to their faculty or program staff without fear of negative consequences. However, 77% indicated that their major advisor fostered a working environment that was good for them.

A reoccurring theme was apparent regarding students' dissatisfaction with the level of information about guidelines that they were provided. For example, students were least satisfied with the amount of information available regarding annual reviews to assess their progress or the type of annual feedback they would receive. They also identified that there was little to no clarity regarding expected timelines or milestones to meet graduation requirements at the program level. In a question that asked if their department had a handbook, a location where much of this type of information would usually exist, 54% of the students responded that they did not know if there was a handbook. A recent review of current practices indicated there are currently master's level programs at Boise State University that do not have a handbook. However, all 11 doctoral programs have handbooks, although 20% of the doctoral students indicated they were not aware of this.

When asked about their major advisor, 72% of the respondents were satisfied with the advising/mentoring they received from their primary advisor. However, 58 students (10%) clearly identified they were dissatisfied. The gender of the respondent did not appear to make a difference in the response. However, when compared with their peers, online students seemed the least satisfied with the advising they received. Results suggested that 12% of the online students were very dissatisfied, and only 58% (compared to 72% in face-to-face programs) were satisfied. When looking at URM students, there was an increase in dissatisfaction, with 15% responding they were dissatisfied; however, 68% indicated they were satisfied, which is fairly close to the general group. Students in the STEM areas appeared the most positive, as 90% indicated they were satisfied with the advising/mentoring they received, and only 4% were dissatisfied.

In general, students tended to indicate their advisors cared about them, were easy to discuss ideas with, and served as a role model. Where there was less certainty tended to be around giving feedback and providing information about such topics as funding opportunities, program and Graduate College policies, and career paths. Similar to above, students appeared interested in receiving regular feedback on their progress and constructive feedback on their

work. Students in online only programs were the most dissatisfied with the amount of feedback they received when compared to other students.

Comparison of results to other campuses:

Comparison data is difficult to obtain, as there is no single climate survey embraced by all graduate schools. Although questions were taken from existing surveys, differences remain given varying definitions and methodological approaches, as well as type of institutions. In addition, schools do not widely share results from such surveys or provide this information publicly, leading to additional challenges of identifying comparison data. The Council for Graduate Schools (CGS) has acknowledged concerns about the climate for graduate students, but data driven outcomes are limited.

Where available, comparative data was identified. A review of information available offered limited suggestions for additional interpretation. In general, nothing of note was identified when the results were compared to available national trends.

Dissemination and Outreach Plans

Individual college results from the present surveys were provided to the Deans and Associate Deans of each college. Results from students in online programs only were given to Mark Wheeler, Dean of Extended Studies; URM STEM results were sent to Donna Llewellyn, Executive Director for STEM and Diversity. All were encouraged to utilize the results in a way that they believed would be most useful. Given this was an anonymous survey, they were urged to give thoughtful consideration in any sharing of results, as it is important that students remain confident that these type of surveys are used only for the purpose of increasing the understanding of their experiences in the spirit of continuing to improve efforts on their behalf. An email was sent to all graduate students and faculty letting them know that overall results from the surveys are available on the Graduate College website.

Next Steps

The actions and suggested actions below are not exhaustive. They are offered as only a place to begin to address the climate for graduate students at Boise State University. Ongoing discussions across the institution are anticipated, with plans for identification of action items by the Graduate Leadership Team as well as other stakeholders.

Based on a review of the results for this strategic initiative, the following are offered. Action items (in blue) are currently being implemented. Suggested Action items are continuing to be explored:

- **Thirteen percent of the responding students indicated that within the past year they had considered leaving their program due to climate issues. Although the percentage may be considered relatively small, in actuality this indicates that one out of ten students have considered leaving because of the climate in their program. Applying**

the percentage to the total number of graduate students, this would suggest that 325 graduate students considered leaving Boise State last year because of negative experiences in their program.

Action: The Graduate College, in collaboration with the Center for Teaching and Learning, will offer workshops focusing on best practices for graduate level mentorship and improving department climate.

Action: Faculty in each department will be encouraged to meet to discuss the survey results and identify ways to more consistently follow best practices.

Action: The Dean of the Graduate College has identified a Task Force to review the guidelines for appointment and maintaining of Graduate Faculty status. The possibility of additional requirements will be explored, with criteria possibly including the need to attend training in the area of mentoring and advising.

Action: Advising and mentoring has a significant impact on student success. Programs have been provided with retention and completion rates so that they can become increasingly aware of the students who leave the program. Program faculty are encouraged to explore the percent of students that do not successfully complete the program, allowing further discussion to identify possible reasons for attrition, and where needed, potential changes.

Action: The Graduate College has hired two “Associate Deans in Residence” who will focus on designing and implementing initiatives to improve graduate advising and mentoring.

Action: Every other year the Graduate College has scheduled to gather data on graduate students’ perspectives on the climate of their program and the advising/mentoring they receive. The surveys will remain as similar as possible from year to year, so that comparisons can be made, and any trends or changes identified.

Suggested Action: The Graduate College and/or the Provost Office may consider implementing a university-wide Task Force (or working group) to further explore graduate student attrition.

- **A higher number of URM students (28%) indicated their thoughts of leaving their program last year due to climate issues. This is in comparison to 13% for their White peers. In addition, traditionally URM students reported a higher level of dissatisfaction, (15% responding they were dissatisfied compared to 10% for their white peers), with the mentoring and advising they received.**

Action: Colleges will be encouraged to offer graduate faculty professional development opportunities to support faculty in better understanding the hurdles faced by URM graduate students. In addition, graduate faculty will be encouraged to participate in the BUILD (Boise State Uniting for Inclusion and Leadership in Diversity) Certificate Program.

Action: In the Graduate College's Task Force, review of the guidelines for appointment and maintaining of Graduate Faculty status, the possibility of additional requirements should be explored, with criteria possibly including training in the area of diversity and inclusion.

- **Slightly under one-half (40%) of students did not feel they could bring concerns to their faculty or program staff due to fear of negative consequences.**

Suggested Action: The Graduate College, in collaboration with the academic colleges should further explore possible actions. For example, perhaps each college or every graduate program can create faculty liaisons for graduate students, positions that will be designed to protect student confidentiality in addressing sensitive faculty-student matters. The Graduate College may want to explore the possibility of developing a Student Ombuds position. This could potentially be a graduate assistantship position offered through the Graduate College, which allows a confidential and safe point of contact for students with concerns.

- **In multiple questions and in both surveys, students consistently indicated they would like more feedback about their progress and quality of their work.**

Suggested Action: Best practices indicate that ongoing monitoring of student progress and providing feedback increases likelihood of completion and decreases time to graduation. Programs should implement a formal annual review for each student. This should be comprehensive, focusing on both progress in the program, as well as quality of work and professionalism. Annual reviews should be in written format, and when possible, include multiple sources of information, including feedback from the advisor, faculty, and program coordinator. Programs should develop a systematic approach to an annual review of students, as well as the mechanism for sharing the feedback directly with the student.

- **Students consistently indicated a need for increased clarity about milestones and expectations in their program.**

Action: Providing programs with time to completion data encourages faculty to more fully be aware of students' progression through the program and offer opportunity for discussion about expectations.

Suggested Action: Similar to the above, best practices indicate that clear expectations and stated timelines increase completion and decrease time to graduation. Programs should have identified milestones and requirements for graduation. These should be clearly indicated in the program handbook and discussed with students. Advisors are encouraged to discuss these type of details with students, identifying any barriers and possible solutions, to assist with timely graduations.

- **Results indicated that students wanted informative guidelines and additional information about their programs.**

Action: By the end of this academic year, each graduate program is expected to have a handbook and a process for reviewing the handbook information with students.

Action: Programs should expect all first year graduate students to attend the Graduate Student Orientation offered by the Graduate College each August. In addition, graduate programs or departments/schools may also choose to host graduate orientation events for new students.

- **Although the majority (72%) of students were satisfied overall with the advising/mentoring they received from their primary advisor, Boise State University may want to set an aspirational goal of 90% of students being satisfied with the mentoring they receive.**

Action: Professional development opportunities will be offered for faculty to increase knowledge about mentoring/advising. Best practices for mentoring URM students should be included, as well as additional attention on the mentoring/advising that is provided to fully online students.

Action: Students may also benefit from learning more about their responsibility and how they can positively impact the advisor-advisee relationship. Workshops will be provided to graduate students, with the goal of having students who are “informed consumers.”

Suggested Action: The Graduate College and/or the Provost Office may consider implementing a university-wide Task Force (or working group) to further explore identification of best practices and institutional expectations for mentoring graduate students.

Suggested Action: Colleges may want to encourage department discussions about the value of graduate student mentoring and advising in their programs. In particular,

consideration should be given to the mentoring of graduate students at both the master's and doctoral levels when determining workload/effort.

- **Results suggested that the majority of students who reported being discriminated against or sexually harassed did not report the incident. Themes in the reasons for not disclosing were 1) concerns about retaliation or negative consequences, 2) not being aware of where to report these incidents, and 3) a belief that nothing would be done.**

Action: Additional information is needed to better understand students' reasons for not disclosing discrimination and/or sexual harassment. Climate surveys in the future will specifically ask if students are aware of where to report such incidents.

Suggested Action: University leadership may want to review current policies, and the mechanisms utilized at the institution to inform students. In particular, identifying approaches to better informing graduate students about resources may be useful. It will be important to engage in collaborative efforts with stakeholders such as the Dean of Students, Campus Operations, and the Human Resource Services at Boise State.