

# Academic Incivility and the Graduate/Professional Student Experience:

Summary of Spring 2011 Survey of UMN-TC Graduate and Professional Students

## *Introduction*

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In Spring 2011 the Student Conflict Resolution Center (SCRC) surveyed all UMN-TC graduate and professional students to assess the scope, manifestations, and effects of academic incivility on this population. Just over 3300 students responded, about 20% of those surveyed. Academic harassment was defined as hostile, intimidating, or threatening behavior which interferes with the ability to work or study.

Seventeen percent, down from 19% in 2007, reported being harassed by such behavior as hostile communication and threats to academic and employment status. Students reported being harassed most often by faculty who were not their advisers. Twenty percent reported the harassment, those who did not report said they feared retaliation or a negative impact on their career; half said that they didn't believe anyone would help them. Thirty percent of those who did report being harassed felt that they had been retaliated against as a result of reporting the harassment.

Seventy-nine percent, down from 83% in 2007, reported that the harassment somewhat or completely interfered with their ability to work or study. Thirty-six percent, down from 44% in 2007, of those who experienced harassment reported they considered leaving the U as a result. Eighteen percent, down from 29% in 2007, of students who observed another student being harassed considered leaving the U as a result of the harassment.

## Survey Response Rates

Total UMNTC graduate/professional students	17,140
Total survey participants	3,379

### *By gender*

Female	2,016
Male	1,363

### *By citizenship status*

Not indicated	23
Citizen	2,730
Temporary Resident/International Student	503
Permanent Resident	96

### *By ethnicity*

Not specified	140
Hawaiian	2
International	503
African American	73
American Indian	28
Asian	194
Hispanic	69
Caucasian	2,323

### *Student survey response totals by college affiliation*

Academic Health Center	15
Continuing Education	5
Dentistry	88
Education and Human Development	149
Food, Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences	1
Law	180
Management, Carlson	242
Medical School	339
Nursing	52
Pharmacy	87
Public Health	151
Veterinary Medicine	92
Graduate School	1,978

### *Student survey response totals by academic plan*

Medicine MD	248
Business Administration MBA	242
Law JD	177
Veterinary Medicine DVM	90
Pharmacy Pharm D	87

## Academic Incivility and the Graduate Student Experience

Dentistry DDS	85
Social Work MSW	74
Public Policy MPP	70
Chemistry PhD	52
Teaching M Ed	52
Miscellaneous	2,202

## Harassment Experience Questions

Students were asked a series of 42 questions. The first section of the survey consisted of demographic information. The second and third sections of the survey were contingencies – either personally experiencing harassment as defined below or observing another student experiencing the behavior in question. If a student reported they had not been harassed (after being provided the definition), the student would proceed to being asked if they had observed another student being harassed.

Within the “personally experienced” and “observed” contingencies, there were two subdivisions: (1) students who reported the harassment and what their experience of reporting was, and (2) students who did not report the behavior and why they did not. Finally students were asked about the effects of the harassment personally and academically. Excerpts from the 680 comments made by respondents follow the quantitative report.

Have you (Q11) experienced harassment or (Q26) observed another graduate student being harassed while at the U of M?

(Harassment is behavior that is offensive, intimidating, or hostile which interferes with the ability to work or study)

	<b>Personally Experienced</b>	<b>Observed</b>
Yes	565 (17%)	535 (16%)
No	2,736 (83%)	2,766 (84%)

What were the manifestations of the harassing behavior?

Verbal hostility	323 (57%)	342 (65%)
Talking negatively about you	258 (46%)	202 (38%)
Hostile electronic communication	152 (27%)	168 (32%)
Denial of access to resources	130 (23%)	101 (19%)
Threats to academic status	128 (23%)	139 (26%)
Romantic/sexual advances	73 (13%)	78 (15%)
Threats to employment status	63 (11%)	78 (15%)
Unwanted or threatened physical contact	41 (7%)	34 (6%)
Other	90 (16%)	47 (9%)

By whom were you harassed/Who was exhibiting the harassing behavior that you observed?

Faculty (non-advisor)	255 (46%)	246 (46%)
Student	216 (39%)	216 (41%)
Staff	184 (33%)	145 (28%)
Graduate Advisor	117 (21%)	135 (25%)
Administrator	33 (6%)	16 (3%)

Did you report the harassing behavior?

Yes	118 (21%)	49 (9%)
No	446 (79%)	486 (91%)

Where did you report the harassing behavior?

Advisor	39 (34%)	16 (33%)
Department Chair	39 (34%)	10 (21%)
DGS	29 (25%)	10 (21%)
Program Director	22 (19%)	15 (31%)
Office of Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action	12 (12%)	1 (2%)
Supervisor	10 (9%)	5 (10%)
Chief Resident	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
Other	49 (42%)	14 (29%)

How satisfied were you with the handling of your complaint?

Completely dissatisfied	30 (26%)	6 (13%)
Somewhat dissatisfied	25 (21%)	12 (26%)
No opinion	9 (8%)	9 (19%)
Somewhat satisfied	39 (33%)	14 (30%)
Completely satisfied	14 (12%)	6 (13%)

Were there things that could have been done to improve the reporting process and how your complaint was handled?

Yes	67 (58%)	26 (55%)
No	49 (42%)	21 (45%)

Did you experience retaliation after reporting your complaint?

Yes	34 (30%)	9 (19%)
No	81 (70%)	38 (81%)

What prevented you from reporting the harassment?

Fear of impact on career	240 (54%)	128 (26%)
Fear of retaliation	234 (53%)	148 (31%)
Did not believe anyone would help	217 (49%)	162 (33%)
Did not believe it was serious enough	204 (46%)	130 (27%)
Unsure of where to go	151 (34%)	99 (20%)
Shame/embarrassment	82 (18%)	[not asked]
Not enough time	80 (18%)	[not asked]

Believe individuals in authority already knew	[not asked]	123 (25%)
Did not feel it was my place	[not asked]	282 (58%)

Has the harassment kept you from performing to the best of your ability?

No opinion	44 (8%)	111 (21%)
Did not interfere	72 (13%)	202 (38%)
Somewhat interfered	341 (61%)	200 (38%)
Completely interfered	101 (18%)	18 (3%)

Did the harassment you experienced lead you to do something different while at the U?

Avoided the person	348 (62%)	229 (45%)
Changed work study routine to avoid harasser	140 (25%)	53 (10%)
Changed classes	85 (15%)	43 (8%)
Changed advisor	39 (7%)	14 (3%)
Changed program plan	38 (7%)	16 (3%)
Changed area of study	36 (6%)	7 (1%)
Changed committee member	34 (6%)	15 (3%)
Changed place of employment	25 (4%)	10 (2%)
Considered but not yet taken action	70 (12%)	45 (9%)
No	93 (17%)	201 (39%)
Other	96 (17%)	48 (9%)

Has the harassment caused you to consider leaving the U?

Yes	203 (36%)	94 (18%)
No	357 (64%)	435 (82%)

Has the harassment you experienced affected you in any of the following ways?

Anxiety	455 (85%)	230 (66%)
Excessive thoughts about the harassment	327 (61%)	137 (39%)
Loss of concentration	321 (60%)	105 (30%)
Feeling edgy/irritable	313 (59%)	145 (42%)
Feeling depressed	286 (54%)	92 (27%)
Disrupted sleep	252 (47%)	63 (18%)
Delayed academic progress	196 (37%)	54 (16%)
Feeling unsafe	131 (25%)	77 (22%)
Other	72 (13%)	40 (12%)

## Qualitative Analysis

The last question on the survey, “Please feel free to write any comments you would like to make regarding this topic” elicited 680 comments from 543 respondents. The responses were divided into four categories:

- 1 – those which expressed a serious concern and reflected a negative experience, 14%
- 2 – those which reflected a somewhat negative experience, 22%
- 3 – those which made suggestions to remedy a problem, provide constructive criticism, 25%
- 4 – those which expressed a positive experience, 39%

All identifying information has been redacted to protect confidentiality; some comments have been edited as indicated by “...”.

### Examples – Category 1:

“The harassment I experienced from a faculty member...has made me feel sad, anxious, and depressed. It has made my doubt myself and caused me to contribute less in fear of failing. It has made me think and speak badly about my graduate program the U of M.”

“...It has negatively impacted my self-confidence, and has discouraged and distracted me from doing my best work. I came into my graduate program with an extremely strong academic record, engaged with my work, and interested in working hard to do the best job that I could. It...has sapped much of this enthusiasm and confidence... I have experienced anxiety and depression...”

“The harassment was excessive criticism of a graduate student by the PI while I was working in the lab. S/he would continually criticize the student and remark, “Are you stupid or something?” often. The student is no longer at the university.”

“I will leave this university with a sense of frustration, disappointment, and miss opportunity.”

“I do not trust anyone in the department. I do not feel safe to report this problem... I fear retaliation and fear I will do more harm than good by reporting the issue. I feel stuck and trapped. I want to do well in my course of study but this person has caused me so much stress. I am now failing.”

“I am disheartened by the prevalence of harassment on campus and the ineffectual options that trainees being harassed have to deal with it. I know many trainees that are leaving academia in general because of the prevalence of this culture in academia. Academia is losing its brightest and best because it refuses to deal with high profile tenured faculty that don’t know how to interact with others.

### Examples – Category 2

“There is a known pattern of hostile behavior by faculty in the department that is an accepted part of the department culture. It is stressful and hard for many grad students to adapt to.”

“As a new graduate student, I was unsure of what is “acceptable” behavior in academia. Overall, it seems like faculty can get away with a lot of things that, in my previous professional experiences, would have gotten someone fired... It is too bad, because so much damage has already been done. I can’t imagine wanting to continue my education here now.”

“I had a bad experience after reporting the inappropriate behavior because the department pressured me to make it formal. All I wanted was to let people know what was going on to protect future students and informally provide the department with data...they pressured me to go formal and I refused. The department’s response harmed me more than the abusive event...”

“I think the university needs to be more clear or make policies regarding electronic bullying.”

“I think there is not enough clarity about what is ethically acceptable when it comes to faculty dating their students. I have heard of other people who have worked in my lab that my advisor has dated or tried to date, now he’s dating a grad student in another department, but I still feel like it’s weird and not very appropriate... I’m here to study and learn and be taken seriously as a colleague in my field. If professors need more dating opportunities they need to leave campus and go elsewhere, and not use their students as a pool of potential mates.”

“I was completely surprised at the level of harassment at the (name of program/school). I plan to do something about it when I graduate.”

### Examples – Category 3

“Too many professors try to be friends and cross the line. They need reminders about the types of jokes and conversations that are appropriate. Yes, we’re graduate students and likely older (more like them), but that doesn’t mean we want to be friends. Stay my professor and act as a mentor and teacher.”

“This problem is rampant and there doesn’t appear to be a solution. As graduate students, we are constantly reminded (sometimes explicitly by faculty/directors/advisors) that we have little to no power, and it seems that any attempt to report or resolve harassment will only cause more problems for us. Wish this were different.”

“Please do not make any attempt to contact me regarding this situation. I’m about to graduate and would like just to be done with the U.”

“Faculty need to be held accountable for their behavior, just like the rest of us.”

“Most faculty have not worked in a professional environment. They don’t realize how their behavior would get them fired in any other work environment. The department head is only



interested in protecting the department from lawsuits or illegal activity but is not interested in creating a culture that would lead to the highest productivity for everyone.”

“...When I started graduate school I thought that I would eventually want to pursue a faculty position. Now I plan to open a bakery when I graduate.”

### Examples – Category 4

“This is great that it’s being addressed. There should be zero tolerance for this type of behavior.”

“Please feel free to contact me via my email or the phone numbers in my country below. It is my pleasure to support any information regarding this research.”

“The graduate school is a great environment to work in, I have never seen any harassment issues on this campus.”

“The majority of my classes are on-line.”

“I haven’t encountered or witnessed anything but I appreciate the U taking this seriously.”

“Thanks for conducting this survey and help us build a better academic community.”

All comments for each question, redacted to preserve confidentiality, are available from SCRC upon request.

### Survey Support

The Student Conflict Resolution Center thanks the Office of Measurement Services (and Shelly Wymer) for ongoing support in the administration and interpretation of the survey.