Doctoral Student Experiences with Social Support and Community at UCLA

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Executive Summary

Analysis of responses to the open ended item "where and with whom have you developed community at UCLA" revealed six key themes: 1) departmental support, 2) non-departmental support, 3) research activities, 4) co-curricular support, 5) support outside of UCLA, and 6) lack of support.

*Departmental Support-*The most common source of support was departmental and included peers within the program or cohort as well as departmental faculty and staff. While support within the department was frequently cited, respondents sometimes added caveats to their responses that indicated this support was not all they hoped it would be.

Non-departmental Support- Non-departmental support referred to people (faculty, other students, etc.) and departments on campus but outside the students' home department that provided students with a sense of community. These included other academic departments (often in related fields) as well as Student Affairs departments, campus employment, and university housing. For international students the Dashew Center was a common resource cited in this area.

Research Activities- Research activities, consisting of interaction with colleagues in a lab setting or through research projects, as well as other scholarly activities, were also identified as providing a sense of support to doctoral students. Research activities were more frequently cited by students in science and technology fields (STEM) compared to non-STEM students.

Co-Curricular Support- Co-curricular support, in the form of co-curricular student organizations, recreational activities, and interaction with other students of a shared racial/ethnic identity, as well as more informal friendships and socialization, was the second most common theme in support. This theme was cited more frequently by Students of Color than White students, suggesting their greater need to seek out communities of shared social identity. Men were also more likely to report co-curricular support when compared to women. International students also showed a higher number of comments in this area, primarily due to their

development of community around a shared international student or home country identity.

Support Outside UCLA- Students also reported finding support outside of UCLA such as through family, particularly a spouse, or neighborhood organizations.

Lack of Support- Of concern was the theme of "no community"—the feeling of a lack of any support or community at UCLA—which accounted for approximately 5% of all comments.

Survey Administration &

Overall Respondent Demographics

Survey Administration

The 2010 Student Affairs Graduate and Professional Student Survey was administered online in Spring 2010 to all graduate and professional students at UCLA. The survey was designed with a Student Affairs focus and included items related to: perceptions of progress, mental health/wellness, use of time, financial concerns/resources, interactions with others, campus climate, self-ratings of skills, ethics in academia, international student issues, post-graduation plans, sense of community, and improvement of graduate/professional experience. For more information about the survey instrument see: http://www.sairo.ucla.edu/data/efforts_gradsurvey.html.

Overall Respondents

A total of 4,067 students responded to the survey (41% response rate). The sample was generally representative of the overall graduate and professional student population. Female respondents were slightly over-represented compared to the overall graduate and professional student population (53% vs. 48%), as were Asian students (24% vs. 19%). The sample was representative in terms of degree objective and major field. Additional information about the survey results can be found at: http://www.sairo.ucla.edu/data/efforts_gradsurvey.html.

Introduction

This report provides a summary of PhD student experiences with social support and community at UCLA based on responses to an open-ended item on the 2010 Student Affairs Graduate and Professional Student Survey: where or with whom have you developed a sense of community or social support at UCLA? This report highlights six key themes identified in the data: 1) departmental support, 2) non-departmental support, 3) research activities, 4) co-curricular support, 5) support outside of UCLA, and 6) lack of support. Beyond identifying key themes in social support for all doctoral students, this report explores nuances in experiences for different student groups, namely, differences in social support by race/ethnicity, gender, international or domestic status, and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and non-STEM fields of study.

Background and Methodology

Analysis of the open-ended responses involved several key steps. First, a team of SAIRO researchers developed a set of preliminary themes based on analysis of a subset of the data. Then, the research team developed a preliminary coding schema based on themes from the initial analysis. The subset of the data was coded again and the coding schema was refined. Eventually, the full data set was entered and coded in ATLAS ti, a qualitative software program that allows researchers to manage and code open-ended data. Based on the results in ATLAS, key themes in support for doctoral students were identified. Appendix A provides a brief definition of each theme and a description of the types of support they encompass.

Each individual response was coded for as many people and places that were identified as sources of support. In other words, within each response, multiple sources of support or comments regarding support at UCLA may have been present, resulting in multiple codes assigned to an individual response. Thus, there are far more codes than there are respondents (see Appendix B). To identify differences in support between two student populations, the total number of times a code appeared were calculated as a proportion of the overall responses from a selected student group. Of

the total respondents, 787 doctoral students responded to the open-ended question.

Overall Sources of Support for PhD Students

Doctoral student respondents found support within the following areas: their department, outside their department, through research or co-curricular activities, as well as outside the University setting. For some students, a lack of social support was an important part of their doctoral experience.

Departmental Support from Faculty, Staff, and Students

The first of the six themes is departmental support. Specifically, students identified the following sources of support that are associated with their department: the student's department as a whole, their faculty advisor, other faculty in the department, students from their cohort, other students in the program, peers from classes, and administrative staff within the department. Many students conveyed departmental support simply as "my department" while others specifically identified the people within their department who made it a supportive environment for them. For example, one student identified the faculty in the department as her primary source of support, stating, "The faculty in my department has provided tremendous mentorship. Dr. Schiller[1] is deeply concerned about his students. He is an amazing mentor who advocates for students and does his best to link students with work opportunities…" For many students, the department was not the only part of their support system. One student stated, "The other graduate students in my department are great as are some of the faculty. They are my primary community although I also have a community outside of UCLA that is important to me."

Within the department, peer support was expressed as support from a student's entering cohort but also as support from students in different years or nearly graduating from the

[1]The names of individuals within student responses have been changed. Names of departments or units on campus have not been changed so as to better understand the institution's role in student support.

program. For example, one student lauded the support she received from peers in her department by identifying "my cohort and other students in my department." She went on to explain, "We socialize in a variety of different ways with one another and also travel to conferences together. I've developed a rich network of friends during my time as a graduate student at UCLA." Other times the nature of how students received support from peers was unclear as many responses simply identified "students in my department" or "fellow students in my program."

It should also be noted that while some students said "almost everyone in my department" or "several friends from the department" were instrumental in making them feel a sense of community, students also tempered their responses by expressing discontent with the support in their department. For example, one student shared that his support was somewhat limited by stating, "a small number of peers in my program." Another student noted support from faculty but a lack of support from peers: "faculty, but almost never with other students." Another student said, "classmates mostly, but most of my support does not come from UCLA." One student said, "with my colleagues in the department, but not even very much. Everyone is pretty stressed out all the time."

Identification of a source of support, followed by somewhat of a retraction or caveat within the response was a frequent occurrence. This suggests that although many students might name people associated with their department or the department itself as source of support, it is important to understand qualitative differences in the nature of that support. For some, departmental support means having a family-like unit to rely on, while for others the department is where most of their interactions occur but not necessarily where needed support is provided.

Non-Departmental Support- Other Departments, Staff, and UCLA Housing

Although students most often identified departmental support in their responses, they also identified faculty outside their department, staff in other departments, related departments, Student Affairs departments, their jobs on campus, and

experiences in UCLA housing as supportive. Collectively, such sources refer to support that is not directly associated with the student's home department but still a source of support that resides within the purview of UCLA. Thus, UCLA housing is identified as non-departmental support as a way to distinguish that from non-University owned housing, which will be discussed as support outside of UCLA.

Faculty in other departments and other departments themselves were identified as sources of support. For example, students often drew support from both their home department and related departments. As one student said, "outside my family, I have bonded most strongly with the few other people in my specific field, as well as a few others in closely related fields both within and outside my department. This has happened in classes (before, after, break times, during…)." Another student was very specific as to who formed her support network: "two faculty members on my dissertation committee, fellow like-minded graduate students both in and outside my department, and the student advisor in my department." These exemplar quotes demonstrate that students' interests and perspectives often serve as a bridge for students across departments. Some students were explicit in their need to leave their department to find supportive peers. One student sought friendship with graduate Students of Color outside the department: "With students of color I've met in other courses NOT in my department."

Student Affairs (SA) departments, as well as on-campus employment, were other sources of support for students. SA departmental support was most frequently identified by international students who found the Dashew Center for International Students and Scholars (DSISS) particularly supportive. One student wrote, "With my classmates and people from the Dashew Center." Other units that students found supportive were the Graduate Student Resource Center (GSRC), Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), and the John Wooden Center. One student expressed hope that the GSRC would become a strong source of support, saying, "… Graduate Student Resource Center is also a friendly, social space that I hope helps me develop [community]." For students with

limited sources of support, SA units provided important resources. For example, one student implied that her only source of support is at CAPS, stating, "I've found a source of support through the CAPS Graduate Student of Color group and through individual counseling at CAPS. The clinicians who service Students of Color have been my sources of support which makes me feel like a pathology." UCLA housing was also identified as a supportive space. Students did not elaborate much on their experiences within UCLA housing, but residents did cite peers and neighbors as a source of support.

Lastly, students identified their work on-campus as a site of community. One student wrote, "I have developed a sense of community with fellow UCLA staff/employees through my on-campus employment." Many students expressly identified their Graduate Student Researcher (GSR) position as a source of support while others simply said that their job, whatever the nature may be, was a supportive environment.

Research Activities

Research activities, in the form of interaction with colleagues, lab work, and research projects, were identified as a primary source of support. References to other researchers, conference attendees, and/or scholars within the student's field of study were coded as "colleagues" because these individuals could not be identified as students at UCLA but seemed more to refer to individuals associated with an area of study. For example, one student identified her support as her "research center with fellow colleagues" which suggests her community is specifically linked to research activities, which may or may not be associated with her department.

Labs were cited as sources of support, as were graduate students or faculty working in the labs. For example, here are some instances in which students identified research activities as providing support: "First and foremost with my lab and advisor, secondly with other students in the Clinical Psychology program," "In the lab, with [the] professor and other students," "Lab colleagues," "My dissertation lab (i.e. with other

grad students, post docs, and technicians)," and "Graduate students in my lab and other Chinese students."

Co-Curricular Support

Students identified "friends" and "fellow graduate students" as important sources of support.[2] Interaction with friends and other students most often occurred through sports or fitness activities or participation in a student organization. Frequently, students wrote "I have developed a sense of support with other UCLA graduate students." Sometimes students identified where they found friends such as through a carpool system, Ackerman Union, or through recreation classes at the Wooden Center. Several students identified fitness classes or gym activities as a primary source of support. Students involved in sports saw them as positive opportunities to build community. One student wrote, "I am on the Club Water Polo Team, so I made a lot of friends through that and it made me feel more connected to UCLA."

Students also identified student groups, such as the Intervarsity Graduate Christian Fellowship, the American Red Cross Club, and the Lambda Graduate Student Network as sources of community. For example, one student found community in a cultural performance student group, "I participated in a Chinese Folk Dance group and we practice once a week. We will give performance when there is any big event [on campus]."Another student started a student organization after not finding professional development support available, and cited that group as her source of support, "A student organization that I started regarding professional development (Since UCLA has demonstrated no incentive or desire to educate students about their career options and networking strategies, I started an organization)."

Other times, student group involvement centered around finding others of a shared racial/ethnic, sexual orientation, or international student background. Among Students of Color, it was

common to pursue participation in a student group organized around a racial, ethnic, or cultural identity and students often described these groups as their primary source of social support. The Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (SHPE), Society for Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans in Science (SACNAS), Pilipino American Graduate Student Association (PAGASA), Latino Graduate Student Association, Black Graduate Student Association, and the Taiwanese Graduate Student Association are some of the student groups that were identified as supportive to students of color. Indeed, finding people of a shared racial background was important for many students, even if it was not expressed through student group participation. One student said she found support among "Other Latino Students" and added, "there are very few by the way." Other students identified "other students of color" or "other women of color" or "other graduate students, especially those who are minorities" as important resources. Findings suggest that support from others of a similar background, be it racial, ethnic, international, or LGBT, is important aspect of the doctoral student experience.

Support Outside of UCLA

Sources of community outside of the campus environment consisted of support from family members, neighborhood organizations or off-campus housing, work outside of UCLA, and co-curricular sports outside of campus. Familial support referred to spouses, romantic partners, and relatives. Students most often identified "my wife" or "my husband" or "my partner" as a source of support. One student wrote, "my classes from my program have been my support system and I have met some of my closest friends from the program. Also, I met my fiancé in the program and he has also provided me with immense support." Another student identified his wife, also in his department, as a source of support. Still another student said his support came from his wife and his wife's department. For a few students, parents were identified as a source of support.

Lack of Support

Although the majority of students identified sources of social support and community in the form of their department, research activities, co-curricular activities, and other sources on and off campus,

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[2] Unless students explicitly identified friends and fellow graduate students as part of their department or some of other unit on campus, they were coded as "friends," "graduate students," or "undergraduate students." In the final analysis, these codes were combined to form a broader theme of "co-curricular support."

some students did not report such experiences.

A smaller subset of the respondents reported having "none" or "no community" when asked to identify their sources of support. For this subset of individuals, feelings of isolation appeared to profoundly shape their experiences in graduate school. Comments included:

> No one. I feel very isolated
>
> Don't feel I have one. I know people through classes but that is about it.
>
> I feel very little sense of community at UCLA
>
> Very little sense of community at UCLA. Classmates are too scattered and life is so expensive in LA that it is hard to get together with others on any kind of regular basis.
>
> There is no community on campus. Social support is lacking. Alienation is ubiquitous.
>
> No one really in the graduate program. In undergrad, there was a strong sense of community everywhere I went. Grad students are always in fight or flight mode; socializing is alien to them.
>
> Nowhere...AT ALL.
>
> No one. There is little sense of community in LA or at UCLA.
>
> Pretty much nobody.

The theme of lack of support was reinforced by the fact that even when students identified sources of social support, they sometimes qualified those statements. In other words, even students who identified a source of support sometimes indicated that this support was not meeting their expectations or was limited in some way. For example, one student identified her support as "one or two people with whom I've worked," but went on to say, "But other than that no one really. I do feel very disconnected from UCLA and other graduate students generally."

Other examples of qualifying statements included:

> N/A - some support (and lots of constructive criticism/help) from advisors/profs,
>
> no social support / student life.

> No one consistently but on occasion a few colleagues I TA/TF with and those in my area of study.
>
> Within my own research group, but not much outside of it.
>
> Only one other graduate student within my lab and a few other graduate students within my department that I have had classes with.

Sources of Support by Student Group

This section highlights the following sub-group comparisons of sources of support for doctoral students: 1) Race/ethnicity, 2) gender differences, 3) international or domestic status, and 4) field of study. Differences were explored by a comparison of proportions between groups of the number of times a theme occurred out of the total number of comments. The percentages within each student group are presented in Table 1 (p.7).

Comparisons by Race/Ethnicity

Students of Color were identified as students belonging to Asian/Asian American, Black/African American, Chicana/o and Latina/o racial categories. The greatest difference in support between Students of Color and White students was that Students of Color reported finding co-curricular support on campus at a rate that was 5% higher than that of White students. This difference may be explained by the fact that interactions with people of a shared racial/ethnic identity were more common among Students of Color than for White students.

In terms of departmental and non-departmental support, support through research activities, and support outside of UCLA, the frequency with which White students named these sources was slightly higher than that of Students of Color. These findings suggest differences in support for White and Students of Color, namely that White students perceive more support in their immediate department and through other campus units, while Students of Color may rely more on co-curricular support, largely in the form of student groups organized around a shared identity. It may be that Students of Color are extending their reach for

Table 1. Themes in Sub-Group Comparisons of Response

Type of Support	White	Students of Color	Female	Male	Intl.	Dom.	STEM	Non-STEM
Departmental Support	46%	41%	50%	41%	33%	46%	38%	50%
Non-Departmental Support	16%	12%	10%	10%	13%	11%	9%	14%
Research Activities	12%	13%	12%	14%	15%	12%	17%	7%
Co-curricular Support	15%	25%	16%	21%	27%	19%	24%	17%
Support Outside of UCLA	7%	4%	6%	9%	7%	7%	7%	6%
No Community	5%	4%	5%	6%	6%	5%	4%	6%

support and looking to fellow students who share their racial/ethnic identity to provide them with a sense of community.

Comparisons by Gender

Gender differences were greatest with respect to departmental support. Women more frequently reported finding departmental support than their male counterparts. Interestingly, men more frequently reported having support in all other areas of support, except for non-departmental support where 10% of comments from both men and women highlighted this type of support. Particularly high among males, was co-curricular support (5% greater than females).

These findings suggest that females look primarily to their home departments for support at UCLA and are less likely than males to extend their reach outside the department for support. Perhaps men find it easier to build support outside their department than do women.

Comparisons of International and Domestic Students

Differences between international and domestic students were slight in all areas except two: departmental and co-curricular. Domestic students had a greater number of comments that indicated that their department was supportive and the frequency with which this occurred for international students was 13% less. However, for international students, 8% more of comments identified co-curricular activities as a source of support at UCLA. In all other categories, support for international students was greater or equal to support for domestic students. The higher frequency with which international students identified co-curricular support may be explained by the extent to which they highlighted the role of the Dashew Center in facilitating friendships with individuals from the same country or other international students.

Comparisons of STEM vs. Non-STEM Students

There were a number of differences in support for STEM and non-STEM students. Departmental and non-departmental support were substantially higher for non-STEM students while support through research activities and co-curricular support were greatest among responses from STEM students. These findings suggest that STEM students may find a greater sense of support in their lab and with people who work there. Perhaps STEM students look to those same people to interact with in a co-curricular context. This is likely given the nature of STEM fields, in which students often spend time

with people associated with their lab and conduct research in a lab setting. It makes sense that for non-STEM students, they must look more to the department overall for support.

Conclusion

Many of the findings in this report are not surprising- it makes sense that given the nature of STEM fields, STEM students identified their research lab and research activities as the place where they find a sense of belonging at UCLA. It also makes sense that international students find other international students and the Dashew Center as important sources of support given that there may be language and cultural barriers to forming networks beyond those two sources. Given existing research on underrepresented and racial minority students, it is also not very surprising that these students would need to seek out individuals of the same racial/ethnic identity for support, particularly through student organizations geared toward this social identity.

Overall, when doctoral students do find social support, it is primarily through peers. Although this may well be the nature of graduate life where students must support each other, overreliance on peer networks still leaves some students commenting that they have no or limited community. Thus, even though most students seem to rely on students in their program for support, that support may not be enough to make all students feel a sense of belonging. Departments should continue to facilitate connections among students in their programs across cohorts, and faculty and institutional actors may need to take a greater role in promoting a sense of community and belonging among the student population, particularly for non-majority populations (i.e. international, Students of Color).

Appendix A: Abbreviated Coding Schema

Theme	Codes Comprising Theme	Definition
Departmental Support	Faculty Advisor Departmental faculty Academic departmental staff Students in cohort Students in program Department Students from classes	Referred to sources of support associated with the student's home department. Included support provided by the student's primary faculty advisor or any faculty explicitly identified as part of the student's department. Students who were explicitly identified as part of the program or within the student's entering cohort were also included in this theme. Additionally, any staff that were explicitly identified as working within the department, such as departmental student affairs officers were considered part of the departmental support system.
Non-Departmental Support	Faculty at UCLA Faculty outside of dept. UCLA staff Student Affairs staff Student Affairs departments Non-Student Affairs depts. Work UCLA housing	Referred to sources of support that originate on campus but not within the student's home department. Non-departmental support included faculty and staff within other academic departments as well as Student Affairs and non-Student Affairs units on campus. These forms of support were grouped together because they suggest some form of institutional support beyond the department. UCLA housing was considered part of this institutional support because it falls within the purview of the University and the nature of experiences are shaped by institutional policies and programs.
Research Activities	Student research Colleagues	Referred to support associated with participation in scholarly research activities such as participating in a research lab (mostly applicable to students in STEM fields), a writing group, or through scholarly papers and presentations with colleagues at UCLA and other institutions. Research activities combined codes related to scholarly activities to better understand the extent to which this unique aspect of doctoral student life provides social support or community at UCLA.
Co-curricular Support	Co-curricular organizations Co-curricular sports Students Undergraduate students Friends People of shared racial identity People of shared sexual orientation People of shared international identity	Referred to support garnered through interaction with peers on campus such as through student organizations or intramural sports teams. References to friends and other graduate or undergraduate students were included in this code when they did not explicitly refer to peers within the student's department.
Support Outside of UCLA	Faculty at other institutions Department outside of UCLA Co-Curricular sports outside of UCLA Work outside of UCLA Housing Family Neighborhood Unclear outside UCLA	Referred to support that is located outside of the campus setting, Examples of external support was that found at other institutions, through neighborhood organizations and associations, or within students' familial social networks.
No Community	No Community	Referred to instances where student responses indicated no social support or sense of community was available to them.

Appendix B: Number of Comments by Theme*

Type of Support	White	Students of Color	Female	Male	Intl.	Dom.	STEM	Non-STEM	Total
Departmental Support	328	114	348	190	66	474	235	305	1732
Non-Departmental Support	112	33	69	47	25	115	56	84	429
Research Activities	84	35	84	66	30	120	106	44	485
Co-curricular Support	111	70	112	97	54	195	146	105	779
Support Outside of UCLA	47	12	40	42	13	69	46	36	258
No Community	37	11	38	26	12	52	25	39	203
Total	719	275	691	468	200	1025	614	613	4605

*For a percentage, see **Table 1**