

# Improving the Advising and Mentoring of Graduate Students

Summary of Summer 2016 Survey of UMN-TC Graduate Students

## *Introduction*

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In summer 2016 the Student Conflict Resolution Center (SCRC) surveyed all UMN-TC graduate students to assess the level of satisfaction with their advising experiences. Of the 12,013 students surveyed, there were 1,732 respondents, or just over 14.4%. 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.

Students were asked, through a series of ten questions, to relate to their academic adviser based on their experiences over the past six months. These questions focused on communication with the adviser and the degree of the students' satisfaction with their advising.

Additionally, students were asked if they:

- had received an annual progress review for each year that they had been in the program
- had had significant difficulties with their adviser, and
- knew where to go for help to deal with problems with their adviser

Finally, the question was asked "If you could provide your adviser any advice on how to be a better adviser, what would you tell them? A text box was provided for the responses; 586 students provided comments. Students were offered the chance to speak confidentially about their concerns with SCRC by leaving their email address and 76 students requested a consultation.

The highest average response was to the statement: "I respect my adviser" and "My adviser treats me with respect." The lowest average response was to the statements "My adviser provides me with a clear understanding of my status related to progress towards graduation: and "I am satisfied with the amount of guidance I receive from my adviser." Twelve percent reported having significant difficulties with their adviser.

Survey Response Rates

	Population	Sample
Total UMN-TC graduate (non-professional) students	12,064	1,732
<i>By gender</i>		
Female	6,333 (52.5%)	1,026 (59.2%)
Male	5,702 (47.2%)	624 (36.0%)
Other	29 (0.0%)	83 (4.8%)
<i>By ethnicity</i>		
Not specified	432 (3.6%)	141 (8.1%)
African American	405 (3.4%)	41 (2.4%)
American Indian	158 (1.3%)	20 (1.2%)
Asian	658 (5.5%)	258 (14.9%)
Hispanic	322 (2.7%)	61 (3.5%)
Caucasian	7,252 (60.1%)	1,230 (71.0%)
<i>Are you in a PhD program?</i>		
Yes	5,238 (43.4%)	865 (50.7%)
No	6,826 (56.6%)	841 (49.3%)
<i>Are you an International Student?</i>		
Yes	2,824 (23.4%)	304 (17.8%)
No	9,240 (76.6%)	1402 (82.2%)
<i>Year in Grad School:</i>		
1		511 (29.9%)
2		522 (30.5%)
3		277 (16.2%)
4		162 (9.5%)
5		129 (7.5%)
6+		109 (6.4%)
Total		1,710 (100%)
<i>Have you passed your Oral Prelim?</i>		
Yes		407 (47.4%)
No		451 (52.6%)
Total		858 (100%)
<i>Student Survey Response Total by College Affiliation</i>		
Col of Food, Agr & Nat Res Sci	678 (5.6%)	147 (8.5%)
College of Design	252 (2.1%)	25 (1.4%)
School of Dentistry	88 (0.7%)	12 (0.7%)
School of Nursing	436 (3.6%)	68 (3.9%)
College of Biological Sciences	228 (1.9%)	26 (1.5%)
College of Veterinary Medicine	57 (0.5%)	12 (0.7%)
College of Cont. Education	291 (2.4%)	38 (2.2%)
Center for Allied Health	205 (1.7%)	15 (0.9%)
Humphrey Schl of Publ Affairs	379 (3.1%)	52 (3.0%)
School of Public Health	911 (7.6%)	146 (8.4%)

College of Sci and Engineering	2,574 (21.3%)	354 (20.4%)
Medical School	342 (2.8%)	65 (3.8%)
Carlson School of Management	1,650 (13.7%)	109 (6.3%)
Col of Educ/Human Development	2,330 (19.3%)	332 (19.2%)
College of Pharmacy	115 (1.0%)	16 (0.9%)
College of Liberal Arts	1,528 (12.7%)	246 (14.2%)
Not Specified	0 (0.0%)	69 (4.0%)
Total	12,064	1,732

### Advising Experience Questions

The following questions relate to your academic adviser based on your experience over the past 6 months: My adviser provides me with clear expectations regarding my program requirements...

My adviser provides me with clear expectations regarding my program requirements

Strongly Disagree	135 (8.1%)
Disagree	288 (17.2%)
Agree	683 (40.7%)
Strongly Agree	572 (34.1%)

My adviser is supportive.

Strongly Disagree	86 (5.1%)
Disagree	128 (7.6%)
Agree	533 (31.7%)
Strongly Agree	933 (55.5%)

My adviser treats me with respect.

Strongly Disagree	61 (3.7%)
Disagree	88 (5.3%)
Agree	474 (28.4%)
Strongly Agree	1,044 (62.6%)

My adviser helps me to be successful in my program.

Strongly Disagree	102 (6.1%)
Disagree	237 (14.2%)
Agree	564 (33.8%)
Strongly Agree	767 (45.9%)

My adviser provides me with a clear understanding of my status.

Strongly Disagree	138 (8.3%)
Disagree	375 (22.5%)
Agree	646 (38.7%)
Strongly Agree	510 (30.6%)

## Academic Incivility and the Graduate Student Experience

My adviser is accessible.

Strongly Disagree	115 (6.8%)
Disagree	194 (11.5%)
Agree	622 (36.9%)
Strongly Agree	754 (44.8%)

I am satisfied with the amount of guidance I receive from my adviser.

Strongly Disagree	179 (10.6%)
Disagree	369 (21.9%)
Agree	544 (32.3%)
Strongly Agree	593 (35.2%)

I would recommend my adviser to other students.

Strongly Disagree	161 (9.7%)
Disagree	227 (13.7%)
Agree	517 (31.2%)
Strongly Agree	752 (45.4%)

I am satisfied with my degree progress to date.

Strongly Disagree	87 (5.2%)
Disagree	196 (11.6%)
Agree	690 (40.8%)
Strongly Agree	717 (42.4%)

Have you had an annual progress review each year you have been in your current program?

Yes	1,040 (60.5%)
No	678 (39.5%)
Total	1,718 (100%)

I have had significant difficulties with my adviser.

Yes	206 (12.0%)
No	1,511 (88.0%)
Total	1,717 (100%)

I know where to go for help to deal with problems with my adviser.

Yes	75 (36.6%)
No	130 (63.4%)
Total	205 (100%)

## Qualitative Analysis

The last question on the survey, “If you could provide your adviser any advice on how to be a better adviser, what would you tell them?” elicited 586 comments.

The responses were divided into four categories:

- 1 – those which expressed a serious concern and reflected a negative experience, 6%
- 2 – those which reflected a somewhat negative experience, 13%
- 3 – those which made suggestions to remedy a problem, provide constructive criticism, 66%
- 4 – those which expressed a positive experience, 15%

Comments have been left as written, though all identifying information has been redacted to protect confidentiality; some comments have been edited as indicated by “...”.

### Examples- Category 1:

“If a student provides personal information in which they need advising since it is affecting their schooling please be supportive and understanding. I was placed on probation for sharing this information and was led down a difficult road. I am proud that I graduated but I did from the support of family and friends. I wish I had the support of my program but I went to school scared each day for my future. I was excited about attending the U of MN but now I won’t recommend my specific program to future students. If the advising changes, I will change my opinion. I am open to growth and development, but hope no one ever has to go through what I had to. I am sorry that this is not positive. I am a positive person but really was affected by my program’s actions. I hope no other student has to go through what I did. Again sorry for the poor result.”

“Yelling and berating members of the lab is not a good way to train individuals and it not conducive to the spreading of ideas necessary to advance scientific rigor/research.”

“To be kind, respectful, and specific. It’s not ok to agree to a series of weekly meetings and then each week have an excuse to not meet or to not meet in-person. Similarly, angry e-mails and feedback in all caps with five exclamation points is not going to make me understand your questions or concern more clearly, especially when they’re sent at 2am.”

“I would encourage my male adviser to be more aware of gender dynamics and falling into stereotypical potentially flirtatious and demeaning ways of interacting with me.”

“In meeting with my advisor and other U of MN staff and students, my advisor has “dissed” absent staff and students. S/he has made derogatory comments about absent staff and students. S/he has also made cruel in-person comments to people at meetings. I have been spared these in-person outburst. I would tell my advisor to be more circumspect and respectful.”

“It is very difficult to get in contact with my adviser. My emails and phone messages go unreturned for months. Nearly done with the program. I have never received any feedback on my final project.”

“Students are not pawns for a larger political game. I have never had such a terrible experience with a professional in academia before. We have 4 years together so even if you don’t like me, it would be beneficial for you to not be explicitly hurtful, not use me in whatever way you see fit, not trash talk me to other faculty (yes, I hear things), not questions my mental health simply because I challenged you on your mistakes, be supportive, don’t set me up for failure and please BE HONEST!!”

“Learn some people skills and be less selfish. My adviser intimidates his/her graduate students. We are not supposed to say any word around him/her. S/he gets angry over everything. The atmosphere is very negative. The graduate students and postdocs are very unhappy in this lab. Besides, s/he only wants things to be done for him/her, but s/he does close to nothing to help us be successful. Three people left the lab in 2 months.”

### Examples- Category 2:

“Not all PhD students want to become professionals at H1 universities. You shouldn’t treat graduate students as though this is the only respectable career path for them. It’s insensitive (not to mention disheartening) to “give up” on students who express interests in other career goals. You should be as helpful to students who wish to enter the private sector or to teach as you are to those who wish to remain academic researchers.”

“I did not have any contact whatsoever with my advisor for the entire past academic year.”

“Don’t commit to deadlines you cannot keep, and don’t keep saying that you’ll just need another day or two every time a deadline passes for weeks and months at a time.”

“I know advisers are busy so it is helpful to know the best way to communicate. I don’t always feel like I can ask for time to discuss my progress because my adviser has many advisees and responsibilities.”

“I’m not even sure who my advisor is? I wasn’t aware we had advisors in grad school.”

“I would tell my advisor to improve their time management. It is not appropriate to wait many months for feedback on written documents, including theses.”

“I have asked my advisor to assist me with developing a path to graduation. I do not feel as if I have gotten that assistance.”

“I do not have an adviser or mentor. I need one and do not know how to go about getting one.”

### Examples- Category 3:

“It seems that many advisors in my department aren’t aware of all the program requirements, in which case it can be quite unclear how you are progressing as a student. It would be helpful if all advisors reviewed the program requirements so they could help students create a plan.”

“Set up more in-person meetings. The one we had was really helpful, and it would have been nice to meet again and have some short time to talk together personally.”

“Just try to be a bit nicer and show some respect and confidence in your students. I understand you have to be able to deal with criticism of your work in academia, but constant criticism really wears graduate students down.”

“Sometimes I just need to be told that I am doing a good job and that my advisor believes in me. No specifics necessary! Many students have ‘imposter syndrome,’ and often feel like their inadequacies will be discovered at any moment. Simply being told that you have something to say, or that your advisor has confidence in your ability to figure things out can make a big difference.”

“Please be mindful of potential equity concerns when working with students of color, students with various levels of SES, etc.... Also wish that there was a better balance with how advisors work with professional students who work full time. I feel treated more like a full time grad student, this is not my reality as my family and the duties of my career may come before my school work.”

“To keep things confidential and not ask students about other students.”

“I would appreciate it if you were more communicative. There have been emails I have sent that you have not returned, others that took far too long before I received a response. It would be nice if you checked in once and awhile; I haven’t heard anything from you in almost a year.”

“Provide more clarity regarding expectations, responsibilities, and authority. I know research involves a high degree of ambiguity, but understanding which resources are at my disposal, which decisions are up to me, and how to set realistic goals and boundaries would be really helpful in learning how to thrive in an academic environment.”

#### Examples- Category 4:

“None. S/he is absolutely the best. Smart, supportive, innovative, and kind.”

“I think my adviser is wonderful. S/he’s been extremely supportive and understanding, and always works hard to make sure that I’m making progress towards my degree.”

“Honestly, I just really appreciate that my advisor works so fastidiously and is a sincere person. S/he stands up for his/her employees and encourages us to be a supportive, considerate lab. The competitive environment of academia is sometimes frightening and s/he has built a bastion of hope in our department.”

“You take on a lot with your advisees and with promoting underrepresented groups in (program) – know that we appreciate all your support and guidance!”

“None really. S/he’s great, gives really good advice, and is very supportive. S/he’s also really good at figuring out ways to set deadlines and stick to them.”

“(My adviser) is an amazing adviser. S/he takes his/her time and engages with students in a very respectful and care. S/he gets excited when helping out which makes learning experience so positive. S/he comes out of his/her way to come to you and help you. All I would say is big thanks to him/her.”

## Academic Incivility and the Graduate Student Experience

“(My adviser) as well as (my adviser) are both selfless and exceptional advisors. I am extremely grateful and fortunate to learn under their guidance.”

“Sometimes students like me have troubles being confident, but that isn’t their advisor’s fault. You are an amazing advisor and go above and beyond to make me feel that you appreciate my work and believe in me. My insecurities are just something I have to keep working on, and I really appreciate your encouragement. I don’t want you to feel bad about not doing more because you are doing an incredibly awesome job.”

### 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.