

Academic Incivility and the Graduate/Professional Student Experience:

Summary of Fall 2020 Survey of UMN-TC Graduate and Professional Students

Introduction

In fall 2020, during a year of virtual attendance, 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. Nearly 2,000 students responded, about 13% 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-one percent of respondents, down from 24% in 2017, reported being harassed by such behavior. Romantic or sexual comments as harassing behavior were down significantly from 2017, dropping from 21% to 12%. Verbal hostility, talking negatively, and hostile communication also increased and represented the highest reported manifestations. Students reported being harassed by a student (41%), non-adviser faculty (35%), or their graduate adviser (16%). Twenty-four percent reported the harassment to the institution. Fifty-four percent, up from 44% in 2017, indicated feeling somewhat or complete dissatisfaction with how their complaint was handled. Of those who did not report, a majority feared retaliation and/or did not believe anyone would help them. Of those who did report the harassment, 23% percent said they had been retaliated against as a result of reporting, down from 28% in 2017.

Among students reporting academic harassment, 84%, up from 78% in 2017, indicated that the harassment somewhat or completely interfered with their ability to work or study. Forty-one percent, up from 36% in 2017, of those who experienced harassment reported they considered leaving the U as a result. Nineteen percent reported observing another student being harassed; 19% of those observing harassment considered leaving the U as a result.

Table 1. Survey Response Rates

UMNTC Graduate/Professional Students

	Population 15587	Percent N=15587	Sample 1952	Percent N=1952
By Gender				
Female	8754	56%	1223	63%
Male	6871	44%	720	37%
Undeclared	176	1%	9	0%
Citizenship Status				
Not Indicated	905	6%	82	4%
Citizen	11356	73%	1575	81%
Temporary Resident/International	2879	18%	255	13%
Permanent Resident	447	3%	40	2%
Ethnicity				
Not Specified/no Value	567	4%	54	3%
International	2878	18%	255	13%
Black	732	5%	74	4%
American Indian	263	2%	26	1%
Asian and Pacific Islander	1348	9%	144	7%
Hispanic	1348	9%	77	4%
Caucasian	8922	57%	1309	67%
Student Survey Response Totals by College Affiliation				
Academic Health Center	162	1%	18	1%
Biological Sciences	119	1%	23	1%
Continuing Education	252	2%	38	2%
Dentistry	582	4%	64	3%
Design	222	1%	---	0%
Education and Human Development	1991	13%	28	1%
Food, Agric. and Nat. Res. Sciences	536	3%	253	13%
Law	704	5%	134	7%
Liberal Arts	1529	10%	212	11%
Management, Carlson	1488	10%	158	8%
Medical School	2277	15%	277	14%
Nursing	603	4%	61	3%
Pharmacy	542	3%	52	3%

Public Health	989	6%	124	6%
Public Affairs	428	3%	66	3%
Science and Engineering	2404	15%	231	12%
Veterinary Medicine	531	3%	70	4%
Graduate School	442	3%	52	3%

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	n=1885	Observed	n=1826
Yes	391	21%	352	19%
No	1494	79%	1474	81%

What were the manifestations of the harassing behavior? (check all that apply)

	n=391		n=352	
Verbal hostility	228	58%	227	64%
Talking negatively about you	168	43%	146	41%
Hostile electronic communication	131	34%	123	35%
Denial of access to resources	78	20%	90	26%
Threats to academic status	70	18%	75	21%
Romantic/sexual comments	47	12%	58	16%
Threats to employment status	37	9%	32	9%
Unwanted or threatened physical contact	25	6%	32	9%
Other	50	13%	29	8%

Academic Incivility and the Graduate Student Experience

By whom were you harassed/Who exhibited the harassing behavior you observed?
(check all that apply)

	n=391			n=352	
Fellow Student/Resident	160	41%	173	49%	
Faculty (non-adviser)	136	35%	151	43%	
Graduate Adviser	64	16%	68	19%	
Program Director	32	8%	30	9%	
Administrator	24	6%	22	6%	
Supervisor	21	5%	18	5%	
Hospital Staff	21	5%	19	5%	
Residency Program Staff	2	1%	6	2%	
Other	53	14%	20	6%	

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

	n=84			n=31	
Yes	84	24%	31	9%	
No	275	76%	305	91%	

Where did you report the harassment? (check all that apply)

	n=84			n=31	
Department Chair	20	24%	8	26%	
Adviser	20	24%	6	19%	
Student Conflict Resolution Center	20	24%	5	16%	
Office Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action	18	21%	7	23%	
Program Director	17	20%	4	13%	
DGS	14	17%	5	16%	
Supervisor	4	5%	4	13%	
Chief Resident	2	2%	0	0%	
Other	27	32%	5	16%	

How satisfied were you with the handling of your complaint?

	n=84			n=31	
Completely satisfied	9	11%	2	6%	
Somewhat satisfied	19	23%	6	19%	
No opinion	9	11%	7	23%	
Somewhat dissatisfied	25	30%	10	32%	
Completely dissatisfied	20	24%	6	19%	

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

		n= 84		n=31
Yes	54	64%	16	52%
No	28	33%	15	48%

Did you experience retaliation after reporting your complaint?

		n=84		n=31
Yes	19	23%	5	16%
No	63	75%	26	84%

What prevented you from reporting the harassment? (check all that apply)

		n=275		n=305
Did not feel it was my place	N/A		159	52%
Fear of retaliation	179	65%	116	38%
Did not believe anyone would help	162	59%	131	43%
Fear of impact on future career	148	54%	80	26%
Did not feel it was serious enough	108	39%	65	21%
Unsure where to go	85	31%	85	28%
Believe individuals in authority already knew	70	25%	101	33%
Shame/embarrassment	69	25%	11	4%
Not enough time	46	17%	29	10%
Other	46	17%	64	21%

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

		n=346		n=331
Somewhat interfered	215	62%	132	40%
Completely interfered	77	22%	18	5%
Did not interfere	27	8%	112	34%
No opinion	27	8%	69	21%

Did the harassment you experienced lead you to do something different while at the U? (check all that apply)

		n= 391		n=352
Yes, avoided the person	227	58%	156	44%
Yes, changed work/study routine to avoid harasser	114	29%	41	12%
Yes, changed classes, schedule or rotations	55	14%	23	7%
Yes, other changes made	53	14%	25	7%

Yes, changed committee members or teams	45	12%	10	3%
Considered making a change, but not yet taken	40	10%	32	9%
Yes, changed adviser	37	9%	9	3%
Yes, changed program plan	29	7%	8	2%
Yes, changed place of employment	24	6%	12	3%
Yes, changed area of study, program, or specialty	23	6%	7	2%
No, I don't plan to do anything differently	46	12%	119	34%

Has the harassment caused you to consider leaving the U?

	n=347		n=330	
Yes	142	41%	64	19%
No	205	59%	266	81%

Has the harassment you experienced affected you in any of the following ways?
(check all that apply)

	n= 391		n=352	
Anxiety	292	75%	153	43%
Excessive thoughts about the harassment	243	62%	101	29%
Feeling edgy/irritable	226	58%	109	31%
Loss of concentration	225	58%	91	26%
Feeling depressed	185	47%	73	21%
Disrupted sleep	180	46%	60	17%
Delayed academic progress	125	32%	39	11%
Feeling unsafe	121	31%	64	18%
Other	35	9%	23	7%

Qualitative Analysis

The last question on the survey, “Please feel free to write any comments you would like to make regarding this topic” elicited 347 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, 45%
- 2 – Moderately negative experience, 24%
- 3 – Somewhat positive experience, 15%
- 4 – Positive experience, 11%
- 5 – Suggestions to remedy a problem, provide constructive criticism, 5%

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):

“Harassment is definitely still very present in many forms. From sexual/intimidation to hazing environments.”

“It would be great if tenure meant academic freedom, but not the freedom to be a sexist oppressor. Hold tenured faculty accountable for their behavior toward others..”

“Many students have expressed harassment to many top administrators and nothing happened. Worse yet, they experienced retaliation and had to transfer to other states. There are other studies but I don’t believe anything will be accomplished or top administrators take responsibility.”

“I do not feel like the U of MN is a supportive environment for learning, teaching and working. Because so many issues are handled at the department level, a whole layer of gatekeeping exists if you are, as I am, in a pretty toxic and small program.

“Observing this type of behavior has resulted in me warning other potential PhD applicants about UMN and recommending them to other schools.”

“Please PLEASE do something to stop rewarding abuse in academia and include evaluation of faculty behavior and student treatment in tenure expectations and requirements. Otherwise the culture of academia will continue to tolerate and reward this type of toxic behavior and the abuse of students. “

“Tenured faculty seem to be able to get away with anything. The same tenured faculty also protect supervisors that behave terribly. ... Policies must be changed and power dynamics adjusted or this will continue.”

“The University of Minnesota needs to completely rework its tenure code to stop protecting predatory professors. Until that happens I know that nothing will change.”

Examples – Category 2 (Moderately Negative):

“...it is part of the culture in terms of how faculty treat students... these situations were symptoms of the huge power differential between faculty and doctoral students who have very few options for discussion or reporting unfair treatment”

"I feel like faculty could do more to correct comments made in class."

"... The same permissiveness that fuels innovation and experimentation also make room for toxicity and complacency. Staff and students are not particularly good secret keepers. And we often know when complaints have been submitted for faculty member or an administrator."

"Tenured faculty are allowed to get away with quite a bit too much."

"... I do feel like some faculty exude an air which makes you feel like you can never "say no" or never disagree. It isn't that I have explicitly been threatened. But I do fear that any dissonance on my part could result in professional consequences. I do witness poor advisor skills which border on the realm of academic bullying resulting in psychological distress."

"I have been criticized for not being polite enough with a professor who has sexually harassed me. I haven't reported it because this prof is funding me, and I'm desperate to finish the PhD and get out of here."

"I have also experienced lack of support for my disability and mental health. There doesn't seem anywhere to turn."

"This survey is a great tool, yet I have never seen the results become actionable. Harassment in the departments I have worked in are unacceptable."

Examples – Category 3 (Somewhat Positive):

"I have always been treated respectfully and professionally by faculty. I was surprised and disappointed to hear that students were treated poorly."

"I'm happy that you are investigating this issue. Being back in academia after the corporate world, I am reminded of the power differential between graduate students and professors."

"Great research topic, sharing my two cents. While I am a "high-performing, high achieving professional" at work, I have personally felt sharp toward others... Potential for harassment and bullying feel closely related in this season. Thanks!"

"I have not directly observed harassment, but I know that it has happened."

"Just because I have never seen it or experienced it does not mean harassment isn't happening."

"Attaining a graduate degree is not easy, and sometimes tensions rise ... but I have tried not to overstep boundaries and reach out to new mentors and advisors when I'm presented with new challenges."

"I think I have never seen harassment because I have a low standard for what I consider harassment or not."

"I treat this topic very seriously. It has not been an issue for me personally, but it is a topic of paramount importance to long-term student retention and University perception."

Examples – Category 4 (Positive):

"I have been fortunate to be in a very welcoming and supportive department that seems to actively go out of their way to support others."

“All my interaction with fellow students and teaching staff has been professional and appropriate which I hope would be the case in a graduate program.”

“Everyone I have encountered in my first few months of medical school at the University of Minnesota has been incredibly kind, welcoming, and professional.”

“I am aware of students who have been harassed and made to feel uncomfortable, but I have not witnessed it myself. I appreciate this survey on this topic.”

“I am hopeful that if people do experience harassment that they would feel safe reaching out to this resource.”

“I am very pleased to see that harassment is taken seriously by the University. Thank you for your efforts to protect students.”

“I feel that I know the resources to go to when I need assistance regarding a conflict.”

“Thank you for researching this important topic!”

Examples – Category 5 (Constructive Criticism):

“I think it would be great if the university could send out an email to students explaining what resources there are to deal with verbal harassment that has not been physical or aimed at one specific person. I feel like the university is not able to do anything until he has done something terrible, and it makes so many women in my class feel unsafe.”

“Do some faculty training to prevent these from happening. Check in with faculty with mental issues so that they have someone else to yell at.”

“I wish the U would emphasize where to turn for harassment from faculty to students.”

“I wish there was a structured system that graduate students can also evaluate faculty during the TA assignment “

“Spread awareness about the options to report”

“The University is large and there is no way the authority can see all the weirdness that has been taking place. However, please pass the Graduate Students Bill of Rights so we know how to defend ourselves with policy and arguments...Please take a step further by requires programs to be transparent about fundings and appointments. “

“This topic is pretty good. And I am lucky and have nothing bad to report. Thanks”

“I think more focus should be put on the mental health of graduate students in times like this. Most of us live away from our families and loved ones and being pressured to be productive is mentally draining.”

Survey Support

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