

Office of the President

TO MEMBERS OF THE ACADEMIC AND STUDENT AFFAIRS COMMITTEE:

DISCUSSION ITEM

For Meeting of November 17, 2021

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA GRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The University of California Office of the President has worked with all ten UC campuses to examine graduate and professional students' experiences focusing on student health, well-being, advising, and financial concerns.

It is critical to institutionalize this type of data collection and to establish a survey for all graduate students, similar to the UC Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES). Institutional Research and Academic Planning (IRAP) and Graduate and Undergraduate Equity Affairs (GUEA) in Academic Affairs in the Office of the President partnered with campus stakeholders, including graduate deans and students, and leveraged prior graduate student surveys to develop the University of California Graduate Student Experience Survey (UCGSES), a systemwide survey focusing on graduate academic and professional student experiences.

UCGSES was administered for the first time in spring 2021 and will be administered every other year moving forward. UC Information Center dashboards will feature responses to UCGSES questions. With varying experiences by graduate program type, this item provides insight into academic doctoral students' experiences to illustrate the types of data collected.

BACKGROUND

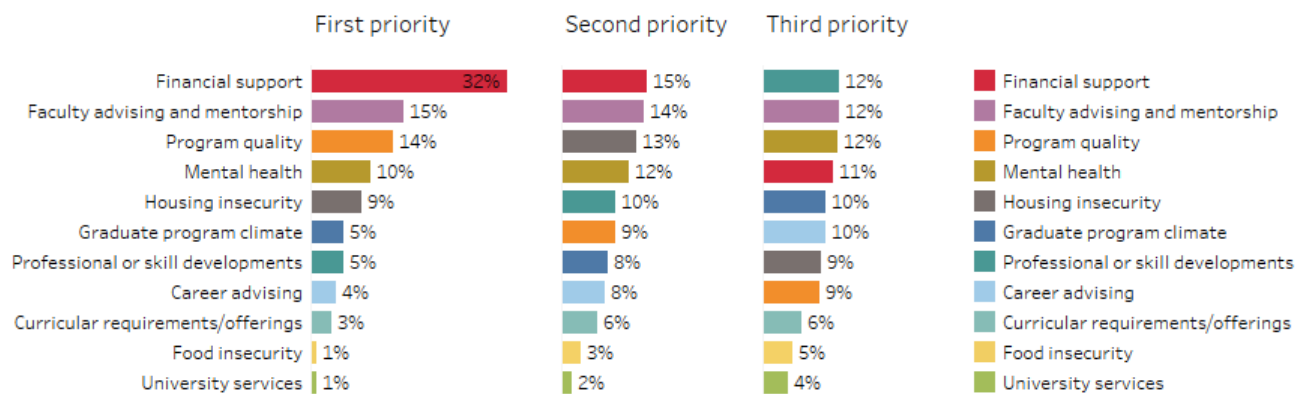
The Office of the President (UCOP) has worked with the ten UC campuses to examine graduate and professional students' experiences focusing on student health, well-being, advising, and financial concerns. UCOP's Institutional Research and Academic Planning (IRAP) unit administered the UC Graduate Student Well-Being Survey in 2016 and the Ph.D. Career Pathways Survey three times from 2017 to 2020. Responses from these surveys indicate that 68 percent of all graduate students (around three-quarters for academic doctoral students) were satisfied with the mentorship and advising they received in their programs and 60 percent were upbeat about their post-graduation career prospects. However, results also show that about half of all respondents (over 40 percent of academic doctoral students) were not confident about their financial situation.

To further examine the graduate student experience, IRAP partnered with Graduate Undergraduate and Equity Affairs (GUEA) to collaborate with the Graduate Deans, the Graduate and Professional Council (a systemwide graduate student leadership organization), and other units at UC’s ten campuses to develop a more comprehensive survey, the UC Graduate Student Experience Survey (UCGSES). The UCGSES assesses many more aspects of the graduate academic and professional student experience, including quality of programs and curriculum, advising and mentorship, professional development, progress to degree, program climate, financial support, health and well-being, satisfaction with University resources, basic needs, post-graduate career plans, and COVID-19 remote learning and research experience. In addition, graduate students were asked to select the top three priorities for UCGSES topics that the University should prioritize with regard to attention and resources.

The UCGSES was administered in spring 2021 to all graduate and professional students with an overall response rate of 27 percent, ranging from 15 percent for UC San Diego to 53 percent for UC Merced. UC San Diego’s rate was likely lower because it administered a similar graduate student experience survey during the same period. UCGSES respondents were fairly representative of the graduate and professional student population in terms of student academic characteristics like discipline and student level and demographics like race/ethnicity, residency, and gender.

Graduate student experiences tended to vary depending on the type of graduate program (e.g., academic doctoral, academic masters, graduate professional). While the UC Information Center dashboard will provide responses for all types of graduate students, this item focuses on academic doctoral students’ experience and covers key areas these respondents identified as top priorities needing attention (Figure 1), such as financial support, faculty advising and mentorship, program quality, mental health, and graduate program climate. Graduate student survey result findings on food and housing insecurity were presented in the September Regents meeting,¹ so this report does not cover data in those areas.

Figure 1: Academic doctoral students’ selection of the top three priorities of the topics discussed in UCGSES



¹ Update on Student Basic Needs at the University of California.
<https://regents.universityofcalifornia.edu/regmeet/sept21/a1.pdf>

The analysis highlights the results for discipline categories and student characteristics where there are significant differences in responses in these topics.

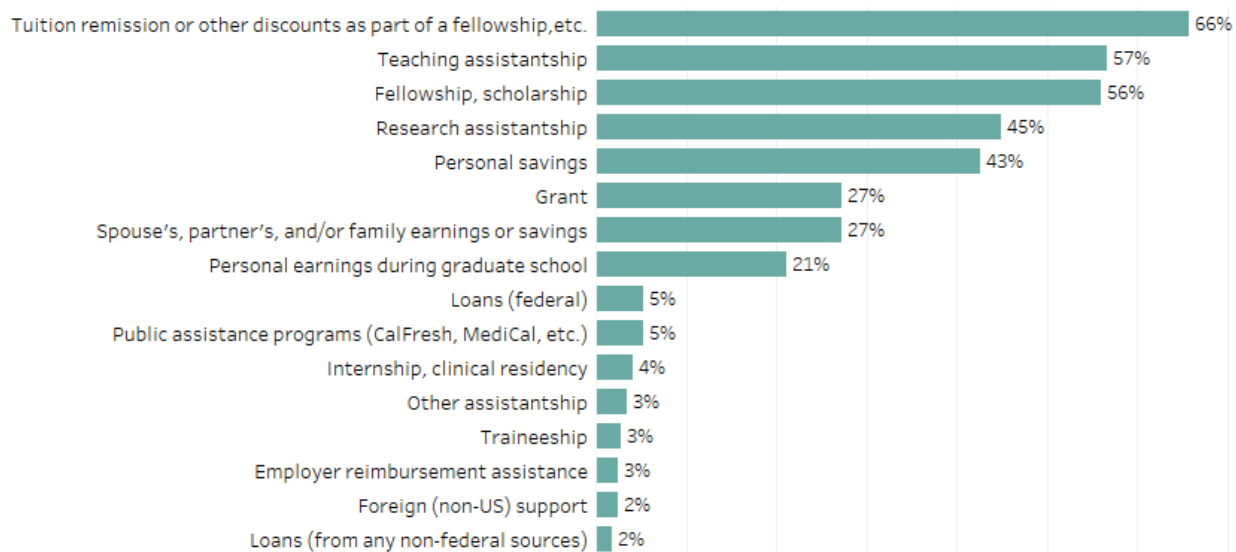
FINANCIAL SUPPORT AND CONCERNS

Financial concerns can interfere with a student’s academic work and other areas of life, so UCGSES asked graduate students to identify sources of financial support for their graduate education and then respond to the following three statements about their financial confidence and current financial situation:

- I am confident in my financial situation.
- I can get by financially without having to cut back on too many of the things that are important to me.
- Financial hardship has impeded my success in my program.

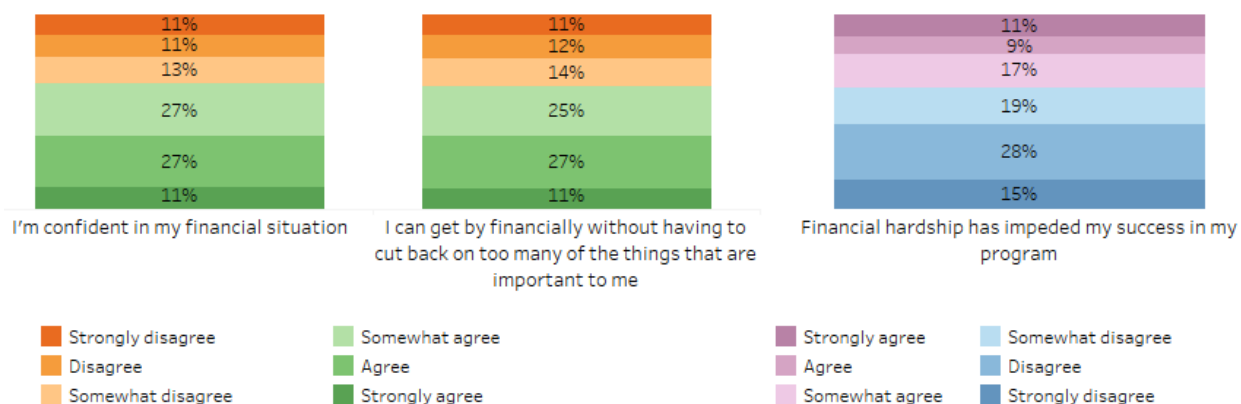
Academic doctoral students reported that their top three financial sources were tuition remission, teaching assistantship, and fellowship/scholarship (Figure 2). More than 55 percent of respondents identified these three sources as their main financial sources. This is not surprising as 54 percent of academic doctoral students at UC serve as graduate teaching assistants, and 53 percent of academic doctoral students work as a research assistant.

Figure 2: Please indicate which of the following is a source of financial support for your graduate education this academic year



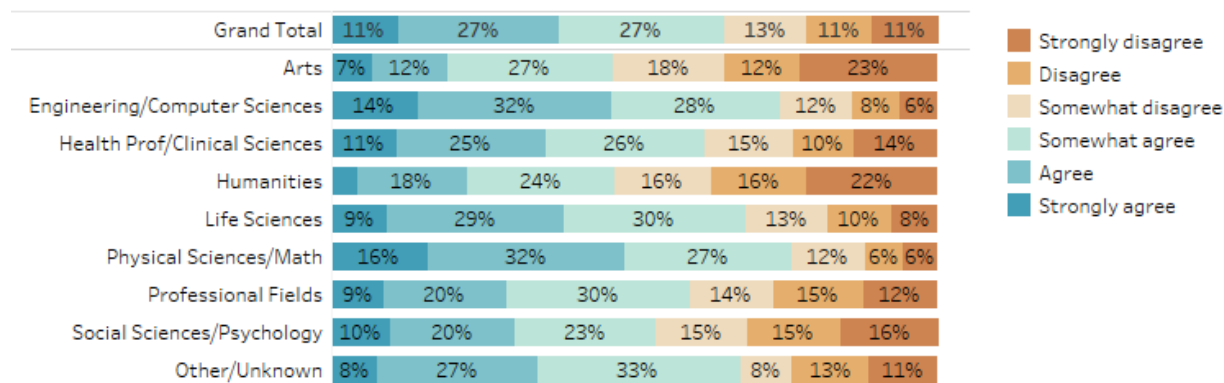
Overall, about 65 percent of academic doctoral respondents reported they were confident in their financial situation and could get by financially without having to cut back on what was important to them (Figure 3). At the same time, about one-third reported that financial hardship had impeded their success in their program.

Figure 3: Academic doctoral students' financial confidence and hardship



The greatest difference in financial confidence and hardship exists among students across disciplines. For example, students in Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences/Psychology were less likely to report that they were confident in their financial situation (Figure 4) compared to other disciplines, and more than half of respondents in Arts and Humanities reported financial hardship had impeded their success. In addition, students from underrepresented groups (African American, American Indian, and Hispanic/Latino(a)), first-generation students, female students, and LGBTQ students reported being less confident in their financial situation than other students.

Figure 4: Academic doctoral students' financial confidence by discipline



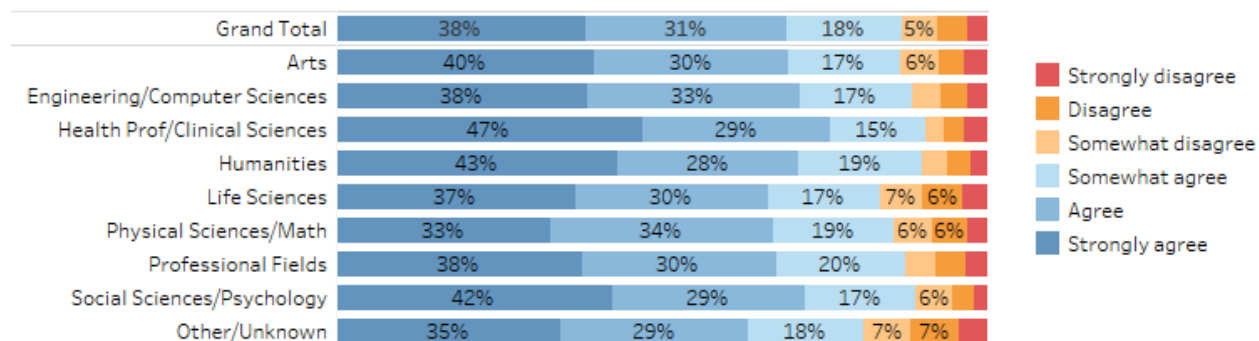
One way UC campuses plan to increase academic doctoral student financial confidence is by providing multi-year graduate fellowships to provide students greater confidence on the amount of financial support available throughout the program.

ADVISING AND MENTORSHIP

The relationship between graduate students and their academic advisor is critical as students navigate through a graduate or professional program. The UCGSES asked participants with an academic advisor to assess their advising and mentorship experience. Overall, more than

90 percent of academic doctoral respondents have an academic advisor. Among them, 87 percent at least somewhat agreed their primary academic advisor was a “real” mentor to them (Figure 5).

Figure 5: My primary academic advisor is a real mentor to me



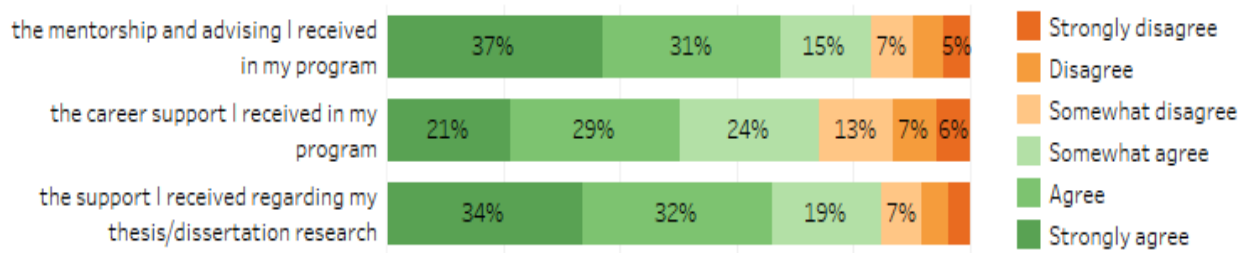
These percentages vary somewhat across discipline, with slightly lower percentages of academic doctoral students in Life Sciences and Physical Sciences/Math agreeing that their primary academic advisor was a mentor to them. In addition, about 90 percent of respondents agreed that their primary academic advisor provided advice in support of their goals and ambitions, advocated for them, treated them fairly, and was an asset to their professional development, but the proportion of respondents positively agreeing their advisors shared knowledge or information about career opportunities outside of academia was about 70 percent. There were no substantial differences in responses to these questions across student characteristics.

The survey also included the following three items examining student satisfaction with the mentorship, advising, and support they received in their degree programs:

- the mentorship and advising I received in my program
- the career support I received in my program
- the support I received regarding my thesis/dissertation research

Overall, more than 80 percent of academic doctoral students at least somewhat agreed that they were satisfied with the mentorship and advising, and support regarding dissertation research they received in their program (Figure 6), and almost three-quarters at least somewhat agreed that they were satisfied with the career support provided in their degree programs.

Figure 6: Satisfaction with the mentorship, advising, and support I received in my program



Academic doctoral student satisfaction varied by discipline, with Humanities (68 percent), Arts (70 percent), and Social Sciences/Psychology (70 percent) being less satisfied with the career support they received in their program.

PROGRAM AND CURRICULUM QUALITY

The survey includes two sets of questions examining program quality and curriculum quality. Overall, about 85 percent of academic doctoral respondents indicate that the graduate degree program quality is at least good, with almost 60 percent reporting it was very good or excellent (Figure 7). UCGSES also asks graduate students to rate the quality of different aspects of the degree programs (Figure 8), with greater satisfaction on “diversity of faculty’s research interests” and less satisfaction with “opportunities to form non-research/academic mentorship relationships with faculty,” “amount of faculty involvement in program activities and events,” and “faculty assistance in helping you find and secure funding.”

Figure 7: Overall, the quality of your graduate degree program is

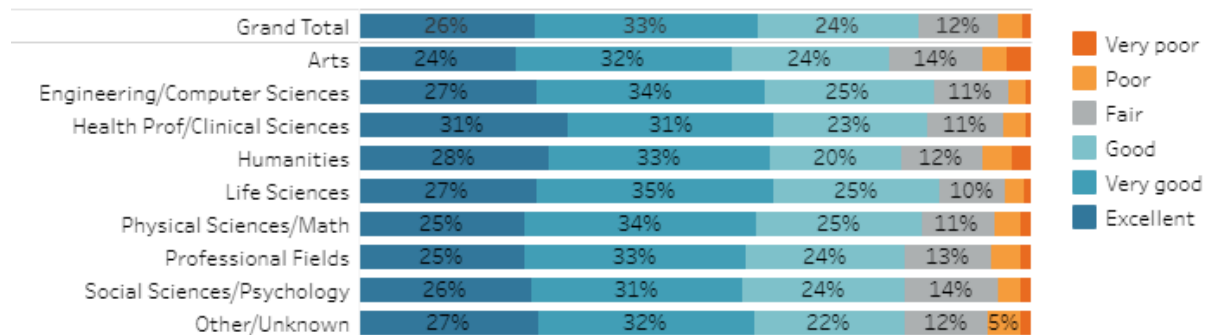
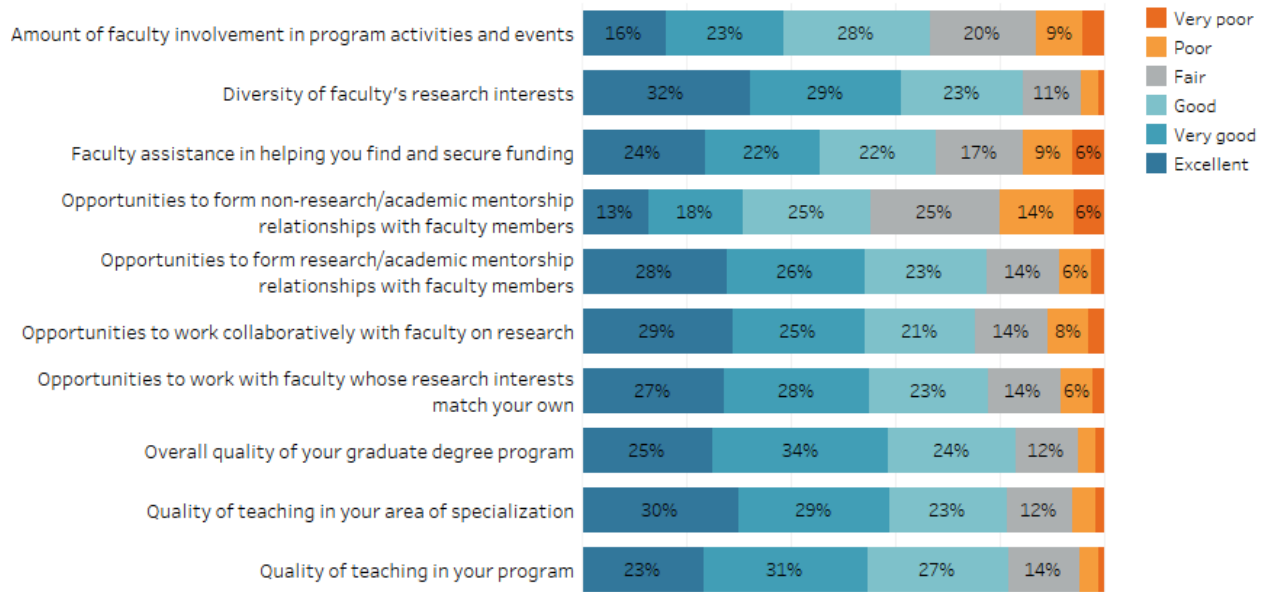
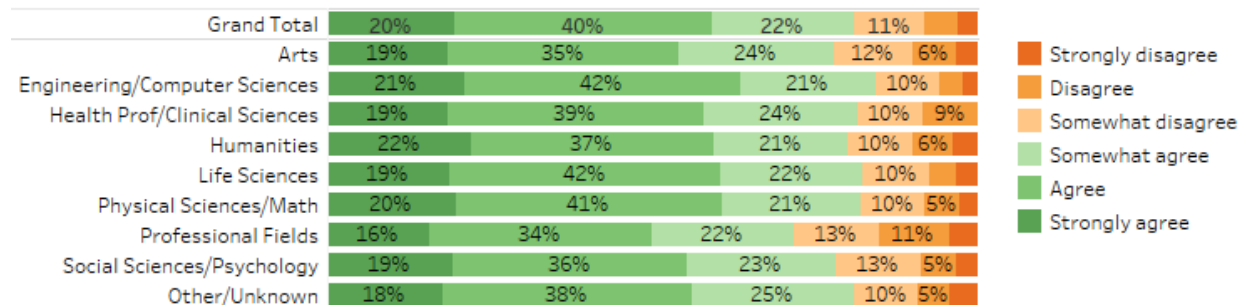


Figure 8: Please rate the following aspects of your program quality



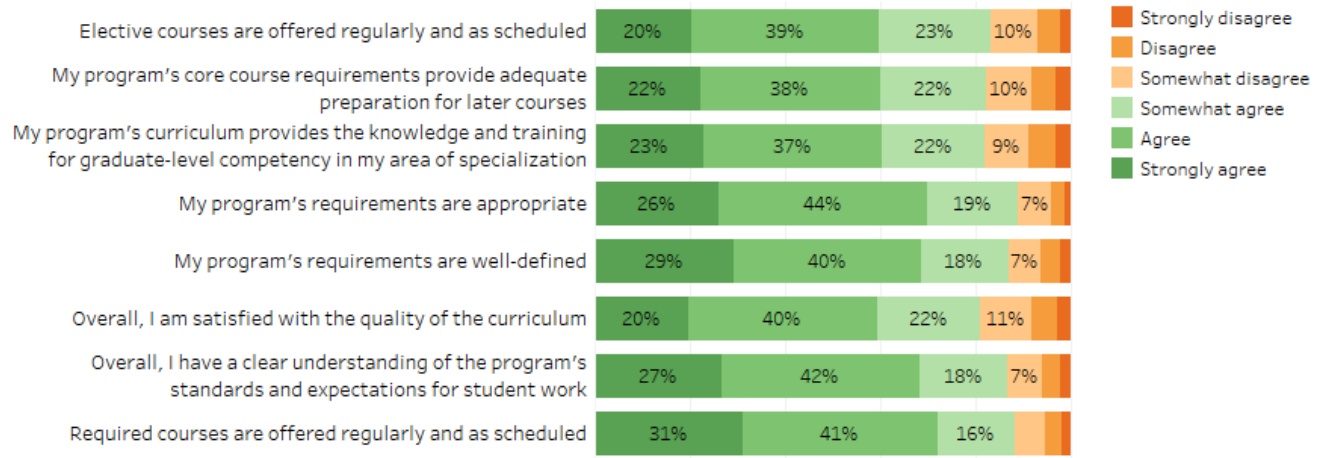
Overall, more than 80 percent of academic doctoral respondents somewhat to strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the quality of the curriculum (Figure 9), with respondents in Engineering/Computer Sciences or Health Professional/Clinical Sciences more satisfied than those in other disciplines.

Figure 9: Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the curriculum



More than 80 percent of academic doctoral respondents somewhat to strongly agreed they were satisfied with differing aspects of the curriculum quality, including scheduling of regular courses and electives, appropriateness and definition of program requirements, and preparation for later courses (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Please indicate how accurately the following statements describe the curriculum of your department/program



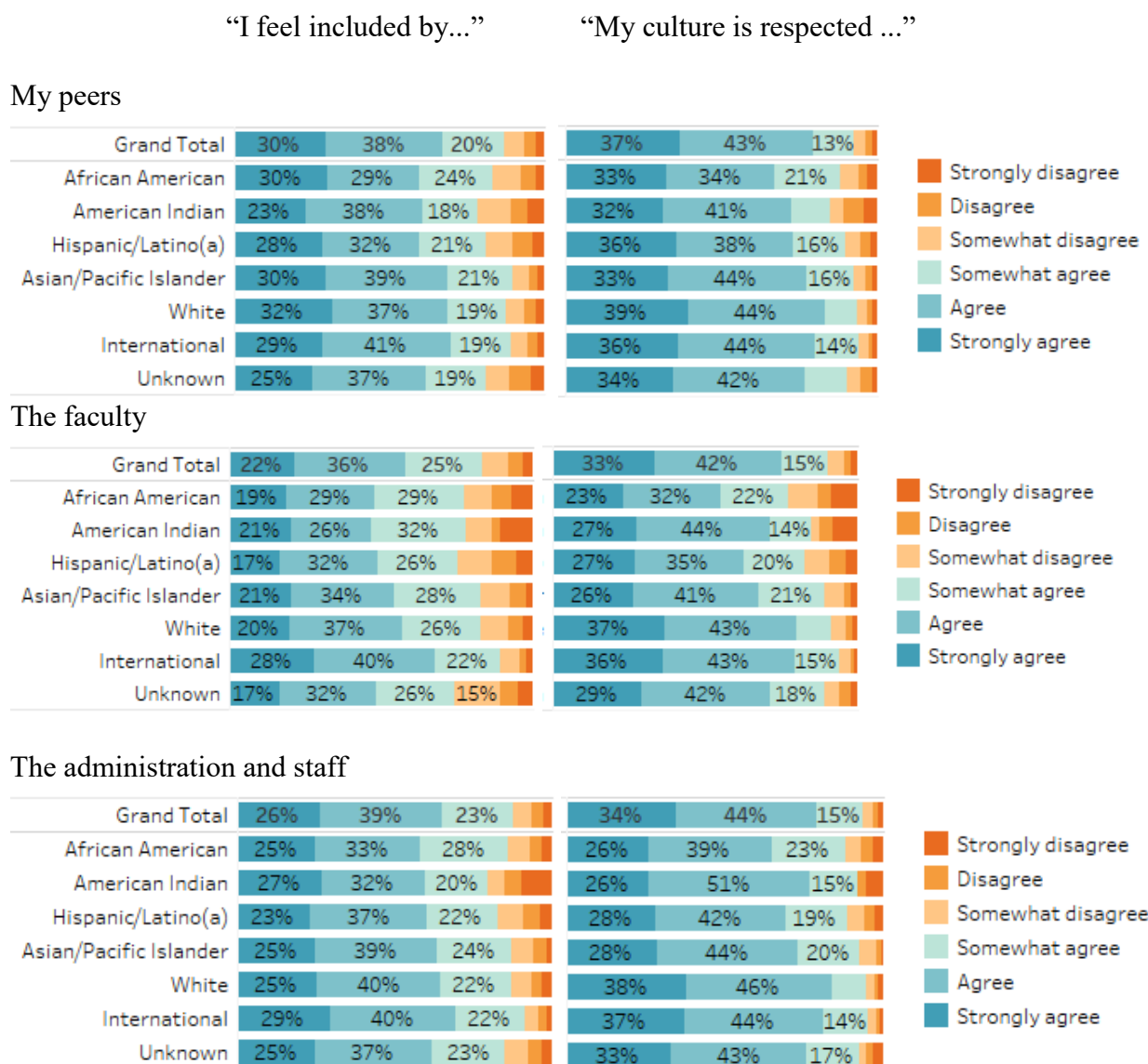
PROGRAM CLIMATE

The UC Graduate Student Experience Survey (UCGSES) asked graduate students to share their opinions on inclusion and respect by their peers, the faculty, and the administration and staff in their graduate program. Figure 11 provides a snapshot of how different racial and ethnic populations of academic doctoral students responded to the questions.

Overall, the majority of academic doctoral respondents reported that they at least somewhat agreed they felt included by their peers (88 percent), by the faculty (83 percent), and the administration and staff (85 percent). In addition, a greater proportion reported their culture was respected by peers (94 percent), the faculty (92 percent), and the administration and staff (94 percent).

However, lower percentages of African American, American Indian, and Hispanic/Latino(a) academic doctoral respondents felt included and their culture respected by their peers, the faculty and the administration and staff.

Figure 11: Responses to “In my graduate program, I feel included by ...My culture is respected by ...” by discipline



STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL BEING

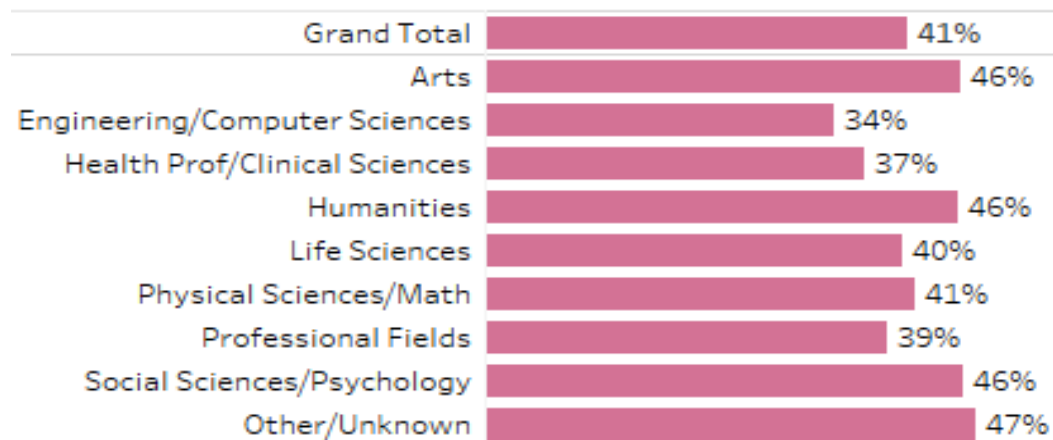
The UC Graduate Student Experience Survey (UCGSES) included a scale with 20 questions developed by the Center for Epidemiologic Studies to measure symptoms defined by the American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for a major depressive episode. A score calculated based on responses to the 20 questions is used to determine whether a student had depressive symptoms of clinical significance.²

The UC Graduate Student Well-Being Survey administered in 2016 found that 38 percent of

² The Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale Revised. <https://cesd-r.com/>.

academic doctoral students experienced depressive symptoms. The 2021 UCGSES shows a slightly higher proportion (41 percent) of graduate students experiencing depression (Figure 12). It is important to note that this survey was administered during the COVID-19 pandemic, which likely would have an impact on student health and well-being.

Figure 12: Academic doctoral student depression by discipline and race/ethnicity



Examining responses across disciplines, academic doctoral students in Arts (46 percent), Humanities (46 percent), or Social Science/Psychology (46 percent) were more likely to experience depressive symptoms than other students. By race/ethnicity, international students reported being significantly less likely to report experiencing depression.

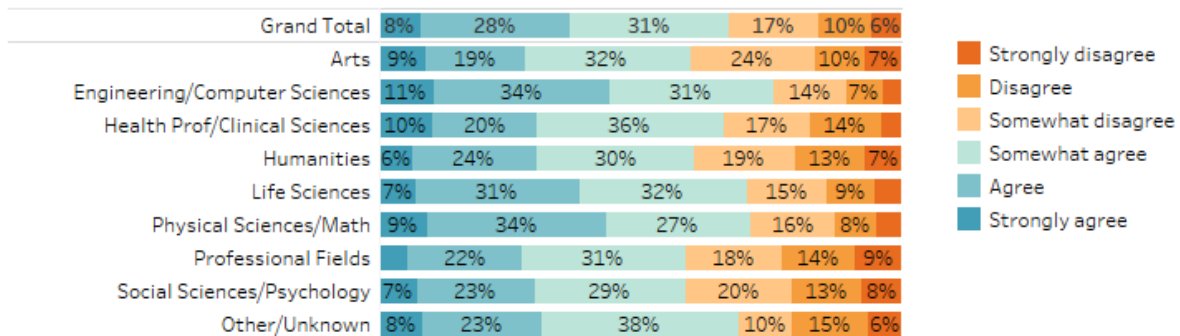
It is difficult to compare the prevalence of mental health issues among UC academic doctoral students compared to peers at other institutions due to differences in the methods and instruments used to measure them. However, a graduate student mental health study based on 2,279 respondents (90 percent Ph.D. students) from 234 institutions found that 39 percent of respondents experienced depression.³

Overall, about 70 percent of respondents at least somewhat agreed they were able to balance their work and family commitments, and 60 percent at least somewhat agreed that their family felt supported in the campus community (Figure 13). Students in Arts, Humanities, Professional Fields, and Social Sciences/Psychology were less likely to report they were able to balance their work and family commitments or felt supported in the campus community.

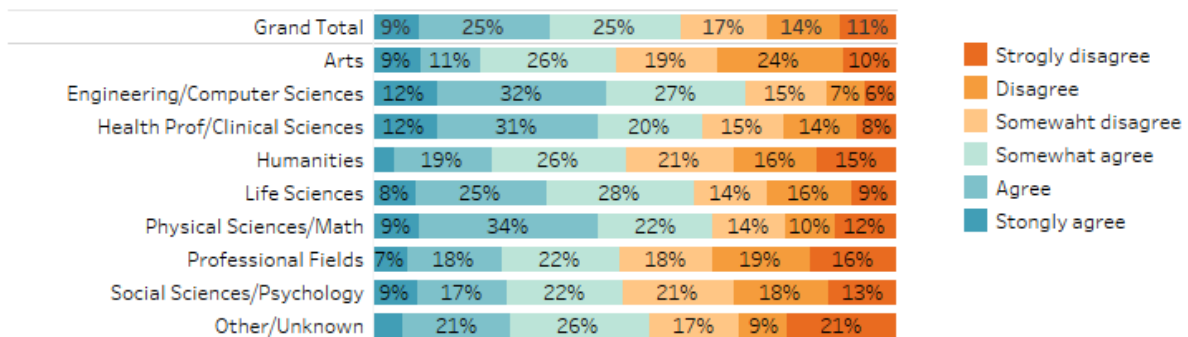
³ Evidence for a Mental Health Crisis in Graduate Education. <https://www.nature.com/articles/nbt.4089#MOESM2>

Figure 13: Academic doctoral student life balance and family support

I'm able to balance my work and family commitments



My family feels supported in the campus community



DEGREE PROGRESS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Figure 14 presents academic doctoral students' responses to questions regarding academic degree progress. Overall, about 85 percent at least somewhat agreed they were on-track to complete their degree program on time and nearly 90 percent positively agreed they were well prepared for the work required to complete their program. However, more than 20 percent of respondents were not very engaged with their day-to-day work and did not have the necessary resources and space they needed to work and study remotely and succeed academically, likely due to the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic and remote instruction period.

Figure 14: Indicate your agreement or disagreement with each item regarding your academic progress by selecting the appropriate response

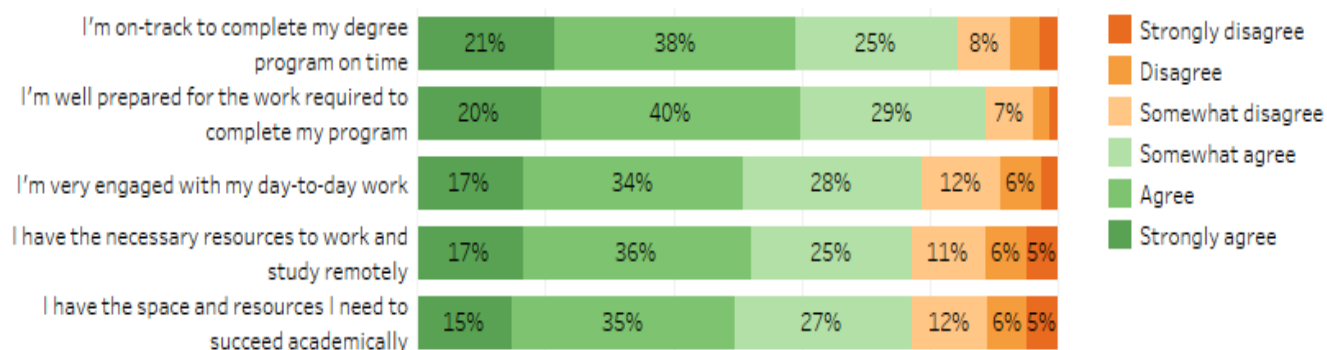
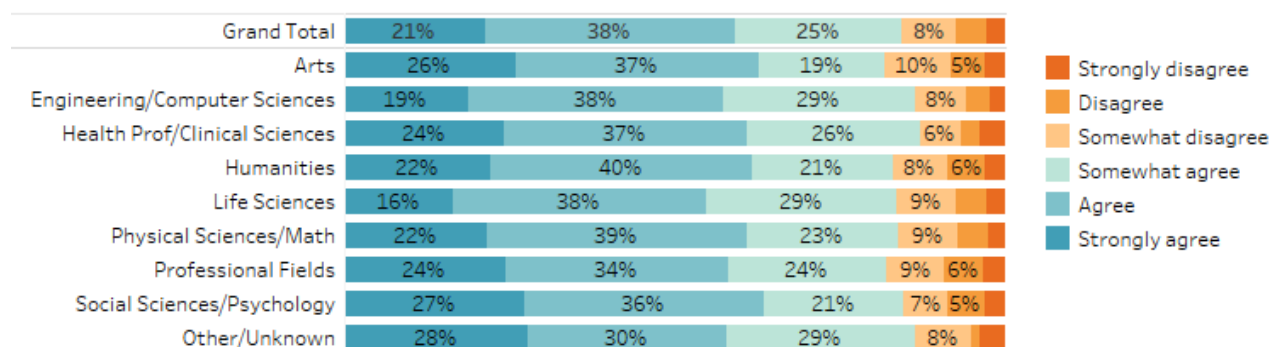


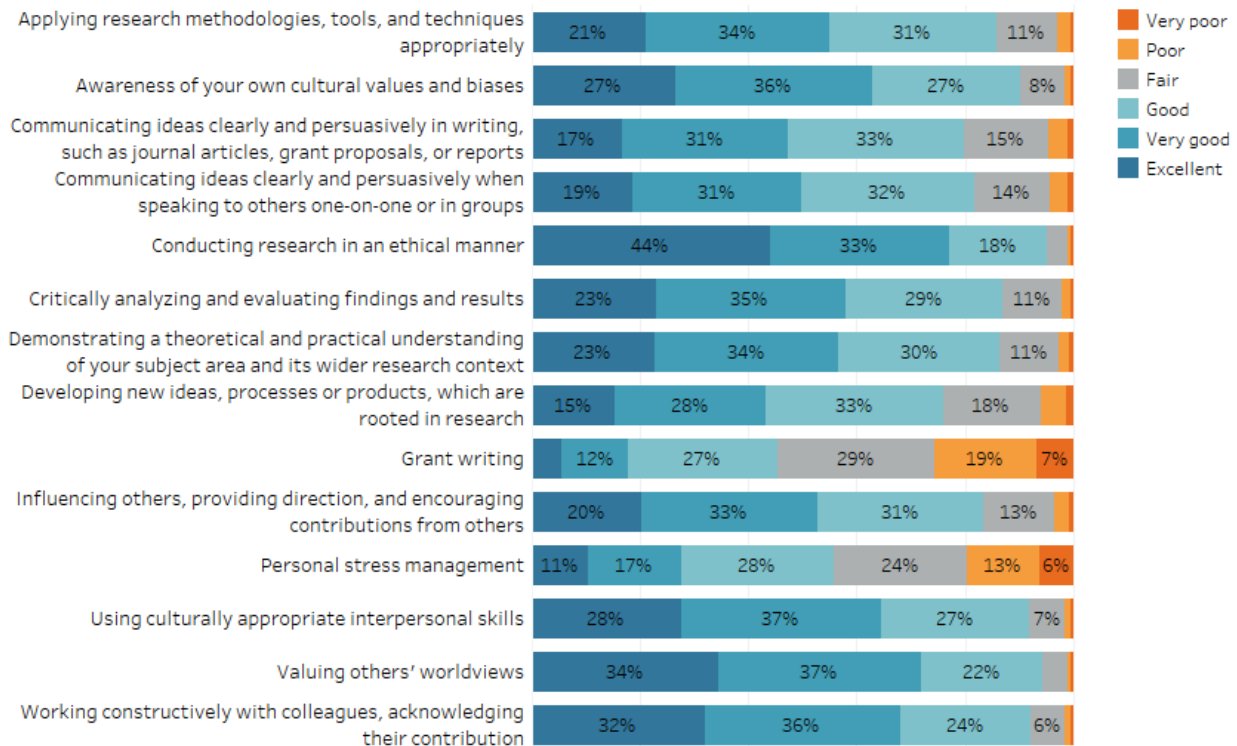
Figure 15 provides the same responses by discipline, with academic doctoral students in Health Professional/Clinical Sciences and Professional Fields more likely to agree that they were on-track to complete their degree program on time.

Figure 15: Responses to “I’m on-track to complete my degree program on-time” by discipline



Academic doctoral students responded they were well-prepared across many attributes, behaviors, and skill sets (Figure 16). More than 90 percent of doctoral students responded they felt good, very good, or excellent in areas like “awareness of your own cultural values and biases,” “valuing others’ worldviews,” and “conducting research in an ethnical manner.” As with prior academic doctoral experience surveys, less than half reported feeling good, very good, or excellent with grant writing and nearly 20 percent reported grant writing skills as poor or very poor. More than 30 percent of respondents in Physical Sciences/Math and Professional Fields reported grant writing skills as poor or very poor.

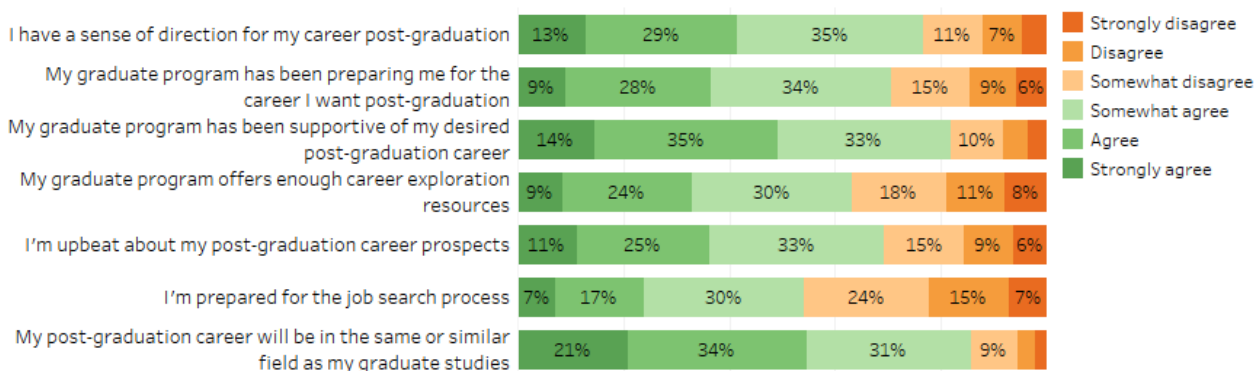
Figure 16: How well prepared do you feel you are in the following attributes, behaviors, and skillsets?



CAREER ADVISING AND PREPARATION

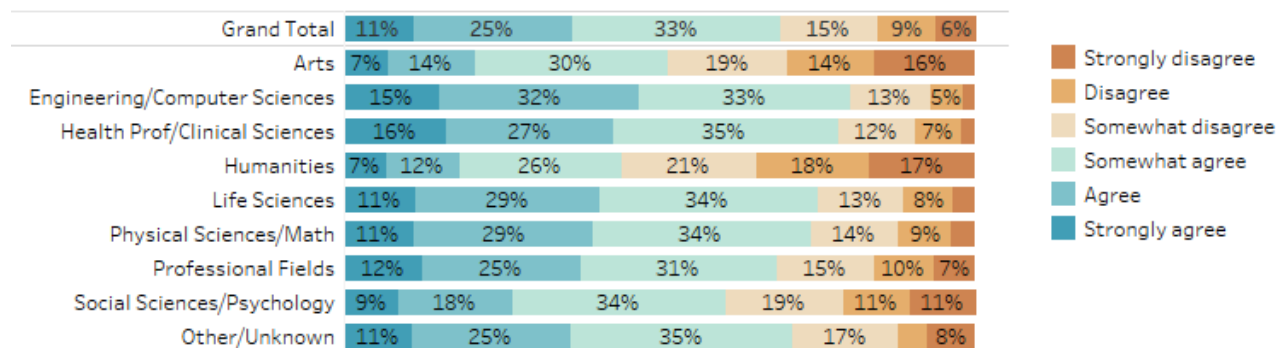
The UC Graduate Student Experience Survey (UCGSES) included a set of questions regarding career advising and preparation. Academic doctoral students' responses varied significantly across different aspects (Figure 17). About 70 to 80 percent of doctoral students agreed that they had a sense of direction for their career post-graduation, their graduate program had been supportive of and was preparing them for the career they wanted, and they were upbeat about their post-graduation career prospects. Nearly 90 percent at least somewhat agreed they would be in the same or similar field as their graduate studies. However, nearly half of all students somewhat strongly disagreed they were prepared for the job search. The COVID-19 pandemic may have increased anxieties regarding job searches.

Figure 17: Please rate your level of agreement with each of the following statements regarding your career preparation



When looking at responses by discipline, the results showed significant differences in aspects regarding career advising and preparation (Figure 18). For example, only 45 percent of doctoral students in Humanities, 51 percent in Arts, and 61 percent in Social Sciences/Psychology agreed that they were upbeat about their post-graduation career prospects.

Figure 18: Responses to “I’m upbeat about my post-graduation career prospects” by discipline



CONCLUSION

UC Graduate Student Experience Survey (UCGSES) data provides important and useful insights into the graduate and professional student experience, identifying areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. Institutional Research and Academic Planning (IRAP) has shared detailed survey data with the campus graduate divisions. The survey data dashboards discussed in this item will be available to the larger campus community and public through the UC Information Center. Campus communities are also encouraged to use this data in their work to better understand and improve the student experience. Whether it is improving student health and well-being, increasing access to financial support, or preparing students for post-graduate careers, the UCGSES—as seen with the UC Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES)—guides individual campuses to best support students’ needs. In the coming months, IRAP and Graduate, Undergraduate, and Equity Affairs (GUEA) will share data results and discuss ways to

address challenges facing graduate students with key stakeholders, such as the Council of Graduate Deans and the Academic Senate's Coordinating Committee on Graduate Affairs.

KEY TO ACRONYMS

CES	Center for Epidemiologic Studies
GUEA	Graduate, Undergraduate, and Equity Affairs
IRAP	Institutional Research and Academic Planning
UCOP	UC Office of the President
UCGSES	UC Graduate Student Experience Survey
UCUES	UC Undergraduate Experience Survey