

# Academic Incivility and the Graduate/Professional Student Experience:

## Summary of Fall 2017 Survey of UMN-TC Graduate and Professional Students

### *Introduction*

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In fall 2017, 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 2,600 students responded, about 16% of those surveyed. Table 1 compares the sample to the overall population and demonstrates that individuals responded at rates roughly proportional to their associated college size. Women, Caucasians, and U.S. citizens each responded at rates greater than expected based on the population size; groups that were each overrepresented in the three previous iterations of the survey.

Academic harassment was defined as hostile, intimidating, or threatening behavior which interferes with the ability to work or study. Twenty-four percent of respondents, down from 30% in 2014, reported being harassed by such behavior as hostile communication and threats to academic and employment status. Romantic or sexual comments as harassing behavior were up significantly from 2014; 21% reported experiencing (12% in 2014) and 28% observed (16% in 2014). Students reported being harassed by: a student (49%), non-adviser faculty (39%), or their graduate adviser (15%). Twenty-three percent reported the harassment to the institution. Forty-four percent indicated feeling somewhat or complete dissatisfaction with how their complaint was handled. Of those who did not report, a majority did not believe anyone would help them and/or feared retaliation. Of those who did report the harassment, 28% percent said they had been retaliated against as a result of reporting, down from 42% in 2014.

Among students reporting academic harassment, 78% indicated that the harassment somewhat or completely interfered with their ability to work or study. Thirty-six percent, down from 40% in 2014, of those who experienced harassment reported they considered leaving the U as a result. Twenty-one percent reported observing another student being harassed; 26% of those observing harassment considered leaving the U as a result.

**Table 1. Survey Response Rates**

	<b>Population</b>	<b>Sample</b>
UMNTC Graduate/Professional Students	16,181	2,601
<i>By Gender</i>		
Female	8,740 (54.0%)	1,598 (61.4%)
Male	7,394 (45.7%)	1,000 (38.5%)
Undeclared	47 (0.3%)	3 (0.1%)
<i>By Citizenship Status</i>		
Not indicated / No value	733 (4.5%)	101 (3.9%)
Citizen	11,723 (72.5%)	2,066 (79.4%)
Temporary Resident / International Student	3291 (20.3%)	380 (14.6%)
Permanent Resident	434 (2.7%)	54 (2.1%)
<i>By Ethnicity</i>		
Not specified / No value	945 (5.8%)	71 (2.8%)
International	3,294 (20.4%)	376 (15%)
Black	579 (3.6%)	74 (3%)
American Indian	230 (1.4%)	44 (1.8%)
Asian and Pacific Islander	1,150 (7.1%)	163 (6.5%)
Hispanic	513 (3.2%)	89 (3.6%)
Caucasian	9,470 (58.5%)	1,688 (67.4%)
<i>Student Survey Response Totals by College Affiliation</i>		
Academic Health Center	95 (0.6%)	17 (0.7%)
Biological Sciences	117 (0.7%)	29 (1.1%)
Continuing Education	250 (1.6%)	40 (1.5%)
Dentistry	585 (3.6%)	86 (3.3%)
Design	263 (1.6%)	39 (1.5%)
Education and Human Development	2,251 (13.9%)	348 (13.4%)
Food, Ag. and Nat. Resource Sciences	634 (3.9%)	119 (4.6%)
Law	622 (3.8%)	122 (4.7%)
Liberal Arts	1,655 (10.2%)	308 (11.8%)
Management, Carlson	1,756 (10.9%)	206 (7.9%)
Medical School	1,880 (11.6%)	319 (12.3%)
Nursing	516 (3.2%)	76 (2.9%)
Pharmacy	569 (3.5%)	91 (3.5%)
Public Health	979 (6.1%)	186 (7.2%)
Public Affairs	473 (2.9%)	113 (4.3%)
Science and Engineering	2,630 (16.3%)	340 (13.1%)
Veterinary Medicine	499 (3.1%)	97 (3.7%)
Graduate School	407 (2.5%)	65 (2.5%)

## Harassment Experience Questions

Students were asked a series of 33 questions. The survey was split into sections of contingencies – either personally experiencing harassment as defined below or observing another student experiencing the behavior in question. If a student indicated 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 report. Finally, students were asked about the effects of the harassment personally and academically. Excerpts from the 450 comments made by respondents follow this quantitative summary.

Have you (Q2) experienced harassment or (Q17) 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)

	Personally Experienced	Observed
Yes	595 (24%)	505 (21%)
No	1,910 (76%)	1,930 (79%)

What were the manifestations of the harassing behavior?

Verbal hostility	323 (59%)	309 (65%)
Talking negatively about you	245 (45%)	177 (37%)
Hostile electronic communication	141 (26%)	148 (31%)
Denial of access to resources	122 (22%)	125 (26%)
Romantic/sexual comments	118 (21%)	134 (28%)
Threats to academic status	105 (19%)	127 (27%)
Threats to employment status	64 (12%)	66 (14%)
Unwanted or threatened physical contact	62 (11%)	74 (15%)
Other	89 (16%)	41 (9%)

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

Fellow Student/Resident	266 (49%)	233 (49%)
Faculty (non-adviser)	215 (39%)	211 (44%)
Graduate Adviser	82 (15%)	105 (22%)
Supervisor	39 (7%)	24 (5%)
Program Director	31 (6%)	40 (8%)
Administrator	30 (5%)	27 (6%)
Hospital Staff	28 (5%)	13 (3%)
Residency Program Staff	4 (1%)	12 (3%)
Other	80 (15%)	27 (6%)

Did you report the harassing behavior to the University of Minnesota?

Yes	126 (23%)	51 (11%)
No	425 (77%)	431 (89%)

Where did you report the harassment?

Adviser	31 (25%)	11 (22%)
Student Conflict Resolution Center	31 (25%)	6 (12%)
DGS	29 (24%)	10 (20%)
Department Chair	28 (23%)	13 (27%)
Office of Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action	26 (21%)	10 (20%)
Program Director	25 (20%)	14 (29%)
Supervisor	12 (10%)	5 (10%)
Chief Resident	2 (2%)	0 (0%)
Other	42 (34%)	12 (24%)

How satisfied were you with the handling of your complaint?

Completely satisfied	27 (22%)	3 (6%)
Somewhat satisfied	30 (24%)	18 (37%)
No opinion	12 (10%)	7 (14%)
Somewhat dissatisfied	25 (20%)	14 (29%)
Completely dissatisfied	29 (24%)	7 (14%)

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

Yes	74 (61%)	28 (57%)
No	48 (39%)	21 (43%)

Did you experience retaliation after reporting your complaint?

Yes	34 (28%)	13 (27%)
No	88 (72%)	35 (73%)

What prevented you from reporting the harassment?

Did not believe anyone would help	218 (52%)	148 (35%)
Fear of retaliation	210 (50%)	122 (29%)
Did not feel it was serious enough	197 (47%)	94 (22%)
Fear of impact on future career	187 (44%)	93 (22%)
Unsure of where to go	133 (32%)	95 (22%)
Shame/embarrassment	101 (24%)	17 (4%)
Not enough time	93 (22%)	36 (8%)
Believe individuals in authority already knew	84 (20%)	112 (26%)
Did not feel it was my place	[not asked]	249 (58%)
Other	64 (15%)	97 (23%)

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

Somewhat interfered	318 (59%)	152 (32%)
Completely interfered	104 (19%)	31 (7%)
Did not interfere	72 (13%)	199 (42%)
No opinion	45 (8%)	92 (19%)

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

Yes, avoided the person	348 (65%)	189 (42%)
Yes, changed work/study routine to avoid harasser	145 (27%)	51 (11%)
Yes, changed classes, schedule or rotations	70 (13%)	29 (6%)
Yes, changed committee members or teams	42 (8%)	13 (3%)
Yes, changed adviser	38 (7%)	10 (2%)
Yes, changed program plan	34 (6%)	17 (4%)
Yes, changed place of employment	27 (5%)	11 (2%)
Yes, changed area of study, program, or specialty	26 (5%)	11 (2%)
Yes, other changes made	94 (18%)	45 (10%)
Considered making a change, but not yet taken action	61 (11%)	60 (13%)
No, I don't plan to do anything differently	83 (15%)	157 (35%)

Has the harassment caused you to consider leaving the U?

Yes	192 (36%)	103 (22%)
No	345 (64%)	362 (78%)

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

Anxiety	413 (82%)	183 (61%)
Excessive thoughts about the harassment	333 (66%)	124 (42%)
Loss of concentration	314 (62%)	115 (39%)
Feeling edgy/irritable	310 (61%)	149 (50%)
Feeling depressed	262 (52%)	89 (30%)
Disrupted sleep	244 (48%)	67 (22%)
Feeling unsafe	182 (36%)	77 (26%)
Delayed academic progress	164 (32%)	44 (15%)
Other	58 (11%)	43 (14%)

## Qualitative Analysis

The last question on the survey, “Please feel free to write any comments you would like to make regarding this topic” elicited 450 comments. The responses were analyzed and sorted into the following five categories. Percentages reflect the number of comments in that category:

- 1 – Serious concern, negative experience, 26%
- 2 – Moderately negative experience, 33%
- 3 – Somewhat positive experience, 5%
- 4 – Positive experience, 20%
- 5 – Suggestions to remedy a problem, provide constructive criticism, 16%

All identifying information has been redacted to protect confidentiality. Some comments have been edited for clarity; the original meaning has been preserved.

### Examples – Category 1 (Serious Concern, Negative):

“I don't know what needs to be done to change academic culture such that it no longer fosters abusive people and nurtures toxic relationship dynamics, but it needs to happen fast. It is absolutely unacceptable that it seems impossible to remove abusive professors and advisers from the University.”

“I know that the department and university administrators are aware of this professor's continued harassment of multiple students and it does not appear anything is being done. Furthermore, because this professor's colleagues are aware I feel it gives other professors the understanding that their behavior toward students may not have consequences and this impacts all of our experiences.”

“I tried talking to my program director about why I had a negative experience during my rotation and the hostility I faced. Without knowing anything about the situation, he told me that I am the problem. I feel entirely alone with no support or guidance from the people who are supposed to be my mentors. I fear retaliation if I try to take this situation any higher.”

“I feel like there is nothing I can do but leave the program. It makes me sad because this was my dream.”

“I am a woman in a heavily male dominated environment ... I have heard people make racist, sexist, and homophobic comments; I have had male classmates invade my personal space in class and I was even groped in the hallway of my department right outside my office by a fellow classmate ... this environment is toxic to women and that this is the reason my field has such a low representation of them.”

“Rotations are so high stakes. With over \$200,000 of student loan debt just to get to the clinical year and your entire grade hanging on one person's opinion of you during your rotation, you have no hope of support. You just have to grit your teeth and bear whatever comes at you. Otherwise all your work will be in vain and you will still be \$200,000 in debt with no career. I hope this explains the enormous pressure that underlies the professional experience. Now add abuse to that and it's easy to see why so many students have emotional and mental trauma.”

“The amount of power faculty have over grad students—in the sense that a single person can make or break our career—is terrifying. And even if you report and get some kind of resolution, you still risk your reputation and ability to get good recommendations not just from that faculty member, but from the department.”

“The person that I have been harassed by and that I have observed harass others is a senior faculty person with tenure. This person has a history of this behavior and nothing has changed in the department to stop this person from behaving in an intimidating and threatening way. It makes it a very difficult place to work and study ... Even those who have spoken up about this person regret their decision as little has been done to change the faculty member's behavior.”

### Examples – Category 2 (Moderately Negative):

“Graduate students avoid particular faculty, both in coursework, on committees, and at social/professional functions, in an attempt to avoid intimidation or berating ... Multiple graduate students consider leaving the program for a less abusive environment, and several actively discourage prospective students from coming to the department.”

“I've been pursued/asked on dates by two different TA's, both shortly after the semester ended. I figure that's not against the rules since I was no longer their student, so that might have justified their pursuits in their minds. Granted, flirty banter began before the semester ended, so that might have been against any rules/guidelines. It was just uncomfortable, since we're all still here in the same darn building every day, year after year. I've been here for quite some time and so have the two guys. I'm not offended or hurt, I told them no and we moved on. I'm just annoyed that I have to deal with this in a professional environment. I'm a graduate student. I'm not forking up a ton of money to get a date, I'm here to learn.”

“I have two close friends who have been victims of harassment - two too many.”

“Have you seen other students harassed? Well, I've seen them overworked, I've seen them be made very anxious by certain committee and/or funding situations. In general, I think that the power dynamics in our current graduate education model are pretty tricky ... I've seen plenty of anxiety generated by not knowing where your next semester of funding is going to come from, or from faculty/committee members who don't get around to looking at or helping with aspects of a thesis (further delaying students' progress towards completion). Is this harassment or a systemic problem with our graduate education model?”

“The faculty member yelled at a student in front of our entire class - very uncomfortable for everyone”

“I have not experienced or directly observed harassment, but I know of a faculty member who other students have told me to avoid because of his history of harassment. Many students know about this.”

“My graduate advisor/boss has a reputation for being too stern and bad at communication. He has yelled during meetings, has made inappropriate comments, and does not always establish constructive or smooth methods of communication (e.g. very unavailable, slow to respond to email if at all, ‘aggressive’ communication). Just because he has a high-ranking position and is the boss does not mean he can talk down to us.”

“When an attending physician gets to yell at you (even when factually incorrect) and then reports you to your program director. Then you get told that ‘there is a hierarchy.’ Now I avoid this person at all costs.”

### Examples – Category 3 (Somewhat Positive):

“Thank you for taking steps to better the situation. That being said, I will believe it when I see it.”

“I would stop harassment if I were to see it. That type of behavior has no place at the University.”

“I just recently communicated with a professor about this problem. She communicated with the head of the program and told me that I don't need to do anything else about it. So I'm not sure what is going to happen.”

“it's possible I just wouldn't notice subtle harassment patterns if they happened to someone else.”

“I am in my first year of my masters program. I have not experienced harassment, nor have I seen it. But I am glad this survey exists to inform me about future resources if needed.”

“I have experienced harassment frequently, but never from colleagues or patients during residency. In my experience, the U has been a very welcoming and safe place to work/train. I think this is partly because of the overall environment at the U but also the specific environment of [my program].”

### Examples – Category 4 (Positive):

“I haven't personally experienced any harassment, although if encountered I would definitely speak out. Thanks for all you guys do to protect the academic community.”

“Just because I haven't personally encountered it, doesn't mean harassment doesn't exist. I'm glad effort goes into identifying causes and providing resources to those who suffer from such circumstances.”

“Overall, I think our environment is fantastic. I feel very secure and safe from being harassed, and, if I were to be, I know it would be handled swiftly by my department.”

“This is excellent way to take care of your students.”

“Honestly my time as a student at the U has been more free of harassment than other seasons of my life. My department is respectful and cooperative. I am grateful.”

“I am a student within [my] program. Although I have seen many cases of harassment and unprofessional behavior throughout my residency career in other programs, the culture within the program has been of high integrity and very professional. There are no issues with resident/student mistreatment in these programs that I am aware. I think it is excellent that the University is taking steps to reach out to students with surveys like this.”

“I am so glad to report I have not experienced or witnessed any foul play myself. I appreciate your attention to this topic.”

“I appreciate that you are doing this survey. While I have not experienced harassment, nor have I witnessed it, I understand that it does happen to people in many different places, including perhaps at the U.”

**Examples – Category 5 (Constructive Criticism):**

“I haven't seen many resources for harassment on campus. If they exist, they aren't very visible.”

“I think advisees or TAs should also be able to evaluate their advisors or the professors they work for.”

“it will be good if there can be some workshop or open course for this topic”

“Just a note that harassment is not often voiced so while I appreciate the gesture of this survey it's a reminder that many more instances go unvoiced.”

“The professors who are supposed to mentor graduate students have too much power on students and there are too little restrictions and effective ways of punishment on their misconduct from the University system. When recruiting new faculty members, there is lack of proper training on mentorship, research and boundaries. Students are the most vulnerable victims when it comes to harassment, bullies and power abuse ... My harasser is still out there, and nobody knows what happened when I was working in his lab ... I really hope the University could make a better, safer, more welcoming environment for every student ... Meanwhile, I urge the University top administrators and policymakers to listen to the students' voice, improve the professorship tenure and funding evaluation process, and build a more effective harassment resolution system.”

“Unless faculty, department chairs, and the university take a firm and transparent stance against those who treat their students inappropriately, nothing will change.”

“I am so glad you are looking into this. There are VAST power differentials at play within the University and it has taken me 2+ years to work up the courage to report my experience. Continue to do this important work!!”

“I am very unhappy with the solution when we try to report things. I feel like the system is in place as an outlet for students to complain, but never fixing the problem (especially when it comes to a professor harassing the student).”

### Survey Support

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