2008 Graduate Student Survey Analysis

In summer 2008, the UC Merced's Graduate Studies Division conducted an online survey of continuing graduate students. The purpose of the study was to measure student satisfaction levels with various experiences as a graduate student at UC Merced. The target population included 112 continuing graduate-level students who were expected to return for the Fall 2008 term. Seventy-two students participated in the survey for a 64% response rate.

Respondents were fairly representative of the sample population, especially in terms of ethnicity and degree level (Table 1). Males and students in four of the programs (Biological Engineering, Quantitative & Systems Biology, Social & Cognitive Sciences, and World Cultures) had substantially lower response rates (52-58% vs. 67-75%) than females and students in other programs.

Over 45% of respondents expect to graduate within the next 2 years and another 45% within 2-4 years. 36% of respondents were already graduate students before enrolling at UC Merced (many having come with faculty members when they left other campuses to work at UC Merced) and 31% were employed in a field related to their major.

Satisfaction with Aspects of Program

Table 2 highlights questions related to the respondents' programs, course work, and quality of interactions with faculty, advisors, and other staff. Overall, 86% of the respondents said that they were satisfied (somewhat or very) with their program at UC Merced.

The highest levels of satisfaction with aspects of the graduate students' programs were associated with the **intellectual caliber** of the faculty (94% were at least somewhat satisfied; 63% were very satisfied) and the programs' ability to **keep pace** with recent developments (86% were at least somewhat satisfied; 47% very satisfied). Areas needing the most improvement, according to most graduate students tended to revolve around **facilities** and **training/preparation** in teaching, research methods and TA-ing (for those for whom these were applicable). Only about a third of the graduate students were very satisfied with these aspects of their program.

Over three-quarters of the graduate students who had **teaching assistantships** felt that the amount of time they were expected to spend on TA duties was about right for them (Table 3). About two-thirds said agreed that the teaching experience provided through their program was adequate preparation for an academic/teaching career (although they should be surveyed once they are actually in those careers to see if this holds up). Two-thirds or more also agreed

that they were appropriately prepared and trained before entering the classroom and 62% felt they were appropriately supervised to help them improve their teaching skills.

The graduate student respondents almost unanimously agreed that their own **research interests are incorporated** into their thesis work (97%) and over 80% agreed that the **amount of coursework seemed appropriate** to the degree (although only 17% strongly agree to this) and that they get **ongoing and constructive feedback** from their program advisor.

Satisfaction with Quality of Interactions

Several items reinforced the overall positive response given to the graduate students' **relationships with faculty**: professional relationship with faculty advisor (90% at least somewhat satisfied), students in program are treated with respect by faculty (96% agreed), good rapport between faculty and students (93% agreed), good relationships and interactions with faculty personally (99% agreed), own advisor has student's interests in mind (96% agreed) and keeps track of student's research progress (94% agreed). Most students (59%) did not think that there were **tensions among faculty** that affected students, but two out of five did. The range, by School, for students who agreed or strongly agreed that faculty tensions affected them was 26% to 56%.

The generally good **relationships among graduate students** contributed to the overall favorable climate, as perceived by them (90% agreed that the overall climate of their program is positive). They tended to agree that the students in their program are collegial (90% agreed) and that relationships and interaction with other students in their program are good (90% agreed). Very few (8%) thought that the degree of competition among students is excessive.

Rating Quality of Course Work

Although respondents tended to think the **quality of instruction** in their courses was excellent (41%) or good (39%), the **availability of courses** needed to complete their program seemed to be a big concern. A little less than half (47%) said the availability was excellent or good (only 14% saying "excellent"). Given the competing demands of the faculty for conducting their own research, teaching undergraduates as well as graduate students, and trying to keep up with designing and offering courses as the first cohorts of both undergraduate and graduate students move through their programs, it is not surprising that the need for more course options has been identified as a problem. Seven of the open-ended comments for this set of questions stressed the need for more courses.

The graduate programs at UC Merced are highly interdisciplinary, by design. Even so, many of these graduate students responded favorably to the **encouragement to take courses outside their programs**. Over 60% rated this excellent or good. It is unclear, however, whether or how this might be related to the general feeling that not enough courses are offered. At least one student commented that he/she had to take courses outside the program in order to fill all the requirements.

Program Support and University Resources

Table 4 shows the relative satisfaction rates with types of support for the graduate students' programs as well as the usage and ratings of various types of university resources. Although most respondents were generally at least somewhat satisfied with **support directly related to their programs** (feedback on their research, advice on degree requirements, preparing for exams, preparing for their thesis, selecting a thesis advisor, and standards for writing in their field as well as for academic integrity), they were less satisfied with **support for the professional or career aspects** of their program. This is true even after adjusting for those students who said these aspects were not applicable to them (presumably at their stage in the program). The majority of students planned to work in academia (28% expected to have tenure-track faculty positions, 26% expected to become postdoctoral fellows), but 22% expected to become non-faculty researchers and 9% anticipated going into engineering or manufacturing positions (Table 5). Support items that need to be addressed or re-evaluated include: advising for career options especially outside academia, assistance in developing professional contacts outside one's program, and grant-writing advice.

Some university resources are much more geared to undergraduates than to graduate students. There is no graduate student housing on campus, for example. Some of these resources perhaps should be reviewed by the campus to determine whether or when such services should be offered to graduate students. For the purposes of this report, however, services that were not used by at least 50% of the respondents will not be evaluated. This list of infrequently-used services includes: Disability Services, Learning Assistance Center, Housing, Child Care Referral Services, Student Counseling Services, Career Services Center, University Police, and Financial Aid Office.

For those remaining resources, the highest rated were Library facilities (80% responding they were excellent or good), the Graduate Division (74%), on-campus computer facilities (71%), and pretty much a tie among Web-based campus computer services, Student Health Center, health insurance offered (GSHIP), Office of the Registrar, Bobcat Bookstore, and Billing & Payment Services (all around 58-66%). Parking provoked the most negative response (only 22% responding excellent or good). The campus shuttle service and dining services had the highest "poor" ratings.

Obstacles to Academic Progress

Not surprisingly, the most frequently cited obstacle to academic progress is "**work/financial commitments**" (Table 6). Three out of every five graduate students said this was at least a minor obstacle; almost 30% said it was a major one. Next on the list were "course scheduling" (50%), "program structure or requirements" (49%), and "family obligations" (48%). There is not much the campus can do about the students' family obligations, but one recommendation from this study is to conduct a few focus groups to find ways the campus can help improve the financial/work support, as well as course availability/scheduling and program structure/requirements.

Student Life

Graduate students tend to be much more focused on their studies and less interested in organized social activities than most undergraduates. UC Merced still is very small, however, so one would expect that it would be easier to engage graduate students in campus social activities geared toward them, especially those activities sponsored by their own School or program. Table 7 shows that UC Merced graduate students tend to be **aware of activities** and three-quarters or more seem to **attend these activities** at least occasionally regardless of sponsor (campus, School, or program). Open-ended responses ranged from "I'm here to work/finish my PhD, not to socialize," to "the socializing opportunities are improving but, in a town like Merced where there are very few options, the graduate school could step in and fill this void," or "social activities in the School are generally poorly organized and advertised at the last minute, making it difficult to attend."

General Assessment

Overall, the graduate student respondents rated their academic experience at UC Merced higher than other aspects (Table 8). About four out of five rated their academic experience and their graduate program as excellent or good. A little more than half, in contrast, rated their student life experience as highly. At most, only a third gave their experiences an excellent rating. Only a third would definitely select this campus again (although almost 60 % definitely would select their same field of study) or definitely recommend this campus to someone considering their own graduate program (Table 9A). Seven percent indicated that it was at least somewhat likely or they were uncertain whether they actually would stay in their programs to degree completion (Table 9B). These would be good questions to follow up on through focus groups or targeted surveys. What would be characteristic of an excellent academic experience or an excellent graduate program? Knowing what they know now, what would make them select this same campus or their UC Merced graduate program again? Or make them highly recommend the campus and program to someone considering their field?

Post-Script

Comparative data to help put these responses in perspective are relatively difficult to find. Some institutions conduct graduate student surveys and post the results on their Web sites. However, even these are not necessarily suitable comparisons. Sometimes the questions are identical or at least very similar, but the population of students might be too different from UC Merced's to provide a good benchmark. Other times the questions are too different, or the analyses use mean response instead of percentages, or they use ratings of quality (excellent, good, etc.) instead of satisfaction or agreement/disagreement.

Following is a short listing of graduate student survey analyses at other campuses:

U. of Colorado, Boulder
http://www.colorado.edu/pba/surveys/grad/05/index.htm

Michigan State U., East Lansing
http://grad.msu.edu/survey2k.htm

U. of Central Florida
http://www.irweb2.ucf.edu/oeas_survey/gss/gd_index.htm

State U. of West Georgia
http://www.westga.edu/~cogs/printable/GraduateSurveySpring2002.pdf

Kent State U.
http://www.kent.edu/aqip/Surveys/graduatesurvey.cfm

U. of Minnesota
http://www.cogs.umn.edu/survres.pdf

Stanford U.
http://news-service.stanford.edu/news/2005/february23/report-022305.html

Northeastern U.
http://www.northeastern.edu/oir/pdfs/01gss.pdf

Georgia State U.
http://www2.gsu.edu/~wwwire/pdf/2003-2005%20APR%20GRADUATE%20STUDENT.pdf

Table 1. Survey Population and Respondent Demographic Information					
	Population		Respondents		Response Rate
	N	%	N	%	%
Total	**112**	**100.0%**	**72**	**100.0%**	**64.3%**
Gender					
Female	43	38.4%	32	44.4%	74.4%
Male	69	61.6%	40	55.6%	58.0%
Ethnicity					
African-American	1	0.9%	0	0.0%	0.0%
Asian/Pacific Islander	7	6.3%	5	6.9%	71.4%
Hispanic	12	10.7%	9	12.5%	75.0%
White	38	33.9%	28	38.9%	73.7%
International	34	30.4%	21	29.2%	61.8%
Unknown	20	18%	9	12.5%	45.0%
Degree Sought					
Master's of Arts	3	2.7%	3	4.2%	100.0%
Master's of Science	14	12.5%	10	13.9%	71.4%
Doctorate	95	84.8%	59	81.9%	62.1%
Program					
Applied Mathematics	7	6.3%	5	6.9%	71.4%
Biological Engineering	7	6.3%	4	5.6%	57.1%
Electrical Engineering	14	12.5%	11	15.3%	78.6%
Environmental Systems	20	17.9%	15	20.8%	75.0%
Mechanical Engineering	3	2.7%	2	2.8%	66.7%
Physics & Chemistry	10	8.9%	7	9.7%	70.0%
Quantitative & Systems Biology	23	20.5%	12	16.7%	52.2%
Social & Cognitive Sciences	16	14.3%	9	12.5%	56.3%
World Cultures	12	10.7%	7	9.7%	58.3%

Table 2. Program, Quality of Interactions, and Course Work

Satisfaction with	Very Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied	Very/Somewhat Satisfied	Not Applicable
Overall satisfaction with program	**43%**	**43%**	**13%**	**1%**	**86%**	0%
Program						
Intellectual caliber of faculty	63%	32%	4%	1%	94%	0%
Program's ability to keep pace with recent developments in field	47%	39%	13%	1%	86%	1%
Adequacy of facilities	30%	41%	20%	10%	70%	0%
Quality of graduate-level teaching by faculty	44%	31%	20%	4%	76%	3%
Training in research methods	36%	38%	16%	10%	74%	3%
Amount of financial support	50%	31%	9%	10%	81%	1%
Teaching and TA preparation	35%	40%	15%	9%	75%	10%

Agreement with	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Not Applicable
Program						
Financial support for graduate students is distributed fairly	25%	48%	21%	6%	73%	0%
Staff in program are knowledgeable about rules and regulations that affect graduate students	31%	35%	21%	14%	65%	0%
There is a sense of intellectual community in program	24%	54%	16%	7%	77%	0%
Program structure encourages student collaboration or teamwork	13%	51%	26%	10%	64%	0%
Amount of coursework seems appropriate to the degree	17%	65%	14%	4%	82%	0%
Feedback on progress toward degree from advisor is ongoing and constructive	51%	31%	17%	1%	82%	0%
Own research interests are incorporated into my thesis work	53%	44%	3%	0%	97%	0%

Satisfaction with	Very Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied	Very/Somewhat Satisfied	Not Applicable
Quality of Interactions						
Advising & guidance	49%	32%	13%	7%	81%	0%
Professional relationship with faculty advisor	71%	19%	8%	1%	90%	0%
Helpfulness of staff in School or program	46%	38%	11%	6%	83%	0%

Faculty effort in helping to find employment	40%	29%	14%	17%	69%	51%
Opportunity to interact with across disciplines	31%	42%	16%	10%	73%	7%

Agreement with	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Not Applicable
Overall, the climate of my program is positive	**44%**	**46%**	**8%**	**1%**	**90%**	**0%**
Quality of Interactions						
Students in program are treated with respect by faculty	56%	40%	3%	1%	96%	0%
Rapport between faculty and graduate students in program is good	56%	38%	7%	0%	93%	0%
Own relationships and interactions with faculty are good	68%	31%	1%	0%	99%	0%
There are tensions among faculty that affect students	23%	18%	42%	17%	41%	0%
Students in program are collegial	42%	48%	7%	3%	90%	0%
Relationships and interaction with other students in program are good	55%	35%	7%	3%	90%	0%
Degree of competition among students is excessive	0%	8%	61%	31%	8%	0%
Am satisfied with amoung of time spent with advisor	53%	33%	14%	0%	86%	0%
My advisor has my interests in mind	60%	36%	4%	0%	96%	0%
There is a person or office I trust to report perceived abuse or misconduct in my program by my advisor or committee member	31%	40%	19%	10%	71%	0%
My advisor keeps track of my research progress and will help determine when I have accomplished enough work for my degree	57%	38%	6%	0%	94%	0%

Rating	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Exellent/ Good	Not Applicable
Course Work						
Overall quality of course work in program	**26%**	**47%**	**22%**	**4%**	74%	**0%**
Availability of courses needed to complete program	14%	33%	35%	18%	47%	0%
Quality of instruction in courses	41%	39%	20%	0%	80%	0%
Encouragement to take courses outside program	16%	45%	17%	23%	61%	0%

Table 3. TA Experience						
Agreement with	**Strongly Agree**	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**	**Strongly Agree/ Agree**	**Not Applicable**
As a teaching assistant, I was appropriately prepared and trained before entering the classroom.	36%	33%	16%	15%	69%	15%
As a teaching assistant, I was appropriately supervised to help improve my teaching skills.	25%	37%	22%	17%	62%	17%
The teaching experience available through my program is adequate preparation for an academic/teaching career.	24%	42%	18%	16%	66%	13%
The amount of time expected of me as a TA was about right.	25%	53%	14%	8%	78%	10%

Table 4. Program Support and University Resources						
Satisfaction with:	**Very Satisfied**	**Somewhat Satisfied**	**Somewhat Dissatisfied**	**Very Dissatisfied**	**Very/Somewhat Satisfied**	**Not Applicable**
Program Support						
Courses, workshops or orientations on teaching	15%	48%	25%	13%	62%	14%
Assistance in developing professional contacts outside program	24%	29%	27%	20%	53%	18%
Feedback on your research	51%	36%	11%	1%	87%	1%
Advice on:						
Writing grant proposals	21%	30%	27%	21%	52%	20%
Publishing your work	38%	30%	18%	15%	67%	14%
Career options within academia	24%	36%	24%	17%	59%	17%
Career options outside academia	11%	33%	35%	21%	44%	20%
Research positions	18%	38%	34%	11%	55%	21%
Degree requirements	28%	42%	21%	9%	71%	0%
Preparing for examinations	32%	40%	22%	6%	72%	10%
Developing your thesis or dissertation proposal	34%	42%	20%	5%	75%	9%
Process required to select a thesis advisor	34%	36%	17%	13%	70%	24%
Standards for academic writing in your field	30%	41%	21%	8%	71%	7%
How to avoid plagiarism and other violations of the standards of academic integrity	37%	43%	11%	10%	79%	11%

How Frequently	**Frequently**	**Occasionally**	**Never**	**Frequently/Occasionally**
University Resources				
Library facilities	54%	44%	1%	99%
On-campus computer facilities	25%	49%	25%	75%
Web-based campus computer services (e.g., registration)	67%	32%	1%	99%
Graduate Division	22%	60%	18%	82%
Student Health Center	17%	51%	32%	68%
Health insurance (GSHIP)	27%	51%	21%	79%
Financial Aid Office	8%	36%	56%	44%
Career Services Center	1%	22%	76%	24%
Student Counseling Services	3%	11%	86%	14%
Child Care Referral Services	3%	4%	93%	7%
Disability Services	0%	3%	97%	3%

Learning Assistance Center	1%	4%	94%		6%
Billing and Payment Services	11%	69%	19%		81%
University Police	1%	29%	69%		31%
Housing	0%	6%	94%		6%
Office of the Registrar	14%	79%	7%		93%
Parking for students	35%	39%	26%		74%
Campus shuttle bus service (Cat Track)	32%	25%	43%		57%
Dining Services	31%	54%	15%		85%
Bookstore	19%	74%	7%		93%

Quality of experience with	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Fair**	**Poor**	**Exellent/ Good**	**Not Applicable**
University Resources						
Library facilities	31%	49%	13%	7%	80%	1%
On-campus computer facilities	28%	43%	22%	7%	71%	18%
Web-based campus computer services (e.g., registration)	28%	38%	28%	6%	66%	1%
Graduate Division	29%	45%	24%	2%	74%	10%
Student Health Center	21%	43%	23%	13%	64%	33%
Health insurance (GSHIP)	16%	43%	35%	7%	59%	18%
Financial Aid Office	11%	58%	8%	22%	69%	48%
Career Services Center	10%	30%	30%	30%	40%	71%
Student Counseling Services	8%	46%	15%	31%	54%	81%
Child Care Referral Services	0%	25%	0%	75%	25%	88%
Disability Services	0%	50%	0%	50%	50%	94%
Learning Assistance Center	0%	50%	17%	33%	50%	91%
Billing and Payment Services	9%	49%	29%	14%	58%	16%
University Police	10%	48%	32%	10%	58%	55%
Housing	9%	27%	18%	46%	36%	84%
Office of the Registrar	21%	43%	28%	8%	64%	6%
Parking for students	5%	17%	34%	44%	22%	10%
Campus shuttle bus service (Cat Track)	14%	26%	23%	37%	40%	39%
Dining Services	6%	41%	27%	25%	48%	10%
Bookstore	10%	53%	34%	3%	63%	3%

Table 5. Post Graduate School Plans

Professional Plans	Percentage
Engineering, Manufacturing	9%
Non-tenure-track faculty	4%
Tenure-track faculty	28%
Researcher (non faculty)	22%
Teacher	4%
Analyst	1%
Postdoctoral fellow	26%
Pursue another graduate degree (not at UC Merced)	6%
	100%
Type of Employer	
4-year college or university	54%
Community or junior college	4%
Elementary, secondary or special focus school	1%
Industry or business	21%
Hospital or clinic	0%
Non-profit organization or foundation	1%
U.S. (federal) government or your home country if not the U.S.	6%
State or local government	0%
National Laboratory	0%
Self-employed	0%
Unknown	13%
	100%

Table 6. Obstacles to Academic Progress				
Rate extent of obstacle	**Major**	**Minor**	**Not**	**Major/Minor**
Work/financial commitments	29%	31%	40%	60%
Family obligations	16%	32%	52%	48%
Availability of faculty	7%	31%	63%	38%
Program structure or requirements	8%	40%	51%	49%
Dissertation topic/research	8%	32%	60%	40%
Course scheduling	8%	42%	50%	50%
Immigration laws or regulations	3%	10%	87%	13%
Other	5%	7%	88%	12%

Table 7. Student Life				
How Frequently	**Frequently**	**Occasionally**	**Never**	**Frequently/Occasionally**
Social activites occur on campus?				
Organized university-wide social activities	18%	68%	14%	86%
Organized social activities within your school	23%	61%	17%	83%
Organized social activities within your advisor/research group	10%	62%	28%	72%
Do you attend social activities on campus?				0%
Organized university-wide social activities	11%	63%	26%	74%
Organized social activities within your school	24%	56%	20%	80%
Organized social activities within your advisor/research group	27%	46%	27%	73%

Table 8. General Assessment					
Rating	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Fair**	**Poor**	**Exellent/ Good**
Your academic experience at UC Merced	33%	50%	14%	3%	83%
Your student life experience at UC Merced	11%	45%	27%	17%	56%
Your graduate program at UC Merced	31%	49%	17%	4%	79%
Your overall experience at UC Merced	25%	53%	21%	1%	78%

Table 9A. Overall Evaluation of Campus and Program					
Likelihood of doing it again:	**Definitely**	**Probably**	**Probably Not**	**Definitely Not**	**Definitely/ Probably**
Select this same university?	32%	39%	18%	11%	71%
Select the same field of study?	59%	34%	7%	0%	93%
Recommend this university to someone considering your graduate program?	33%	38%	25%	4%	71%

Table 9B. Likelihood of Staying in Program						
Likelihood	**Very Likely**	**Somewhat Likely**	**Somewhat Unlikely**	**Highly Unlikely**	**Definitely/ Probably**	**Uncertain**
Stay in program until receive ultimate degree objective?	79%	14%	3%	1%	93%	3%