

# Sources of Graduate Student Community

## Executive Summary

### PURPOSE

Understanding that developing a sense of connection and community is important to graduate student retention, the 2014 Student Affairs Graduate and Professional Student Survey included a number of questions related to campus climate, interactions, and community. In particular, in order to explore in more depth and detail the development of graduate student community at UCLA, the survey included an open-ended response item asking “Where and with whom have you developed community at UCLA?” This brief reports on the analysis of responses to this item and compares 2014 responses with those from 2010 in order to explore potential shifts in responses over time.

### FINDINGS

Analysis of student responses revealed six key themes about the means through which graduate students find community and support at UCLA: 1) departmental support, 2) non-departmental support, 3) research activities, 4) co-curricular support, 5) support outside of UCLA, and 6) lack of support. The prevalence and nature of responses identified across these six themes generally mirrored results from 2010. Key findings from the analysis included:

- Students’ academic departments were the most frequently cited source of support and community, but many respondents still listed caveats to that community indicating it was not as strong as they hoped.
- Comparisons of responses by race/ethnicity, gender, field, and international student status revealed some important differences:
  - International students and Students of Color were less likely to report finding community in their department, and slightly more likely to report finding community through students with similar identity and resources/groups targeted specifically to their particular identity.
  - Additionally, International students were more likely to report not having a community when compared to their domestic counterparts.
  - STEM students were more likely to report finding community in their lab settings.

### IMPLICATIONS

When doctoral students do find social support at UCLA, it is primarily through peers and colleagues. Although reliance upon colleagues may well be the nature of graduate life, 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 staff may need to take a greater role in promoting a sense of community and belonging among the student population, particularly for non-majority populations such as International students and Students of Color.

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## Introduction

The 2014 Student Affairs Graduate and Professional Student Survey (GPSS) was administered online in Spring 2014 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. This brief provides a detailed overview of open-ended responses to the following question: “Where and with whom have you developed community at UCLA?” using a priori, or pre-existing, codes that were developed emergently as part of the previous analysis of 2010 data related to this survey item. Beyond identifying key themes in social support for all doctoral students and comparing their prevalence to that in 2010, this report explores variations 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.

## Method

In order to allow for longitudinal comparison, a team of SAIRO researchers utilized the same coding scheme developed for coding this item in 2010 for the analysis of the 2014 data (see the [report](#) for more detail on the 2010 analysis). In order to do so, the viability of this a priori coding scheme was first examined using a random subset of 2014 responses to the survey item. Because no new emergent codes were identified in the 2014 data, the pre-existing coding scheme was deemed worthy of continued use, and was thus applied to the entire 2014 dataset. Of note, 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. 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.

## Findings

As was found in the 2010 GPSS, graduate student respondents found community within the following areas: their department, outside their department, through research or co-curricular activities, as well as outside the University setting. Unfortunately, for some students, a lack of social support was also a part of their graduate experience (see Figure 1).

### Departmental Support from Faculty, Staff, and Students

Under this theme, students identified various forms of support from their department, which included: the student’s entire department, their faculty advisor, other department faculty, cohort members, other students in their program, fellow classmates, and administrative staff within their department. Student responses varied detail, as some simply answered, “my department” while others responded more specifically. For instance, one student referenced their peers by replying, “My cardiology fellows,” meanwhile others answered, “At the School of Education with peers and colleagues who share my values and academic research interests.” For various students, departmental support was not their sole support system. One student answered, “Faculty and peers in my department as well as in other departments (economics).”

It is important to note the varying levels at which students found their departmental support. For instance, while some expressed limited communities, “I only feel rapport with my own MPH management cohort,” and, “With a couple of peers in my department, but I have not really developed a sense of social support while here,” others expressed multiple forms in which they found their departmental community. For example, one student replied, “With a few of the other students in my program, with my advisor, and with the staff in the department I work for.” Overall, this exemplifies the varying nature of the answers received.

Although many students might name people associated with their department or the department itself as a source of community, 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. Moreover, identification of a source of support, followed by somewhat of a retraction or caveat within the response was a frequent occurrence in both the 2010 survey and the 2014 survey. Though not generalizable, this multi-year similarity suggests that graduate students at UCLA may experience a relatively consistent feeling of conditional and circumstantial support from their department.

For most graduate students, finding community from their peers or within their program was a frequent occurrence. Although these forms of support occurred most often, there was a wide range of departmental communities, illustrating its large variation. Importantly, in both 2010 and 2014, departmental connections served as the most common form of community for graduate students at UCLA, representing 38 and 46 percent of all student responses, respectively. Interestingly, the increase in relative prevalence of this theme between 2010 and 2014 was found to be statistically significant, meaning that the proportion of responses that included mention of departmental connections with faculty, staff, and/or students grew in a notable way among the graduate and professional student population during that four-year period.

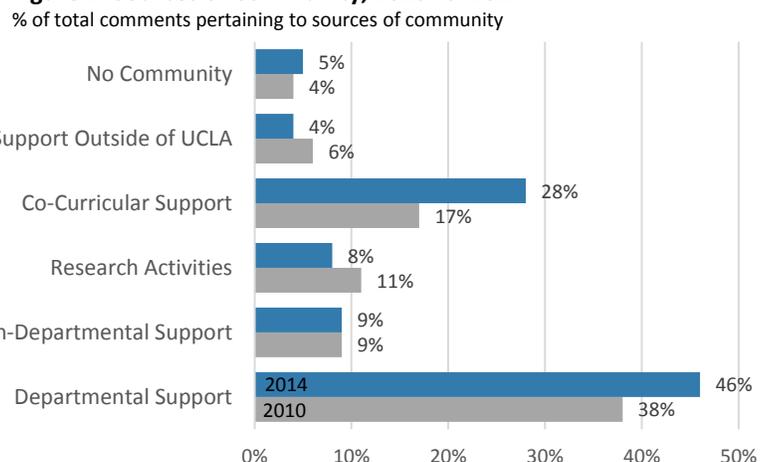
### Non-Departmental Sources of Community

While departmental community is most common in student responses, outside resources were also frequently cited, such as faculty outside the department, staff in other departments, departments related to their field, departments in Student Affairs, on campus jobs and their experiences with university housing at UCLA. The aforementioned sources refer to support that is not directly tied to their home department but is still within the jurisdiction of UCLA. Thus, UCLA housing was included here separate from housing not owned by UCLA, which was counted as support outside of UCLA.

Faculty members of other departments, along with the departments themselves were often cited as significant sources of support. Many students would indicate support from both their own departments and related ones. Some of the support has been very effusive; one student said “the faculty in my department have been great, and the extended cohort from my department and...inter-departmental programs” helped foster a good sense of community. This quote among others shows how students’ interests and connections lead them to branch out to other departments. Some were very explicit in describing the impact faculty had on them and their need to reach out. One student described faculty in their home department as “unresponsive” and cited their advisor as a valued source of support, even going so far as to state “I would have quit were it not for him.”

Student Affairs (SA) departments, along with UCLA housing and on campus jobs, were cited as strong sources of support for students. Not unlike the 2010 survey responses, the most popular unit identified in the 2014 GPSS was Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS). Other units mentioned included the Dashew Center for International Students and Scholars (DSISS) and the Graduate Student Resource Center (GSRC). Students did not usually elaborate on the experience, but did take special care to name helpful resources when they had limited support. One student stated that her support comes solely from her CAPS clinician and that she would “have not developed much of a sense of community” otherwise. UCLA housing was also identified as a source of support. Students were not very elaborate in describing their experiences with housing, but at times peer neighbors were identified

**Figure 1. Sources of Community, 2010 vs. 2014**



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as good supporters, with one student citing Weyburn and Hilgard as a “great community.” Finally, students pointed to their jobs on campus as providing a sense of community. One student in particular expressed how volunteering at an office on campus became a full internship and how “[he has] found a sense of community and support” through the interests he shares with the office. Some students cited their Graduate Student Researcher (GSR) position, and others simply stated that their coworkers or their workplace was where they found support.

## Research Activities

In the 2010 GPSS, research activities were cited as a significant source of community and support for graduate students here at UCLA. Similarly, 2014 results found that research activities, in the form of interaction with colleagues, lab work, and research projects, served 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.” These individuals could not be identified as students at UCLA but seemed more to refer to individuals associated within an area of study. For example, one student identified her support with “a few people that [she] taught with” which suggests her community is linked to research activities in collaboration with colleagues working in a similar fields of interest, which may or may not be associated with her department. Labs and research groups were both cited as sources of support, as were other graduate students, teaching assistants, and/or faculty working in the labs. For example, here are some instances in which students identified research activities as providing support: “From the coworkers in the lab,” “My advisor and his fantastic lab group,” “My wife & research lab” “With my peers and post-doctoral scientists in my lab,” “With other labs in the building.”

## Co-Curricular Support

Students often identified friends and peers as significant sources of support. Students frequently depicted student organizations and department connections as the primary bridge to friends and peers here at UCLA. Sometimes students indicated places where they found support, such as the Wooden Center on campus. Students who played sports also found community even if they did not find friendships. One student described their community as “random people that play pick up football” with them on the UCLA field, indicating a closeness via shared interest among peers.

Student groups on campus were also identified. Students were not always specific in naming their areas, but their responses reflected a wide variety of groups, both academic and non-academic. Some students cited music groups, religious fellowships and other societies as areas of support. The Graduate Student Association was also mentioned a few times, with one student writing that joining GSA along with their orientation as a graduate student really impacted their experience. Many students did not name specific groups but did state that they found community in organizations affiliated with their fields.

Many times, students stated that their sense of community came from people they could identify with in some manner, such as LGBT groups and community. Students of Color frequently cited organizations that were based around a shared racial, ethnic, or spiritual identity. Some organizations named included the Black Graduate Student Association, and the Korean-American Scientists and Engineers Association, along with several different religious fellowships including the Graduate Christian Fellowship. Students most frequently cited support found with people they related to racially. One student in particular emphasized how they found community “with some of my peers from classes and with other students across divisions that are of my same race/ethnicity,” citing this as the primary source of support. Finding people with a shared racial identity appeared to be important for many Students of Color according to their responses, with students citing specific groups such as “other Latino students” or simply “other students of color” as major sources of support. These patterns suggest that finding community with students based on shared identity characteristics is very important for graduate students.

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## Support Outside of UCLA

Sources of community outside of UCLA consisted of support from family members, neighborhood organizations or off-campus housing, work outside of UCLA, and co-curricular sports outside of campus. In particular, familial support, which was also one of the most common responses under this theme, ranged anywhere from spouses, romantic partners, or relatives. For example, some students responded, “I spent a lot of time with my wife,” or “My partner who is also a PhD student here at UCLA.” In addition to familial support, off-campus housing and neighborhood organizations, specifically, “church,” and “roommates,” were also common answers. In both the 2010 and 2014 Graduate Student Support and Community surveys, outside support was the least common of the overall themes.

## Lack of Support

Most doctoral students reported finding or developing community somewhere—either at UCLA or beyond. However, a small fraction of students reported that they did not have a sense of community, saying it was “nowhere” or “with no one.” Examples responses included: “I have not; this is missing. I wish there were more of a sense of community at University Apartments,” “Nowhere,” “Nowhere, no one,” and “No one, really.” This theme of lack of support or community was reinforced by the previously mentioned caveats through which other students who chose to report one or more sources of support also indicated that this support was limited or that they found it insufficient in some way. For example, students would often identify one or two individual friends, colleagues, or faculty members from whom they received support, but report that beyond those limited sources they found little other community at UCLA. For example, one student identified sources of support by reporting that “I enjoy the camaraderie among fellow students in my specific program, and have formed relationships with certain teachers,” but then added, “but no other sense of community has developed.” Other examples of qualifying statements included, “with a couple of peers in my department, but I have not really developed a sense of social support while here,” “Nobody, really. I have a couple of friends here and there, but that's it,” and “my department largely. However, in truth, my lack of a community is, by far, the largest challenge I face at UCLA.”

## Sub-Group Comparisons of Sources of Community

This section highlights the following sub-group comparisons of sources of support: 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 comparisons within each student group are presented in Table I.

### 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. One major difference in sources of community between Students of Color and White students was that White students reported finding departmental community at a rate that was 4% higher than that of Students of Color. In addition, Students of Color cited co-curricular support on campus at a rate that was higher than that of White students (5% in 2010 and 4% in 2014). Generally, this racialized difference in interaction rates may be explained by the fact that Students of Color more often reported interacting and finding community with other students of a shared racial/ethnic identity. Students of Color and White students reported finding non-departmental support, support from research activities, and outside support at about equal rates.

### Comparisons by Gender

Gender differences in support varied most greatly in terms of departmental community, with women reporting departmental sources at a rate about 3% higher than men while co-curricular sources of community showed the inverse, with men reporting at a 3% higher rate than women. Rates of non-departmental support, research activities and community outside UCLA were about the same for both groups.

## Comparisons of International and Domestic Students

Not unlike the 2010 GPSS, remarkable differences were found between international and domestic students' comments in regards to where they find social support. As it turns out, nearly half (47%) of domestic students' comments indicate finding support from within their academic department, whereas only 15% of comments indicate the same among international students. On the other hand, international students find greater support among co-curricular activities in contrast to domestic students, a 5% difference. 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. In addition, only 4% of domestic students' comments referenced finding no community at all in comparison to 10% of international students'. This suggests that international students have a more difficult time acclimating to their program and while the Dashew Center and peers with a similar cultural background may help in filling that gap, there is still a need for stronger support for community building among this population.

## Comparisons of STEM vs. Non-STEM Students

There were a number of differences reported sources of community between STEM and non-STEM students. In both the 2010 and 2014 GPSS, departmental and non-departmental sources were reported at higher rates by non-STEM students while community found through research activities and co-curricular support were more common among responses from STEM students. In 2014, 52% of comments made by non-STEM students referenced departmental sources, compared to only 39% of STEM student comments. Among STEM student comments, 30% referenced co-curricular sources and 13% research activities—higher than their non-STEM peers (reporting 26% and 5% respectively). Because of the nature of STEM fields, it is not completely surprising that STEM students may find a greater sense of support in their lab and with people who work there, and it is important to note that much lab work occurs within the department, so there is some potential overlap between these categories.

## 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 community 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, this analysis found that when doctoral students do find social support and community, 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

**Table 1: Comparison of Reported Sources of Community**

	2010		2014	
	White	Students of Color	White	Students of Color
Departmental Support	46%	41%	48%	44%
Non-Departmental Support	16%	12%	9%	9%
Research Activities	12%	13%	8%	8%
Co-Curricular Support	15%	25%	26%	30%
Support Outside of UCLA	7%	4%	4%	4%
No Community	5%	4%	4%	5%
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Departmental Support	50%	41%	47%	44%
Non-Departmental Support	10%	10%	9%	8%
Research Activities	12%	14%	8%	8%
Co-Curricular Support	16%	21%	27%	30%
Support Outside of UCLA	6%	9%	4%	5%
No Community	5%	6%	4%	5%
	Intl.	Domestic	Intl.	Domestic
Departmental Support	33%	46%	32%	47%
Non-Departmental Support	13%	11%	10%	9%
Research Activities	15%	12%	10%	8%
Co-Curricular Support	27%	19%	33%	28%
Support Outside of UCLA	7%	7%	5%	4%
No Community	6%	5%	10%	4%
	STEM	Non-STEM	STEM	Non-STEM
Departmental Support	38%	50%	39%	52%
Non-Departmental Support	9%	14%	7%	10%
Research Activities	17%	7%	13%	5%
Co-Curricular Support	24%	17%	30%	26%
Support Outside of UCLA	7%	6%	5%	4%
No Community	4%	6%	6%	4%

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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 staff may need to take a greater role in promoting a sense of community and belonging among the student population, particularly for non-majority populations such as International students and Students of Color.

Though the numerical frequency of graduate students that sensed a “lack of community” was low in comparison to those who found community, it is important nonetheless. Studies on the experiences of graduate students from underrepresented communities, including race, gender, LGBTQ identity and documentation status, reveal that lack of institutional support for marginalized identities is a key factor in graduate student push-out. Considering that this theme was present in both the 2010 and 2014 GPSS, it is imperative that departments attend to the number of students forced to navigate the graduate student experience without a sense of community and limited access to support networks. By increasing institutionally sanctioned support programs, departments can begin to address students’ sense of isolation and lack of community in hopes of retaining more students, particularly those from marginalized communities.