

Summer Climate Committee Interim Report

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Preface

In the Fall semester of 2023, the Graduate and Professional Student Senate (GPSS) conducted a climate and culture survey in six different departments: Sociology, English, Engineering Education, Mechanical Engineering, Fish and Wildlife and Entomology.¹ The departments surveyed were determined by popular request. Qualitative data analysis of the open-ended section along with quantitative analysis from the survey revealed seven general areas of concern: (1) racial and/or nationality-motivated mistreatment, (2) LGBTQ+ motivated mistreatment, (3) general academic abuse or bullying, (4) ableism motivated mistreatment, (5) sexual and/or gender-motivated mistreatment, (6) student perception of it not being handled effectively, and (7) funding related concerns.

The GPSS climate and culture survey group contacted the departments that participated and for those who wished a discussion of their department-specific results was held in the format of their choosing. A summary of all the findings was presented to the University Council on April 22, 2024, where a commitment to improving the graduate student experience was made.²

The Graduate School convened an ad-hoc committee in the Summer of 2024 to investigate what avenues could be explored to alleviate concerns raised by the GPSS survey. The committee looked at success rates of students in terms of percent of students who left the program, graduation rates, change of program rates, and rates of “mastering out” (leaving with a master’s after entering a PhD program). There was wide variety of outcomes across programs and the numbers of students also varied widely so firm conclusions are hard to draw. However, it was recommended that the Graduate School continue to follow up on these data and discuss them with individual departments. Qualitative data from the Graduate School climate surveys should also be discussed with departments.

The report below is a summary of the ad-hoc committee’s findings with an emphasis on “graduate student- advisor” relationships. There are other avenues to consider as well such as “graduate student-graduate student”, “faculty-faculty”, “staff-faculty”, “staff-graduate students”, and more, however we focus on this as a place to start. We break up our findings in terms of “preventative” and “protective” where preventative is meant to be adjustments that can be made to improve the overall climate and graduate student experience so that the more extreme cases of mistreatment become less likely. Protective avenues include suggestions for how to assist graduate students in additional cases where mistreatment is happening.

The committee feels that to develop successful initiatives for change, we must approach it as an effort that involves examining and modifying the systems that are creating the challenges, rather than solely focusing on building individual resilience to challenging environments. We focused on identifying those actions that would have the maximum immediate benefit for the largest number of students. Our aim is to build an environment that brings out the best in each individual and of the community as a whole.³

¹ BIT was initially surveyed but due to an extremely low response rate of $N < 5$, they were excluded from the results.

² <https://news.vt.edu/articles/2024/06/gradschool-gpss-climate-survey.html>

³ Kern, M. L., & Taylor, J. A. (2021). Systems informed positive education. In M. L. Kern & M. L. Wehmeyer (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of positive education* (pp. 109–135). Palgrave Macmillan/Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-64537-3_5

Preventative Measures

The measures described below were discussed by the committee as possible initiatives to help head off or prevent common problems from arising.

Funding Expectations

Research has long established a strong link between financial distress and poorer psychological functioning for graduate students regardless of the area of study.⁴ Many students live in constant fear about whether they will be able to continue in their program because they are not sure what future funding will be or where it will come from. Faculty and programs should be transparent and honest in how funding decisions are made, what the criteria are, the funding cycle, and where the funds are coming from (GTA, GRA, GA, etc.). This worry is particularly acute for international students whose visa status relies on having a steady income. Faculty should be especially sensitive to those worries and should refrain from threatening to remove funding as a punishment.

When possible, students should be given, in writing, multi-year funding offers. Those offers should clearly define the parameters around the funding including amount, duration, progress and hours committed requirements, and specific conditions under which the offer could be revoked.

If a multi-year offer is not possible, each spring departments should notify students, in writing, of their funding opportunities for the next academic year by May 15. This communication should clearly define the parameters around the funding including amount, duration, progress and hours committed requirements, and specific conditions under which the offer could be revoked. We recognize that sometimes there are last minute changes that may allow students to be funded at the last minute. However, it is better to have surprise funding arise than have students rely on funding that will not materialize. If possible, by August 1 of each year, students should have specific assignments

The Structure of Graduate Committees

Purpose: The relationship between a graduate student and their committee chairperson is a mentorship and financial relationship meant to foster research and career development. However, sometimes these relationships may become unproductive for many reasons and neither party is at fault. Herein, we recommend modifying Virginia Tech's graduate school policies and provide recommendations to help normalize dissolving that relationship in an amicable manner.

Current Virginia Tech Policy

“Changes in a student's Advisory Committee will be granted only on approval of all committee members (new and old) and on recommendation by the Department Head or

⁴ Evans, T., Bira, L., Gastelum, J. et al. Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education. *Nat Biotechnol* 36, 282–284 (2018). <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/10.1038/nbt.4089>

Graduate Program Director, after the Change of Committee/Advisor Request form is completed and signed.”⁵

“In the case that one or more members does not approve the change in the membership of the Advisory Committee, an appeal may be made by either the student or a faculty member to the Department Head. If the Department Head considers the appeal to have merit, he/she may then ask the Graduate School for an exception to all members signing the form.”⁶

Change of Doctoral Committee Advisor

Recommendation:

Each committee should contain at least one member, other than the chair, in a field closely related to the doctoral committee's chairperson. In the event of irreconcilable differences, or an unproductive relationship between the student and the committee chairperson, the committee members may vote for that committee member to be named the new chairperson/advisor moving the previous chairperson to a seat as a committee member. Students will not lose academic credits or progress made thus far in their degree. However, a committee meeting must be held to agree on a new dissertation that gives credit to any previous data collected with the previous chairperson while giving credit to any new data acquired with the new committee chairperson. The student and faculty will be prohibited from publishing the data acquired while working together without express permission and necessary authorship.

Resources Related to this topic:

- <https://biology.mit.edu/graduate/current-students/support-for-students-changing-labs/>
- <https://cse.engin.umich.edu/academics/graduate/current-phd-students/changing-advisors-in-cse/>
- <https://www.science.org/content/article/dysfunctional-advisee-adviser-relationships-methods-negotiating-beyond-conflict>
- https://www.csusb.edu/sites/default/files/Thesis%20Committee%20Policy_Guidance_6_1_20-ltrhead.pdf

Secondary Advisor

Recommendation

A Graduate Faculty Representative (GFR) or Secondary Advisor (SA) can be appointed to each graduate committee going forward. The GFR is an observer responsible for

⁵ https://graduateschool.vt.edu/content/dam/graduateschool_vt_edu/forms/Change_of_Committee-Advisor_Request.pdf

⁶ https://secure.graduateschool.vt.edu/graduate_catalog/policies.htm?policy=002d14432c654287012c6542e38200d8

assuring students are treated fairly and the policies of the graduate school are upheld. While the SA serves as a committee member with the additional responsibility of being present during an annual status conversation with the student and primary advisor as well as help settle disputes amicably between the parties. It is the faculty and graduate school's responsibility to determine if a GFR or SA is most advantageous going forward.

Resources Related to this topic:

- <https://graduateschool.charlotte.edu/faculty-and-staff-resources/graduate-faculty-representative>
- <https://catalog.ncsu.edu/graduate/graduate-handbook/representatives/>
- <https://ethz.ch/students/en/doctorate/faq.html?question=12337&title=what-is-the-purpose-of-having-a-mandatory-second-advisor>

Evaluation and Student Progress

Given the results of the climate survey, it is important to maintain an understanding of how progress is defined by the graduate school and to track the progress of individual students to ensure a productive and healthy work environment for graduate students and their mentors. Currently, each department regulates progress reports internally. It would be beneficial to have a mandatory progress report submitted to the graduate school at the end of every academic year following an annual committee meeting.

Recommendations:

1. Existing Progress Reports & Examples: Virginia Tech

School of Education and the Department of Entomology annual progress reports are available for reference through our committee folders. Additionally, Dr. Catherine L. Cotrupi is working on establishing some standards, a timeline, and a convenient submission method for this review process and is available to collaborate with the graduate school.

<https://www.ento.vt.edu/academic-programs/general/forms.html>

2. Meetings

Aside from annual committee meetings, it is important for students and their advisor to have annual meetings to establish hours worked, and expectations of progress. These conversations should involve parameters for funding, publications, expected graduation, and career development. If a GFR or SA is not established going forward, these expectations should be outlined for faculty and another form of fostering communication should be upheld.

3. SPOT Surveys

We currently have spot surveys taken by students at the end of their classes that are anonymous. These surveys allow the school to gauge the successes and the failures of certain classes. In the same way, SPOT Surveys can be provided to graduate students annually to determine if there are concerns or patterns that need to be addressed.

Once per academic year, graduate students should answer SPOT surveys about their committee chairperson

- Responses should be restricted to the data analysts, graduate school, and Ombuds person at Virginia Tech. These individuals can review the answers and follow up with students on any concerns about their PI
- Questions created by the Climate survey committee and surveys implemented 2025-2026 school year
- Students should be given questions related to their mentorship experience in their exit survey
- During their faculty review, deans of the college or department heads can discuss concerns with faculty based on trends over the years from student surveys

Facilitating Conversations Between Advisor and Student

Background

The ability to improve the climate in our graduate community depends on the awareness and understanding of how we build healthy relationships within the more immediate working groups we experience. The Graduate School has clearly established expectations for students and faculty in these more localized communities

(<https://graduateschool.vt.edu/academics/expectations/expectations-for-graduate-education-overview.html>). Recognizing and aligning these stated expectations as well as the individual expectations within a working relationship is crucial for improving our work and learning environments.

Regular Training

- a) Sustainable training and resources for faculty advisors on communication of expectations and advising is recommended to more conveniently reach a greater number of faculty (vs. limited in in-person workshops):
 - One suggested approach is to incorporate additional communication and advising/mentoring training into the existing Title IX training for faculty.
 - Pros: This integration streamlines the training process and makes efficient use of already established programs.
 - Cons: A major concern with this approach is the feasibility and logistics of new (“non-mandatory”) contents to the required Title IX training. This

integration might complicate the existing training framework and could lead to challenges without proper buy-ins.

- Alternative Option: utilize the TLOS (Technology-enhanced Learning and Online Strategies) Professional Development Network. This platform offers professional development credits for completing training modules and can provide a structured yet flexible approach to additional faculty training (<https://tlos.vt.edu/request.html>).
 - Pros: The TLOS platform leverages existing infrastructure and is cost-free. Also, it can be made interactive with instructional designers to enhance engagement and effectiveness.
 - Cons: One challenge with this option is that not all faculty members may choose to complete the training for professional development credits. There may be a need for additional encouragement, recognition, or other incentives to motivate faculty participation and completion.
 - Proposed TLOS PDN training for faculty advisors on advising/mentoring and communicating with graduate students:
 - Using the format of self-paced course, this online training can be designed to equip faculty with essential tools and best practices for effective advising and mentoring of graduate students. It can cover a range of topics, including incorporating Virginia Tech's Expectations for Graduate Education, the creation of mentoring agreements, strategies for supporting minoritized students, among others. This course can explore best practices and self-reflections on strategies to support diverse student populations, using available case studies.
 - Recent discussions with the TLOS team, along with faculty from the College of Engineering (COE), have shown strong interest in the proposed TLOS Professional Development Network training. COE might consider taking the lead on this project.
- b) For graduate students, we could develop an online course similar to the *Graduate Student Mentoring* course currently being offered at the University of Texas at Austin and further expand it in scope to include advising topics in general: "The self-paced online ungraded course is designed to help all UT graduate students build strong mentoring relationships and develop networks of mentors on campus. It provides a working definition of mentoring, a list of recommended best practices, and suggestions to help graduate students begin *meaningful and productive conversations* about mentoring. The modules for the course can be taken individually or together. In total, the course takes a few hours to complete, though it is a resource for graduate students to access throughout their time at UT." (<https://ctl.utexas.edu/news/join-graduate-student-mentoring-canvas-course/>). (Note: Currently at Virginia Tech, the ENGE 5304 *Graduate Student Success in Multicultural Environments* course taken by COE graduate students explores some of these important topics)

Graduate Courses: There already exists a pass/fail course for graduate teaching assistants (GTAs). One of the suggestions brought up for maintaining a positive climate is regular training for graduate students beyond just GTA training. This could include unconscious bias training. Western University offers online training modules related to: building inclusivity through anti-racism, historical view of racism in Canada, unpacking and addressing antisemitism, unpacking and addressing islamophobia, etc. Some of these topics have overlap with areas that other student and faculty groups have already brought up wanting the population to be educated on.

Some departments already have offerings such as this, so we recommend an environmental scan and catalog of existing offerings to identify areas where such regular training is lacking.

- c) Discrimination and harassment: Faculty are required to take an online course READ: Respect, Equity, and Anti-Discrimination Compliance Training. It is unclear whether this training is effective and how compliance in this training is monitored. We recommend a review of this training and the development of a plan to track compliance with specific penalties for non-compliance, up to and including removing graduate faculty status.

Tracking Data

The Graduate School does a climate survey every three years. The quantitative data are compiled and summarized in a dashboard available for graduate programs who enquire. However, the qualitative responses have not been analyzed and shared. We recommend that the graduate school find a tool to evaluate those responses and discuss them with programs.

There are also data on time to completion, drop-out rates, number of students who leave with a different degree than the one they began, and other measures of success. Those data should be shared and discussed with departments and standards and norms set. Those programs who are consistently performing below the norms should be identified and resources re-allocated appropriately.

Protective Measures

Emergency Transition Fund for Graduate Students

Currently, Virginia Tech has a Work-Life Grant established as assistance for GAs, GRAs, GTAs, expecting or adopting children.

“In demonstrating its commitment to be work-life friendly, Virginia Tech aims to provide a supportive environment for graduate students in their choice to give birth or adopt a child, or attend to a medical emergency, while simultaneously acknowledging the department's need for continuation of the work being provided by the graduate student as

a GTA, GRA, or GA. The Work-Life Grants program provides the means through which departments can request temporary financial assistance.”⁷

The above language can be adapted to:

“In demonstrating its commitment to a supportive environment for graduate students during their graduate journey while acknowledging the department's need for continuation of the work being provided by the graduate student as a GTA, GRA, or GA, the graduate school has implemented an Emergency fund for students transitioning between advisors or in unproductive relationship with their committee chairperson.”

“Departments can request financial assistance equivalent to a graduate assistantship for two semesters. The Graduate School will provide one half of the two semester tuition and stipend while the College Dean will provide the other half*. These funds may be used in a variety of ways to ensure that the research/teaching effort is not adversely impacted and the graduate student continues to be supported. ”

* It should be noted that the graduate school must develop a standard for determining which students (if not all) receive transitional funding and a budget for providing this funding.
Critical needs request from the Grad School to be submitting in the Spring.

Resources Related to this topic:

- <https://graduate.dartmouth.edu/policy/transitional-support-policy>
- <https://www.rise4mit.com/updates>

Faculty Code of Conduct

There needs to be a clear process by which students and others can report inappropriate and abusive behavior and for department heads, deans, and the graduate school to act on those reports. One suggestion for accomplishing this would be to develop a system like that used in the graduate honor system⁸. This would need to be developed in conjunction with Faculty Senate and Faculty Relations and Department Heads Council. However, some possible steps for adjusting graduate faculty status could include:

1. Facilitated Discussion
2. Investigation
3. Preliminary Review Panel
4. Review Panel
5. University Action
6. Appeals

⁷ <https://graduateschool.vt.edu/funding/work-life-grants.html>

⁸ <https://graduateschool.vt.edu/academics/expectations/graduate-honor-system.html>

7. Actions of the System (sanctions list) with regards to advisory privileges and terms of employment

Recommendation: Work with Faculty Senate, Faculty Affairs, and Department Heads Council to develop a clear reporting methodology and develop a process for those who are accused of misbehavior.

Ongoing Efforts and Goals

The work of this committee has identified some efforts that are currently taking place within the Graduate School and some potential efforts that may help solidify the understanding of strategies to improve our relationships in our more immediate environments:

- a) These efforts include the establishment of general expectations for graduate education, engagement in dialogue with our community about the importance of communication and the establishment of individual approaches to the working relationship, and training for our faculty in mentoring, supervision, and the skills that will allow those efforts to be successful. The Graduate School has created a mentoring toolbox that will be made available to every faculty member and student.
- b) Looking specifically at the effort to engage our community in conversations around the establishment of expectations with working relationships, the Graduate School provides students and faculty with presentations on building and maintaining healthy mentor/mentee relationships, as well as a case study-based presentation on mentoring experiences (e.g., mentoring roadshow by Kevin Edgar and Bill Huckle) to discuss strategies for working through the dilemmas students and faculty may face within these relationships.
- c) Training is needed to help build the skills for students and faculty within these relationships related to communication strategies for distressing conversations, navigating feedback, and skills for addressing microaggressions. The Graduate School also engages our community members in topics related to climate related to the establishment of psychological safety and disrupting academic bullying.
 - One resource some members of our community have accessed is the Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experiences in Research (CIMER) mentor training out of the University of Wisconsin-Madison (<https://cimerproject.org>). This can be further explored (see Appendix XX). Included in the typical CIMER mentor training curricula are essential components such as aligning expectations, articulating your mentoring philosophy and plan, assessing understanding, cultivating ethical behavior, enhancing work-life integration, fostering independence and wellbeing, maintaining effective communication, promoting mentee research self-efficacy and professional development, and reflecting on diversity while establishing a practice of inclusion.
 - Additional mentoring resources: <https://cimerproject.org/online-resources/>

Recommendations

As we look to continue these efforts, we need to identify ways to integrate and normalize these conversations throughout the year. We also need to look at what external expertise can be helpful for increasing our capacity to improve these working relationships. Expanding the knowledge gained from these engagements and potentially increasing its reach throughout our community could enhance our ability to improve outcomes in these relationships and enrich the overall experience within our greater graduate school community.

APPENDICES

I. Additional Data

A. Exit Survey

Data already exists for graduate student exit survey, https://graduateschool.vt.edu/numbers/exit_surveys/exit_results.html. Academic years 2017-18 to 2022-23 are available for viewing. Of note, the data does not differentiate between those who graduated, mastered out, or dropped out. The majority of responses come from the College of Engineering (46%).

B. Retention and Completion Data

For *doctoral* students from 2013-23 the graduation, continuation, transferring to a new program, mastering out, or withdrawing is delineated for each college and department by academic year on <https://graduateschool.vt.edu/numbers/Sloan.html>. There does not appear to be consistent trends across departments in drop-out rates for the covid years. For example, in 2016-17 the department of Physics saw a spike in students leaving the program ~30%, it was nearly half that in 2020-21.

C. Changing Advisor

For *doctoral* students who have passed their preliminary examination in the past decade (2014-2024). The percentage of students who change their advisors *after* their preliminary examination is indicated, broken down by college <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/kacy.lawrence/viz/AdvisorChange/AdvisorChange>. Note, interdisciplinary fields and new departments such as Nanoscience are typically outliers. Departments in the College of Science such as Chemistry, tend to have higher rates of changes than other colleges.

D. Graduate School Climate Survey Data 2022

The qualitative analysis of the data is not currently available. The data is being analyzed using Chat GPT and variants of the categories used in the GPSS Climate Survey and Graduate Ombudsperson Report. The questions that were asked were: (1) Please share with us any information regarding department climate you believe will be helpful. (2) If you are experiencing stress what is causing the stress? (3) Please share with us any other thoughts you may have about

University support. (4) Please share with us any additional information you may have regarding advising that you believe be helpful. (5) Please share with us any other thoughts you may have on creating an inclusive and affirming environment in graduate education. For more information contact Kacy Lawrence, Director of Assessment and Strategic Data Initiatives, klawr5@vt.edu.