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Results from Iowa State Female Graduate Student Needs Assessment Survey, July 2012

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Abstract

During the spring 2012 semester, a task force of graduate students, staff, and faculty created a survey to gather information from women graduate students about their experiences at Iowa State University (ISU). The survey was adapted from similar surveys at MIT and University of Maryland. Our survey had four main sections: (1) Campus climate, (2) Professional development and academic services, (3) Student workload and student services, (4) Wellness, family and housing.

Disciplines

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July 2012**

Task force members: Lorraine Acker, Elizabeth Asque, Glenda Bivens, Marilyn Cornish, Chuck Glatz, Julia Graden, Susana Hernandez, Bethany Juhnke, Kimberly LeVelle, Cindy Maroney, Santos Nunez, Craig Ogilvie, Angelica Reina, Alissa Stoehr, Judy Strand, and Emma White

During the spring 2012 semester, a task force of graduate students, staff, and faculty created a survey to gather information from women graduate students about their experiences at Iowa State University (ISU). The survey was adapted from similar surveys at MIT and University of Maryland. Our survey had four main sections:

- 1. Campus climate**
- 2. Professional development and academic services**
- 3. Student workload and student services**
- 4. Wellness, family and housing**

1,922 female graduate students were sent the survey on March 27, 2012—49.4% clicked on the survey link. Reminder emails were sent on April 4—13.3% clicked on the survey link—and on April 11—11.2% clicked on the survey link. The survey was closed on April 16. In total 654 students started the survey and 438 completed every question. This corresponds to a response rate of $438/1922 = 22.8\%$

The demographic breakdown of the responders is

Asian	Black/African American	Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	Latino/Hispanic	White	Native American	Other	Total
65	23	0	23	319	2	13	427

Master's degree	Graduate Certificate	Undeclared Graduate Student	PhD	Total
198	7	3	223	431

1. Campus climate

- 92% enjoy being a graduate student at ISU
 - Students in the College of Business (83.3%) and the interdisciplinary programs (84.4%) reported the lowest satisfaction rates.
 - The ethnic group that is less satisfied is Hispanic/Latinas, of which 86.7% enjoy being graduate students at ISU.
- 85% feel supported by their department/program
 - However, only 65% of students in the interdisciplinary programs feel supported; the lowest across groups.
 - Native American (0% out of 2 responders), Asian (79%), and Hispanic/Latinas (80%) report the lowest feelings of support by their department/program.
- We asked students if certain judgments, if any, have a negative impact on their studies and scholarship.
 - 51% indicated gender, race, sexuality, age, or other judgments had negatively impacted their work.
 - Examples of other include language, mental illness, and distance education.
 - Across colleges, Human Sciences, Liberal Arts and Sciences, and the interdisciplinary programs all had high rates of negative judgments.
 - By ethnicity, 16 of 24 (67%) African American/Black women, 2 of 2 (100%) Native American women, 6 of 15 Latinas (40%), and 14 of 364 White women (4%) report that judgments related to race have had a negative impact.
- 64% stated their department or research group does not discuss issues related to gender, race, sexuality, and age
 - Agriculture (81%) and Business (79%) report no discussions related to gender, race, sexuality, and age
 - Latinas (60%) and Asians (61%) report the lowest rates of ignoring these topics, i.e. 40% have participated in these discussions.
- 76% feel a sense of community among female graduate students in their program/department
 - College of Engineering (58%) reports the lowest sense of community with females
- 50% feel a sense of community among females students at ISU
 - College of Design (35%) and College of Business (42%) report the lowest sense of community among female students at ISU
 - African American/Black women report the highest (65%) sense of community
- 74% would like to see more connections with other female graduate students
 - This is especially noticeable for international students, Latinas, and African American/Black women

2. Academic Climate and Professional Development

- A large proportion of respondents share their scholarly (84%) and professional ideas (77%) with their faculty advisors.
- 44% have experienced inappropriate or negative stereotypes and 46% have observed inappropriate or negative stereotypes
- We asked students about the mentorship experiences and 52% have received one-on-one mentoring from a female faculty member, female post-doc, or other female senior researcher
- 86% feel supported by their faculty advisors and 88% feel confident in their abilities to handle difficult academic situations in an academic environment.
- 70% reported that the environment in their department or research group support a work-life balance.
- When asked about their comfort level in having difficult conversations about academic issues related to gender, it was clear that female faculty and other female graduate students provide the most support. Fewer respondents are comfortable discussing issues with male faculty and male graduate students (see table below).

Respondents were also asked if they felt comfortable having difficult conversations about academic issues related to their gender with the following individuals:

	% agreed
Female faculty	81%
Male faculty	59%
Female graduate students	89%
Male graduate students	66%

3. Services and Transition to ISU

- We asked students about their awareness, use, and efficacy of university or college services. For the most part, students who used a campus service found it useful. There are a large number of students who are not aware services are available to them.
- The most significant differences in the percentage of students who are aware of a service and have not used the service are public speaking workshops (91%), entrepreneurship workshops (91%), and conflict resolution trainings (96%)
- Students were asked about their transition to ISU. We split the students into two groups (prior degree at ISU or not). However, we inadvertently asked these two groups different wordings of the same question, so the responses are not easily comparable.
 - 148 students or 32.3% did complete their previous degrees at ISU. Of these 148 students, 62% indicated that their transition to campus had not been difficult.
 - 310 students or 67.7% indicated not having completed their previous degrees at ISU. Of these 310 students, 16.7% indicated that because they had not completed their previous degrees at ISU their transition to campus had been difficult.
- Students in the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences and College of Human Sciences had the highest rates of participating in new graduate student orientation programs.
- By ethnicity, white students and international students have the highest rates of participating in orientation programs
- When organized by graduate level, PhD students have the largest participation rates in orientation programs. Certificate students participate in orientation programs at very low rates.
- We asked students about their awareness, use, and efficacy of student services. Following the similar trend for campus and university services, students who used a student service found it useful. There still are a large proportion of students who are not aware certain services are available to them.
- The most significant differences in the percentage of students aware of a service and their use are Disability resources (94%) and Vocational rehabilitation services (95%). The Thielen Health Center (21%) and Campus Recreation services (39%) had the lowest percent difference of awareness and use.

4. Wellness, advocacy, family & housing

- 415 or 98% of respondents indicated having some form of health insurance coverage.
 - Of these students, 93% were covered by ISU’s Students and Scholars program or by their assistantship/fellowship
 - It is important to note that 30% of the sample did not answer the question so we do not know about their health insurance coverage.
- Students were asked to select three issues that were most important to them. Graduate student pay/stipends and assistantship workload are the two most important issues. These issues remain most important across colleges, ethnicity, and graduate level.
- Although 80% of respondents indicated a desire to socialize with other graduate students, those in VetMed (64%) reported the lowest rates. Similarly, by ethnicity, those who choose not to disclose their ethnicity (62%) and White students (78%) reported the lowest rates of wanting to socialize with other graduate students.
- 56% of students come to campus during summer break, while only 39% do so during the Thanksgiving break.
- Students were asked to rate their emotional, mental, and physical health on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1= poor and 10=excellent. The open-ended responses presented earlier provide information about the impact graduate school attendance has on wellness.

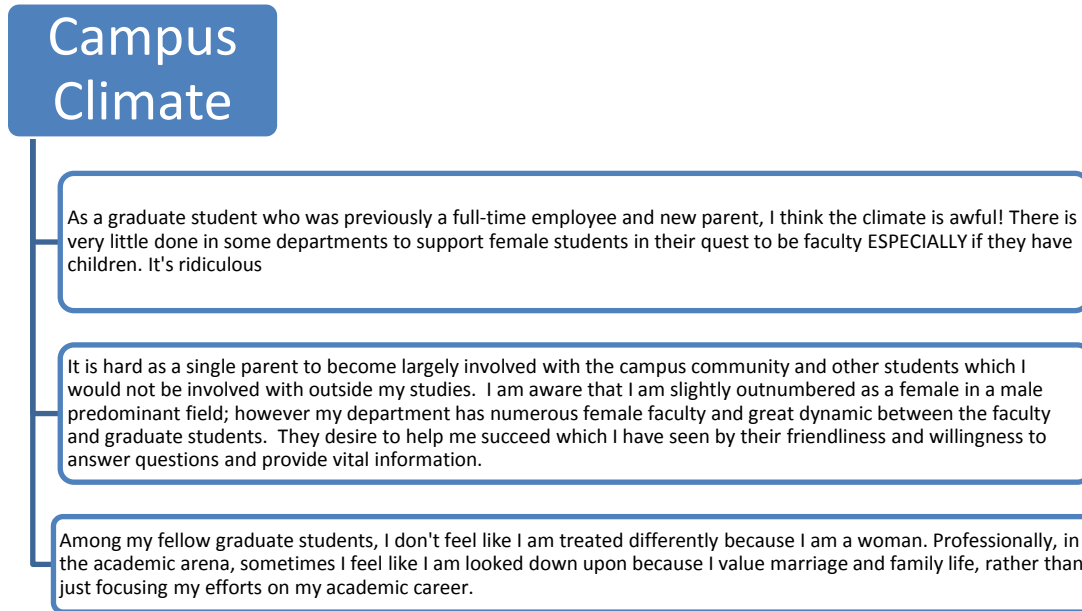
Emotional	7.6
Mental	8
Physical	7.6

- 20% of respondents currently have children, and 29% are considering having children during graduate school.
- Students were asked to select three family issues that were most important to them. Family leave benefits and daytime childcare are the two most important issues. A high number (43 %) of respondents indicated none of the issues were important to them.
- Students were asked about their living and housing arrangements. A large proportion (97%) pay rent or mortgage and most students pay between \$501-600.
- 41% of respondents use CyRide as their primary method of getting to and from campus. 41% of respondents primarily use a car or motorcycle.

Student Voices

The survey included six open-ended questions for students to share their personal perspectives on campus climate, academic climate, professional development, transition, student organizations, and health and wellness. We include a representative sample of the comments from each section.

Campus climate: Please describe what you feel the campus climate is like for you as a female graduate student at Iowa State University



Academic Climate: Please describe what the academic climate is like for you as a female graduate student at Iowa State University

Academic Climate

In general, I feel like the climate for a female graduate student is no different than for a male, until it comes to having a child, which is obviously more of a time commitment to females than males. My immediate climate from my department and my committee members have been very supportive of me having a child. No other female graduate students in my department have had children, but female postdocs have and for some of them, their climate (i.e. the department and their adviser) have not supportive of them having children, which creates an overall negative perspective for other post-docs and graduate students.

The most striking problem with being a female graduate student is the lack of official and reasonable maternity leave. If a policy was established, I think this would help break stereotypes and ill-will towards taking extended periods of time off for maternity leave.

I had one instructor repeatedly glance at his watch while spending time I had SCHEDULED with him, as a young female graduate student who had dropped in was waiting behind me. He couldn't take his eyes off her. I have had male TAs (but no female ones) tell me I didn't need to worry about or learn the subject matter, never mind that I had gone to them with the intent of gaining more than a surface understanding of the subject or meeting the minimum requirements of the syllabus or studying to the test. I have had a male faculty member dumb down an assignment (or suggest I needed accommodations). I am older, I have been around the block a time or two, and I do not suffer fools gladly, and I can handle myself in these situations. But I shouldn't have to.

Professional development: Please share what you feel could be improved about professional development opportunities for female graduate students at Iowa State University

Professional Development

The professional development opportunities could be more department or field specific. I would like to see more panels or seminars that focus on issues related to women in academia. In particular, I think we need discussions about women and the way they handle having families. I especially would like to see senior administrators comment on the ways that getting tenure through publishing and teaching can come at times in which women are having children and have the potential to delay or harm their progress toward tenure. I would like to hear about how female professors deal with situations in which their gender becomes an issue with their male faculty counterparts. I would like to hear how female professors balance children with research trips or child care when both parents work and one has to travel for a conference or research.

Funding, funding, funding, funding . . . did I mention funding? I know that I have to attend conferences and develop myself as a scholar, but I do not have the money to even attend one conference, let alone multiple conferences, in a year. Our department does provide students with a small funding, and we can get a little bit of funding from GPSS. However, those amounts do not come close to meeting the expenses of going to a conference, workshop, etc. There are professional development opportunities at ISU, but solely attending things at ISU will not help me network or develop particular skills that I need to be successful in my chosen career/field of research.

A centralized area on the ISU or department website where this information could be easily and readily available. If I have to dig into multiple sub-categories and pages to find the information (not easy to find), then it isn't useful and I won't have the time to spend searching for it. From my time looking around ISU and my graduate department's websites, I've found little of this information easily available and I recall none of it being focused on female grad students specifically.

In my department, if you spend your time going to these professional development opportunities, you are looked down upon because you are spending time away from work. The general stigma about these opportunities taking time away from work makes it so that people in my department (especially women) are going to be less likely to attend. I don't see that changing any time soon.

Transition: Please share what you feel could be improved about transition and adjustment experiences for female graduate students at Iowa State University

Transition

I was only aware of one mentoring program, and that is one that is organized by our graduate student organization. I never met with mentor that I was paired. Then again, I have only met with my mentee this year once. There could be some more requirements or suggestions offered for how to be a good mentor, what to do with them, etc.

I don't remember learning about orientation or mentoring programs for graduate students who did their previous degree at ISU. I personally felt like a fish out of water, almost like I was expected to know what was going on, but in reality I was constantly confused. Transitioning to graduate school was a rough experience to say the least, my biggest struggle was finding the women and support network that was available during my undergraduate degree. All of a sudden the resources and opportunities that enabled me to complete my undergraduate degree were no longer applicable to my needs as a graduate student.

I didn't have an issue transitioning. I didn't know there were mentoring programs or orientation programs for grad students. I could definitely see how that would be useful though because I'm trying to figure out some things that are required for my major, such as my creative component, and I feel like I have no idea what I'm doing. I'm afraid that regardless of how much I'm trying to be informed about the graduate program, I'm going to find out I'm missing something when I get close to graduating.

Student organizations: Please share any comments about the student organizations and social events for female graduate students at Iowa State University

Student Organizations

I wish there was a Women in Engineering program similar to the Women in Science and Engineering program which was focused on graduate women in engineering. A program that facilitates networking, women specific professional development, graduate women representation on campus, etc. Moving from undergraduate to graduate there is a huge void with respect to the services offered specifically to this population of women.

Student organizations and social events for female graduate students should be more integrated. I find that there is a disconnect between the various student orgs for female graduate students and segregation according to majors/departments/colleges. While it is true that women of particular disciplines need to get together, there should be also opportunity to network with more women across campus irrespective of discipline.

My level of participation in student organizations and social events has been dictated primarily by work load and time available and not based on availability of opportunities. I suspect there are more organizations and events available than the ones I am aware of within department. Again, time becomes the major issue with participation though.

If Iowa State wants to have meaningful student organizations or social events for female graduate students, they need to organize different types of events based on the different types of female graduate students. Some are married with children; some are married without children; some have long-term partners; some are single--the point is, female graduate students have different needs based on their family structures. I would encourage the graduate school to have many types of programs, from general to specific, that address the concerns and issues of female graduate students at many levels. Have a "mother's" group; have a "single women" group. Have groups that like sports or outdoors events. Have programs in which women get together and volunteer or do community service. Have different departments sponsor programs together. There are many different ways to reach female graduate students. The important part is to allow female graduate students from different departments and disciplines to meet each other and find common ground.

Wellness: The graduate student work and campus environment affect my health (both positively and negatively) in the following ways

Wellness

The pressure to complete tasks and work long hours trades off with my health frequently. There are only so many hours in the day, and due to work loads or the pressure to show face, it is often difficult to take advantage of fitness classes that are offered. Additionally, it is tough to make time for health appointments due to the demands of being a graduate student, so I have often not visited the doctor when needed because I did not have the time.

Graduate student work is mentally and emotionally draining. I think that is a known fact and that as a graduate student you just learn how to deal with it. You constantly feel beat down with little times where your confidence is boosted. This is where I think a supportive group of women could really help - a group of women who understand what each other is going through. It is just a fact, men and women handle stress differently and in engineering, being surrounded by men isn't going to help me much when it comes to emotional issues and support.

Without exercising and maintaining a critical work/life balance in order to spend time with my spouse and family, my emotional and physical health suffer. When I can maintain that critical balance (which is extremely difficult given my work load and commuting 2 hours each day), my health is excellent. I have been ill more often than when not in school; however, when I am exercising regularly (which I am now), I do not fall ill and my general stress level is lower.

Positively the campus provides opportunity to enjoy the scenery and to exercise. Negatively as a graduate student I am expected to only be dedicated to academic matters sometimes and I don't have enough time to participate in many programs or benefits offered by the university.

There had been times in my first year at ISU when I walked from my lab to my off-campus home through the campus at 3-4 Am in the morning and felt safe. However, after I moved farther away from campus, at one time I needed an escort as I missed my last bus and could not get any help because the final destination had to be a university property.