

UD College of Engineering Graduate Student Focus Groups November 2018

Description of study

In Summer and Fall of 2018, the University of Delaware Center for Research in Education and Social Policy (CRESP) conducted a focus group assessment of graduate student climate and culture in the UD College of Engineering. Focus groups were held such that each one included only participants from one of five groups. The five groups, with total number of participants from each were: International men (10), international women (6), men (8), women (15), and students from underrepresented groups, defined as domestic, non-white, non-Asian (7). All graduate students were invited to volunteer to participate. Focus groups lasted an average of 71 minutes. Analysis of the data revealed five overarching themes: (a) Undergraduate preparation for graduate work, (b) Challenges during the transition to graduate school, (c) Navigating the academic climate and culture, (d) Program supports and, (e) Student-student interactions.

Key results and recommendations

- Most students feel their undergrad programs prepared them for graduate school. However, international students struggle to adapt to the American educational system: grading, class structures, expectations, etc. Offering resources to international students may help their transition.
- Most students do not come to graduate school knowing what it is like to conduct independent research or how to find an advisor. While some departments formally introduce students to the faculty and research topics, others do not. The report recommends that all departments formalize structures for orienting students to research and helping them identify an advisor.
- Faculty should encourage students to use self-advocacy skills throughout their graduate student career.
- Many students spoke of unequal treatment of URG, women, and international students by professors. Faculty should ensure that they apply practices equally, consistently, and fairly among all students.
- Faculty who are working to provide the best advisement experience for students belonging to URGs should be acknowledged and consulted in an effort to improve the climate for diversity in the COE.
- Many students expressed the need for a neutral party to assist with advisor-student conflicts, e.g., an ombudsperson or a “safe person.” The College should further explore why students feel they need this service.
- Establish transparent and supportive mechanism for switching advisors if necessary.
- Establish transparent departmental policies for student pay, vacation, hours, student progress, and grievances.
- Students requested more support for finding jobs in industry (e.g., industry-mentoring programs, perhaps in partnership with UD alumni; enhanced support for grad students from Career Services).
- While many students develop informal peer-mentoring relationships with more-senior students, others—particularly students from URGs --do not have their mentoring needs met within the COE. The report recommends the COE foster mentoring for all students, taking care to review the various needs students may have in a mentor.