

# **UW - Madison Geoscience Graduate Student Climate Survey**

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## **GGSA Climate Committee**

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# Executive Summary

During the 2019-2020 academic year, the Geoscience Graduate Student Association (GGSA) authorized a newly formed committee to conduct a survey of Geoscience graduate students. The goal of this survey was to evaluate the current state of graduate student professional life and personal well-being. A committee composed of both graduate students and faculty evaluated the results of the survey independently and as a committee before disseminating the results to the department.

After this first survey, a Climate Survey Committee was made official and going forward will consist of: the Student Ombuds, GGSA President, Geopath Chair, and the Faculty Ombuds. This survey is to be carried out every two years. **Here, we present the survey findings from the 2021-2022 academic year.** 47 individuals completed the survey, accounting for approximately 94% of the current geoscience graduate student population. Notably, this edition of the survey contains a new section to assess the department climate surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic that began Spring of 2020. The University of Wisconsin- Madison was closed to in-person instruction until Fall of 2021, when reopening measures were implemented.

The survey included several different question formats, generating qualitative and quantitative results that are fully disseminated within this report. The Committee would like to emphasize that the themes highlighted in the 2019-2020 survey are still areas in need of improvement. With the 2021-2022 survey, we have identified the following common problems facing the geoscience graduate student respondents:

**1) The majority of respondents suffer from mental health issues**, with 61% experiencing depression on a weekly or monthly basis (M1), and 61% experiencing anxiety on a weekly or monthly basis (M2). This is relatively similar to the previous survey that reported 72% of students experiencing anxiety and 45% depression. This indicates that our department is characterized by relatively high levels of poor mental health for graduate students relative to those found in national and global studies<sup>1,2,3</sup>. The Committee wishes to emphasize that 7 respondents indicated thoughts of self-harm (M1) and 3 of daily substance use (M3).

**2) Personal finances were indicated by many respondents (51% (Q1)) as a stressor on a monthly or weekly basis**; this was also mentioned in the context of a lack of administrative support and transparency about funding and insurance (see Support section).

**3) Graduate students turn to peers as well as PIs for support**: this is a positive for many (61% say their PI has a positive impact, 70% say fellow students, 72% labmates (Q1)), but not all. With a small percentage responding that their PI has a weekly negative impact on their well-being, disparities between groups continue to be a problem. This is most evident in the context of expectations. In the previous survey,

53% of graduate students stated that the lack of clearly communicated expectations from their advisor has negatively affected their mental health and productivity. This year, only 30% of respondents reported having experienced clearly defined expectations (Q3a2). Written responses identify disparity between research groups in communicating expectations from PI to students (Q3b2) where some (9%) students report receiving no clear expectations or feedback over the course of a year (Q5d).

**4) Racial disparities and inappropriate behavior:** 22% of students experienced or witnessed intentionally offensive jokes made within the department (Q3a1). 12% of students have experienced or witnessed bias due to gender, sexual orientation, race, class or religion within the department (Q3a1). There are racial disparities in this department promoted by both PIs who “overwhelmingly support white and male students” and white students downplaying the success of students of color. (Q3c).

**5) A lack of problem resolution:** when a problem is addressed, those graduate students involved perceive no successful implementation of resolution or accountability upon the end of conversations (Q15d). There is written concern about “repeat offenders” that are not held accountable.

**6) During the covid-19 pandemic, PIs and peers have had a positive impact on the department climate,** with the University having the most negative impact on student life (Q16a). Overall, comments reveal that students have felt isolated and students hired during the pandemic have felt unsupported (Q21).

**7) Perceptions of improvements: see the most improvement in expectations following the implementation of optional expectation guidelines (Q31).** However, written responses have not observed changes nor faculty trying to make changes. Particular areas identified as little to no improvement include field and lab safety and mental health (Q75- Q31; Q76-Q32).

Positive themes identified within the survey results echoed the results of the previous survey:

**1) Department Community:** strong comradery was repeatedly cited throughout as a positive force amongst the graduate student community, especially in the wake of the pandemic. Comments suggested stronger initiatives to repair and build our community after the pandemic (Q16a).

**2) Advisor support:** students facing issues with their advisor felt comfortable seeking help either directly from their advisor or another department member (Q14, Q15b, and others).

**3) Improvements in research expectations:** while there is room for improvement, it is important to note that there has been some perceived improvements since the last survey. It is time to build on this momentum over the next two years.

We hope that the results of this survey will act as a catalyst and inform specific departmental goals for bettering both graduate student life, faculty-student mentorship, and departmental community. The department has significant strengths in its supportive culture and recent advances in addressing diversity and inclusion within STEM as a whole and Weeks Hall in particular. We believe that improving graduate students' mental health will positively contribute to a more productive and engaged departmental research and teaching environment. While we understand that improving mental health is a multifaceted and long term goal with no single solution, we believe that there are concrete short and medium term actions that can be taken to improve the departmental experience for graduate students.

As this is the second survey we have undergone as a graduate student community, it is an opportunity to take stock of what we have accomplished and what goals still need attention. To that end, we have provided recommendations in the following section that include the suggestions laid out by the previous Climate Survey Committee in 2020. Our goal with this second survey is to highlight smaller, tangible changes that can be made and felt quickly within this framework. With future biennial surveys - that are now part of the GGSA constitution - we hope to continue assessing progress toward improving graduate student perceptions of departmental climate. We are here to celebrate the incremental progress and take steps to continue towards larger goals of a healthy departmental climate.

If you have questions about any of the data please feel free to reach out to the GGSA Climate Survey Committee. We would like to thank the 2019-2020 Climate Survey Committee for their advice, input, and work on this project.

1. Woolston, C. (2017). Graduate survey: a love-hurt relationship. *Nature*, 550, 549-552.
2. Woolston, C. (2019). PhD poll reveals fear and joy, contentment and anguish. *Nature*, 575, 403-406
3. Auerbach, R. P., Mortier, P., Bruffaerts, R., Alonso, J., Benjet, C., Cuijpers, P., ... & Murray, E. (2018). WHO World Mental Health Surveys International College Student Project: prevalence and distribution of mental disorders. *Journal of abnormal psychology*, 127(7), 623.

# Committee Recommendations

Here we outline a recommended course of action for addressing each of the outlined areas above on short-term and long-term. It should be noted that many of the same themes as the 2020 Climate Survey have re-emerged, and thus, the long-term recommendations are largely similar. Where appropriate, we denote potential decision-making and or implementing bodies with an \*

*GSC (Graduate Studies Committee)*

*D&I (Diversity & Inclusion Committee)*

*GGSA (Geoscience Graduate Student Association)*

*BOV (Board of Visitors)*

## 1. Addressing Graduate student struggles with mental health

### Short-term recommendations:

- a. **Establish an annual seminar regarding mental health and campus mental health resources.** \*D&I, GGSA

### Long-term recommendations:

- a. Encourage discussion and practice of a healthy work-life balance and a healthy department through expectation documents (point a) and hosting department-sponsored mental health events.
- b. Normalize mental health awareness and treatment by continuing to share and advertise university level resources. \*D&I, GGSA
- c. Encourage advisors to explicitly define different research expectations (semester by semester) for students funded via TA vs. RA, recognizing the different workloads. \*GSC

## 2. Addressing disparities in work expectations amongst research groups \*GSC

### Short-term recommendations:

- a. **Require all advisors to adopt an expectations document. (Example faculty expectations)** \*GSC

### Long-term recommendations:

- a. Homogenize the format and expectations for Ph.D. assessment/qualifying and preliminary exams. Revise Graduate Student Handbook to reflect these changes. \*GSC
- b. Clearly communicate the expectations for these exams to Ph.D. students, well in advance of the exams. \*GSC
- c. Track and make accessible graduate student attrition data. \*GSC

### 3. Addressing racial disparities, inappropriate behavior, and lack of accountability for negative/abusive actions \*GSC, D&I

#### Short-term recommendations:

- a. **Require faculty, staff, and graduate students to complete sensitivity and racial biases training at a regular interval. \*GSC, D&I**
- b. **Clarify pathways for reporting within the department, and communicate this to the graduate student population. \*GSC**
- c. **Institute a resolution review with the complainant at a set interval (perhaps 2 months) after reported issues are resolved.\*GSC**
- d. **Introduce language on the department website regarding how to apply to a lab in our department for graduate school, including typically implied steps (e.g. emailing a PI of interest). (example)**

#### Long-term recommendations:

- a. Require advisors to attend conflict resolution training. \*GSC
- b. Clearly communicate reporting avenues for inappropriate conduct (e.g. ombuds, Title IX office, Dean of Students office, L&S level reporting) to students during orientation and at least once per semester, via the ombuds.
- c. Implement the departmental code of conduct.
- d. Institute and follow inclusive field policies (examples here under 'field'). Include these policies in course syllabi, on the website, and within research groups. \*GSC
- e. Cultivate a respectful, inclusive, and considerate workplace.
- f. Prioritize diversification of faculty, staff, and student populations through both recruiting and retention efforts.

### 4. Addressing transparency of administrative processes \*GSC, D&I

#### Short-term recommendations:

- a. **Update the Graduate Student Handbook. \*GSC**
- b. **Review the Graduate Student Handbook and distribute an up-to-date copy to all graduate students annually.**

#### Long-term recommendations:

- a. Create an accessible repository of resources and forms for graduate students on the department website (suggested format of an FAQ/ HR page).

### 5. Improving lab and field safety training/infrastructure \*D&I, GSC

#### Short-term recommendations:

- a. **Establish a collection of common field PPE (safety vests, hard hats, etc.) for use by students and faculty in the field.**
- b. **Investigate current university policy regarding domestic field trips and release forms in order to explore options for implementing these items within the department for all field trips. (examples, example)**

- c. **Create a “field guide” to inform students of recommended safe field practices and protocol to support a clearly communicated culture of safety. (example)**

Long-term recommendations:

- a. Provide training for graduate students that conduct field work commensurate with the hazards and responsibilities of that person’s job duties. Special emphasis should be put on providing appropriate health and safety training for TA’s of field courses.
- b. Consider funding first aid or other out of department safety and health training opportunities for students conducting or teaching field activities.

## 6. Addressing burdens due to Graduate student departmental labor

Short-term recommendations:

- a. **Establish a graduate student service award to recognize and compensate 1 or more students yearly who contribute extraordinary service to the department. \*GSC, D&I**

Long-term recommendations:

- a. Continue to encourage and formalize faculty and staff roles in leading and participating in diversity and inclusion programming and events. \*D&I
- b. Explicitly communicate the importance of service and a more equal distribution of labor among the student population
- c. Reduce logistical burden on graduate students by either appointing faculty or staff to play key roles in organizing department social events (picnics, banquet)

## 7. Addressing perceptions of department non-improvement

Short-term recommendations:

- a. **Continue to host graduate student town hall meetings semesterly. \*GSC**
- b. **Introduce a faculty update summary of departmental business to graduate town hall meetings to promote 2-way transparency and communication between faculty and students. \*GSC**

Long-term recommendations:

- a. Continue to invite students to faculty meetings and circulate minutes afterward. \*GGSA, GSC

## 8. Addressing the impact of personal finance as a stressor on students

Long-term recommendations:

- a. Continue to support students’ efforts to attain segregated fee remission at a college/ university level. \*GSC