

TO: Deans and Department Heads
FROM: The Graduate Council – Approved 2/17/2010

PROMOTING POSITIVE PROGRAM DISCUSSIONS BASED ON THE GRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE SURVEY

In the coming weeks the results of the Graduate Student Experience Survey (conducted April 2009) will become broadly available to all faculty, staff and students at the University of Oregon. We hope the survey results will be used to stimulate productive discussions. Below we offer a few suggestions about how to best use this tool and answer some frequently asked questions.

Some guidelines and tips about fostering productive discussions of survey results:

- Schedule a time for your faculty to discuss the results after they have had an opportunity to digest the information. Discuss both identified strengths and weaknesses. Are there some contextual factors that might be important in interpreting the results? How does your program regularly solicit confidential feedback from students and what is your history of responding to identified concerns? If the survey results do not fit with faculty perceptions of the department consider why this might be so.
- Given the high response rate (54%), the sample's representativeness, and the range of questions covered by the survey, we believe there is valuable information for all programs. We think that if students see their faculty taking the results seriously, students are more likely to engage frankly in discussions about program quality, advisor practices, and departmental climate.
- Graduate students are not a homogenous group. If the program appears to be working well for many, but not all, students, it is important to think about what can be done to better serve those who currently feel less well served.
- A noteworthy finding is that some programs that have a less diverse graduate student body (i.e., programs with fewer students of color, first-generation graduate students, women, and/or international students) received stronger ratings on departmental climate and perceived efforts to promote a diverse, inclusive community than did some more heterogeneous programs. It is important to consider contextual factors that might, therefore, help to interpret these results. Among the few areas where we found statistically significant differences among groups of respondents were responses to questions about diversity and perceived inequitable treatment of graduate students. Because under-represented students are more skilled at and/or attuned to recognizing problems in these areas, they may be more likely to report problems. Their honest perceptions are an important resource for programs that want to enhance diversity.
- Programs that have both high satisfaction ratings and have been more successful at promoting inclusive departmental climates have much to share with other programs about what policies and practices simultaneously promote excellence, access, and the production of innovation in our disciplines.
- There are many campus resources available to help programs improve the graduate education they provide to students. Some changes require financial investments that are currently limited. However, there are clearly changes or improvements that are well within the control of faculty, departments and school and college leadership. Talking frankly with Deans, Graduate School leadership, or other units about how to build on strengths and improve weaknesses is a good start on a path to identifying concrete steps that can make a big difference for your current and future graduate students.

How is the information from the survey different from information we currently get from other tools used by schools and colleges and departments to solicit feedback from our students?

All departments receive Exit Survey results gathered by the Graduate School from students who earn degrees. But this is limited to students who earn degrees and the instrument is much more limited in its coverage than this survey. Moreover, the on-line survey enabled us to guarantee greater confidentiality than is likely (or perceived to be likely) when feedback is gathered directly by a department. This data should be interpreted in the context of the other sources of information you have about the quality of your programs and feedback from your students.

Why is confidentiality so important for graduate students?

Faculty may not fully appreciate how concerned many graduate students are that criticism they voice about their programs can result in negative consequences for them. In the highly competitive atmosphere of graduate school – where students compete for internal funding and depend on faculty recommendations for jobs and awards -- many students choose not to take chances with their future. How do we know? Students on the Graduate School Advisory Board have made this crystal clear. Some students also contacted the Graduate School when the survey was launched to secure an assurance the confidentiality we promised would be fully honored.

Does this mean faculty should not organize discussions with graduate students to discuss survey results?

We hope programs will create venues for discussion of these results with students. But those forums should be organized in ways that minimize the vulnerability students could experience. It might mean creating the opportunity for groups or individuals to talk with a department head or the director of graduate studies with a guarantee that comments made would not be traceable to particular individuals. It could mean soliciting feedback in writing without the requirement of a signature. In some programs graduate student-managed discussions might be a good way to promote further discussion of results. In some departments a “town hall” type event might work. The particular method depends on the organizational culture and climate in a department. For example, a department that received comparatively poor scores on climate might want to be especially careful not to amplify the problems by putting students in a position where they are asked to “explain” results. Furthermore, focusing both on strengths and weaknesses is important.

One of the best ways to demonstrate that the faculty takes these results seriously might be to frame discussions around proposed solutions or changes in response to the feedback. This might make students more eager to participate if it is framed as a constructive, collaborative process focused on improving their graduate education.

Will there be other data available from the survey this year?

There will be other data reported this spring. That data includes how different groups of students (e.g., gender, race and ethnicity, first generation or not, international or domestic) responded to these and other questions, responses to some other questions, and qualitative data.

When will the survey be repeated?

We plan to re-administer this survey in three years. However, we will gladly share the instrument with schools, colleges or programs that want to conduct a follow-up before then.

Will programs be asked how they responded to the survey results?

Yes. By the end of Spring term 2010 the Grad Council and the leadership of the Graduate School will poll department heads to find out how you have shared and discussed these results. This will also be a chance to gather your feedback on what we can do to refine the instrument or the process of reporting results in the future. We are eager to collaborate in gathering, analyzing and reporting information that will allow us to build and strengthen our graduate programs.