COGS EQUITY AND ANTI-DISCRIMINATION 2023 - 2024 REPORT

Preliminary trends in DEI Concerns for Graduate and Professional Students at Michigan State University

Presented by the COGS **Equity and Anti-discrimination Committee**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Equity and Anti-Discrimination Committee within the Council of Graduate Students designed a survey to capture what DEI-related concerns graduate students at Michigan State University are experiencing. The survey was designed to: (1) provide the opportunity for graduate/professional students to voice their thoughts and unique perspectives, (2) contextualize key concerns from the perspective of graduate/professional students, and (3) produce baseline data for COGS and other MSU agencies who want to evaluate DEI concerns in the graduate/professional student population.

Two primary topics were examined: **belongingness and discrimination**. Both belongingness and discrimination contribute to how graduate students experience inclusion; further, they have been linked to key outcomes for graduate students (e.g., degree progress, well-being). Belonging is broadly defined as the sense of being accepted and included by those around you without needing to compromise one's individuality. Discrimination is defined as unfair prejudice towards individuals based on various collective identifiers (e.g., race/ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability status, etc.).

To capture these topics, thirty-one graduate students sampled from representatives in the Council of Graduate Students' full council filled out questions pertaining to where within various university units (e.g., department, program, etc.) they experienced belonging, what instances of discrimination they have experienced, and what directions they believe DEI efforts should explore.

When evaluating student belongingness, there were two primary takeaways: (1) students report that their department is a common source of belonging, but do not report experiencing high belongingness at the department level, and (2) when evaluating components that make up belonging, graduate students endorsed various university units' ability to create an inclusive culture, appreciate graduate students, and foster community. When evaluating student perceptions of and experiences with discrimination, there were two major insights: (1) most students indicated that they have come in contact with discrimination, usually by witnessing it or hearing about others' experiences, and (2) students identified sources with formal power (i.e., faculty and administration) as two primary contributors to their perceptions of and experiences with discrimination.

When asked to provide feedback about graduate student DEI concerns that need more attention, four themes emerged: (1) centralizing intersectional identities, (2) focusing on the international student population, (3) evaluating detrimental effects of power imbalances between graduate students and faculty, and (4) cultivating a clearer connection between intentions of DEI initiatives and the actual impacts they have on graduate students.

Collectively, these results yield tentative evidence regarding how belonging and discrimination may be impacting graduate students. As these topics have been found to have important implications for well-being and career outcomes for graduate students, this report provides initial insights into the DEI-related concerns graduate students are contending with as they pursue their studies at Michigan State University. Further, it offers suggested directions to inform future exploration of these issues.

BACKGROUND

The Council of Graduate Students is the authorized student government on campus representing all graduate/professional students at Michigan State University. Our mission is to promote the academic, social, and economic goals of graduate and professional students.

The Council of Graduate Students accomplishes its mission through advocacy, innovative programming, and collaboration with other student organizations and the academic and administrative units of the University.

BACKGROUND

The Equity and Anti-discrimination Committee (EAC) within the Council of Graduate Students (COGS) is tasked with evaluating what issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are of concern to graduate and professional students both within COGS and throughout MSU.

Each year, the EAC creates a report that details the experiences of graduate and professional students and provides recommendations for how to engage in meaningful advocacy that targets top DEI concerns and facilitates a culture of inclusion.

This year, the EAC sought to generate benchmarking data by collecting sentiment around DEI concerns from the COGS full council, which taps into a wide array of departments across the university. In collecting sentiment from COGS representatives, the EAC hopes to:

1. Provide the opportunity for graduate/professional students to voice their thoughts and unique perspectives.

The ability to express one's opinions is a privilege not accessible to all students. This survey provided an anonymous forum through which students from all backgrounds could contribute to our understanding of pertinent DEI issues.

2. Contextualize key concerns from the perspective of graduate/professional students.

Centralizing students' perceptions of DEI concerns enables the derivation of meaningful insights and impactful interventions that serve the population they are intended to benefit.

3. Produce baseline data for COGS and other MSU agencies who want to evaluate DEI concerns in the graduate/professional student population.

To inform data-driven solutions, it is crucial to have a point of comparison to track the efficacy of interventions and progress toward desired outcomes.

SURVEY DESCRIPTION

This survey was designed to evaluate **two primary topics: belongingness and discrimination.** These topics were selected based upon thematic commonalities in concerns brought to the COGS Director of Equity and Anti-discrimination and through discussion within the EAC.

FEELINGS OF BELONGING

Belonging is broadly defined as the sense of being accepted and included by those around you without needing to compromise one's individuality.

PERCEPTIONS OF DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination is defined as unfair prejudice towards individuals based on various collective identifiers (e.g., race/ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability status).

The survey was advertised to full council members within COGS in the Fall of 2023. These individuals were selected to make up the sample as they are the designated representatives from their department. Thirty-one full council members responded to the survey.

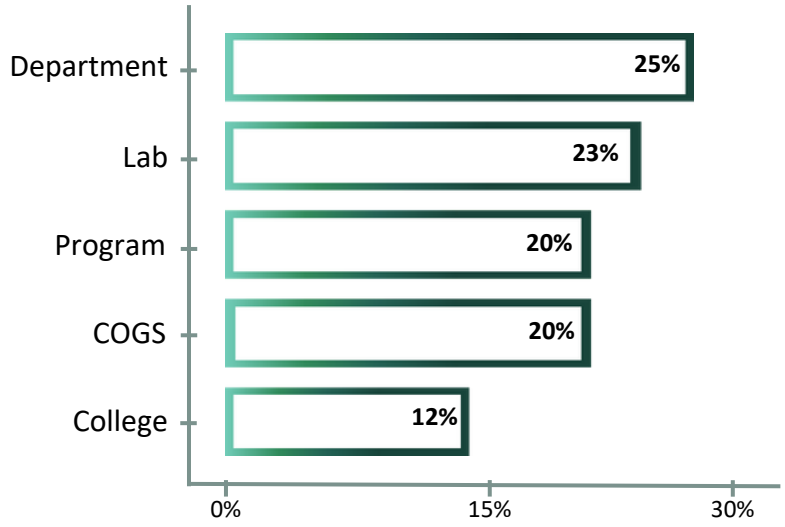
Respondents filled out questions pertaining to where within various university units (e.g., department, program, etc.) they experienced belonging. They additionally answered questions about how frequently they experience or witness discrimination at MSU, and from whom they experience this prejudiced behavior. Participants were asked whether they were aware of MSU policies that protect them from discrimination and if they knew how to report such incidents. Finally, students provided feedback on what DEI concerns they feel need to be addressed. Given the low sample size, data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and pattern extraction to generate trends in responses across participants.

STUDENT BELONGING

Belonging is the fundamental human need to feel accepted and included by those around you; it emerges through the formation of interpersonal attachments that allow individuals to engage authentically, without needing to suppress their unique social identities (Allen et al., 2022). Feelings of belonging play an important role **in the experience of inclusion** for all individuals, especially for members of historically excluded social groups (Shore et al., 2018).

When students do not feel a sense of belonging (i.e., exclusion), it has been shown to negatively impact their self-concept, career aspirations, career advancement, and their retention rates (Ostrove et al., 2011; O'Meara et al., 2017).

Figure 1
Percentage of belongingness attributions across university units



Participants were provided with a definition of belonging and asked to indicate which university units engendered such feelings; university units surveyed included a student's department, lab, graduate program, COGS, and their college.

When asked from which university units students derive a sense of belonging, the most frequently cited source was a student's department (25% of respondents) and the least frequently cited source was their college (12% of respondents). It is important to note these values do not reflect *feelings* of belonging, but rather *where* students believe they derive a sense of belonging.

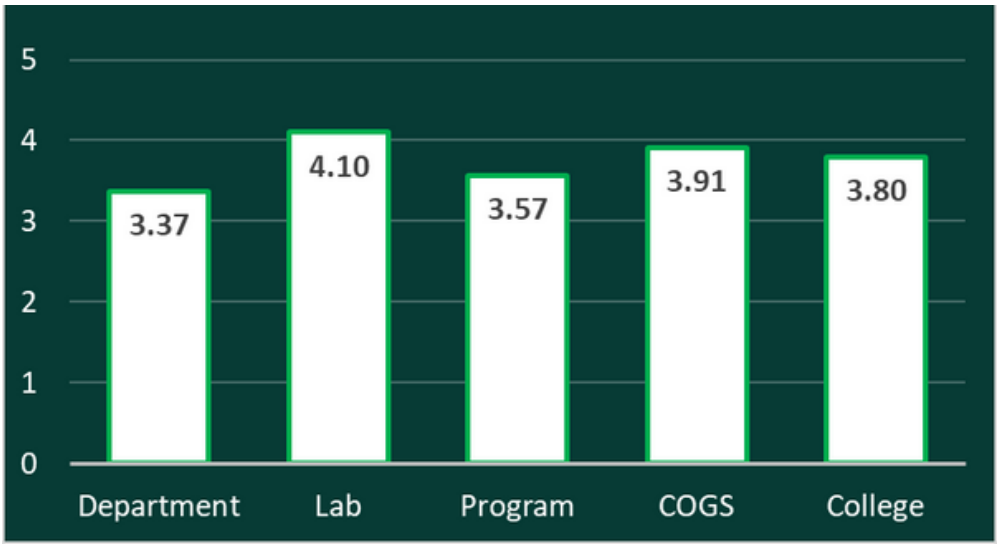
As belonging is informed by interpersonal attachments, a student's college may register as too distal and detached from their daily interactions to constitute a salient source of belongingness. As such, other sources nested within the college may present as more proximal sources of belonging. Notably, departments are structured by discipline similarity and include both labs and programs as subordinate entities. Resultingly, interpersonal interactions that inform belonging within departments include lab-, program-, and department-level socialization effects.

STUDENT BELONGING

In addition to assessing from what university units individuals infer feelings of belonging, the survey also captured students' perceptions of belonging within each university unit by responding to questions related to the following:

- **Culture of inclusion**
- **Respect for diverse opinions**
- **Safe avenues for voicing grievances**
- **Feeling valued and cared for**
- **Comfortability in expressing dissention**
- **Encouragement of work-life balance**
- **Sense of community**
- **Feelings of connectedness**
- **Consideration of diverse needs**

Figure 2
Mean level ratings of belonging across university units



Respondents indicated agreement using a 5-point Likert scale and their responses across the 9 questions were averaged to create their overall score for perceptions of belonging for each university unit. Across university units, participants' perceptions of belonging were strongest within lab contexts, and interestingly, weakest in department contexts.

Students indicated they felt their department was the university unit where they most commonly derived a sense of belonging; **yet, actual feelings of belonging were not experienced most saliently at the departmental level.** This discrepancy between attributions of belongingness and experiences of belongingness at the department level is a strategic opportunity for intervention. As departments can account for variance in belonging salience across labs and programs, interventions at this intermediate-level university unit have the opportunity for wider impact while simultaneously accounting for the needs of a more specific population.

STUDENT BELONGING

In examining specific themes captured by the perceptions of belonging questions, there was a trend across all university units in what themes tended to be endorsed highly and those that were less endorsed. Overall, participants indicated higher agreement that university units had a culture of inclusion, demonstrated they cared about students, and fostered community. On the other hand, participants tended to respond in ways that would suggest they felt university units were less efficacious at creating environments where expressing divergent perspectives is encouraged, supporting work-life balance, and addressing the needs of diverse students.

PERFORMING WELL IN:

- **Promoting inclusive cultures**
- **Making students feel valued and cared for**
- **Fostering a sense of community**

NEED TO DEVELOP IN:

- **Inviting the respectful contribution of different ideas**
- **Supporting work-life balance**
- **Addressing diverse student needs**

Collectively, the themes in student belonging suggest two key takeaways and one major implication:

TAKEAWAYS:

1. Students report that their department is a common source of belonging, but do not report experiencing high belongingness at the department level.
2. The inclusion culture, appreciation of graduate students, and the creation of community by university units were all highly endorsed components of belongingness.

IMPLICATIONS:

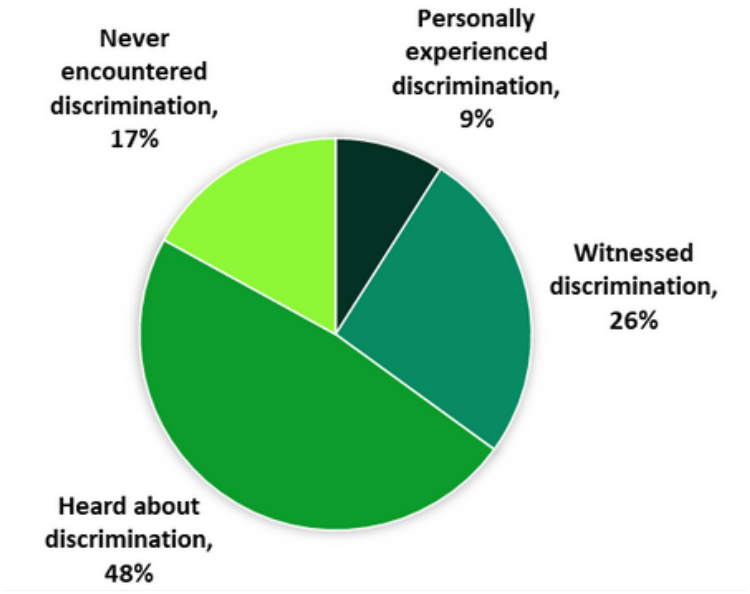
1. As the departments are a strategic target for increasing graduate student belonging, interventions might consider the areas for improvement indicated by the survey (i.e., safety in expressing ideas, work-life balance, and equitable need fulfillment).

PERCEPTIONS OF DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination is defined as unfair prejudice towards individuals based on their collective identifiers like race/ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion, disability status, etc. Discrimination can be overt, which is when bigotry is intentional and public, or discrimination can be covert, which is when bigotry is ambiguously or unconsciously enacted (Sue et al., 2007). Most modern discrimination tends to be subtle (e.g., microaggression), however, in the last 8 years there has been a resurgence of more blatant forms of discrimination (Hebl et al., 2020).

Experiencing and perceiving discrimination has a host of negative outcomes for students, including decreases in academic performance, motivation, and well-being (Hussain & Jones, 2021). Further, it has implications for students' career decision-making and expected vocational outcomes (Conkel-Ziebell et al., 2019).

Figure 3
Student experiences of discrimination



Participants were provided with a definition of discrimination and asked about their personal experiences with discrimination at MSU. The majority (48%) of students reported that they had never personally experienced or witnessed discrimination, but had heard about other's experiences. Only 9% of students indicated having personally experienced discrimination, and 17% indicated never personally experiencing, witnessing, or hearing about discrimination. Of those who reported experiencing, witnessing, or hearing about discrimination, most said they these incidents occurred on a yearly or semi-annual basis; no students reported discrimination frequency at the daily or weekly level.

PERCEPTIONS OF DISCRIMINATION

Participants were given the option to provide qualitative responses describing incidents of discrimination they either personally experienced or witnessed. Here are a few abridged excerpts from their responses:

> **Members of my department have expressed their dislike of DEI programs and the personal and professional needs of graduate students (work/life balance, pay raises to reflect living wage, power equality, and available resources for international students).**

> **The department faculty exert their power to ignore graduate student demands; as a result, we suffer from a lack of diverse perspectives.**

> **My friend is an international student. They haven't experienced discrimination at MSU, but have experienced racial discrimination outside of campus.**

> **During a faculty search, a candidate was rated poorly for not being diverse enough; it seems like diversity only goes skin deep and other forms of intersection such as a person's socio-economic background do not count as diversity.**

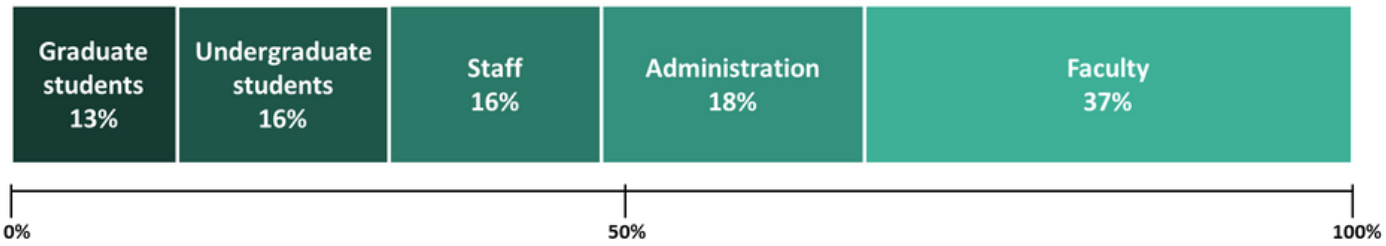
> **Off-campus, a group told me and my roommate that we "should go back to our own country". As an international student, I brushed it off because I understand the nature of a multinational setting can be frustrating and complicated.**

Respondents highlighted that they experience and witness discrimination both at MSU and in the surrounding community. Notably, the unique experiences of international students were mentioned multiple times. Additionally, the incidents shared also converged on a theme of intersectionality, underscoring that the impact of discriminatory events can harm students across surface-level (or observable; i.e., race) identity categories, as well as through deep-level (or less observable; i.e., socioeconomic status) characteristics.

PERCEPTIONS OF DISCRIMINATION

To better characterize from which sources within MSU students experience discrimination, participants were asked which population they perceive as instigating discriminatory behavior: undergraduate students, other graduate/professional students, faculty, staff, and/or administration.

Figure 4
Perceived sources of discriminatory behavior



Overall, participants indicated that faculty were the main perpetrators in the discrimination incidents they experienced, witnessed, or heard about. Participants were also asked about whether they were familiar with MSU policies that protect them against discrimination. Overwhelmingly, respondents indicated they knew how to report grievances, what the Anti-Discrimination Policy covered, and the procedures under the Relationship Violence and Sexual Misconduct policy.

Collectively, the themes in student perceptions of discrimination suggest two key takeaways and one major implication:

TAKEAWAYS:

1. While there was a substantial portion of respondents who denoted they did not have any experience, neither personally nor second-hand, with discrimination at MSU, most students indicated that they were coming in contact with discrimination.
2. Students identified sources with formal power (i.e., faculty and administration) as two primary contributors to their perceptions of and experiences with discrimination.

IMPLICATIONS:

1. As students perceived faculty and administration perpetuating discrimination, these superordinate sources may be a population where anti-discrimination pedagogy, especially that which considers the impact of discrimination on intersectional identities, could make an impact.

WHAT GRADUATE STUDENTS WANT TO SEE ADDRESSED:

THE CENTRALIZATION OF INTERSECTIONALITY IN DEI CONVERSATIONS

A FOCUS ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENT CONCERNS

POWER IMBALANCES BETWEEN GRADUATE STUDENTS AND FACULTY

BRIDGING INTENT AND IMPACT IN DEI INITATIVES

A major component of making individuals feel included in their environments is to encourage their participation in conversations that affect them and invite their involvement in decision-making (Shore et al., 2018). Therefore, this survey gave graduate students the opportunity to provide feedback to the Equity and Anti-discrimination Committee on what topics they would like to see addressed.

Their qualitative responses were thematically analyzed, and four core themes were extracted. Converging strongly with the sentiment expressed earlier in the survey, graduate students indicated that DEI *must* take an intersectional lens in order to be impactful. Additionally, the experiences of international students were highlighted as overlooked and rarely the direct focus of DEI efforts.

Aligning with the finding that graduate students perceive faculty as instigating discrimination, the call to examine the power imbalances between faculty and graduate students was repeatedly stated, especially in advisor-advisee dynamics, where faculty have direct power over student funding and degree progress. Finally, students highlighted that the relative impact of DEI initiatives is often unclear to students. This indicates that the DEI efforts are not always perceived as useful or practically impactful in the lived experiences of graduate students.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This report has generated tentative evidence about how graduate and professional students experience and perceive belonging and discrimination at Michigan State University. These preliminary results provide a starting point for the advancement of existing understandings of graduate student sentiment, as well as the development of interventions that address the concerns graduate students have identified as critical. Thus, to facilitate further exploration, three directions for future work are presented:

DIRECTION #1

Explore how the deleterious effects of discrimination can be attenuated. Notably, engendering belongingness, cultivating diverse peer interactions, and emphasizing institutional commitments to DEI have been shown to be impactful (Hussain & Jones, 2021).

DIRECTION #2

Examine how international students' experiences systematically differ from those of domestic students. As international students embody intersectionality, characterizing their unique challenges, and the subsequent impact on key outcomes (e.g., degree progress), has the potential to highlight concerns that are currently underexamined.

DIRECTION #3

Investigate a holistic approach to supporting graduate student success across all surface- and deep-level identifiers, and how different levels within MSU (i.e., institution vs. department) can contribute to improving graduate student outcomes like recruitment, retention, and graduation (see Rehfeld et al., 2024).

CONTACT

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APPENDIX

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