

Summary: 2009 EECS Graduate Student Survey

Authors: Jacob Abernethy (CSGSA), Zachery Jacobson (EEGSA), Gireeja Ranade (EEGSA), Kristen Woyach (WICSE)

Dear Faculty Members,

We are presenting the results of the recent Student Survey of the EECS graduate student community. The survey was run between August 19 and August 26, had roughly 70 questions, and 192 students completed it, 54.7% from EE and 45.3% from CS. The questions were drawn from previous EECS surveys, from faculty members making recommendations this year, and several questions that we (the authors) created. The complete results are attached at the back of this memo.

We welcome you to review the full survey, but we would like to summarize a number of results that are both interesting and potentially useful in your decision making. We also welcome your feedback, which can be emailed to eegsa.csgsa.wicse@gmail.com.

As a super-short summary, here is a list of things we would love to address in collaboration with the faculty. We are happy to work on these and help out in any way possible.

Points of note:

- **GSI supplements:** Last year, the EECS faculty passed a resolution mandating that all grad students receive supplements when working as GSIs to receive the same pay as a GSR. We find that this policy has not been honored, and 83% of GSI's last semester did not get the GSI supplement.

Chair Memo 07-08, From Prof. Edward Lee

"The following policy was voted on by the faculty at a department meeting on December 17. The vote in favor was unanimous (with two abstentions)."...."When a graduate student serves as a GSI, the student's faculty advisor is expected to offer a partial GSR appointment if the student is conducting research on a funded project at an appropriate level of effort."

We request a staff member in the department be responsible for checking on this. It is difficult to check this as a student, as different tax rates make it difficult for students to compare wages, and conversations about funding with faculty can be difficult.

- **New course requirements:** 69.8% of grad students think the new course requirements policy is "Just Right" - thank you!
- **Cardkeys for collaboration:** Most grad students would appreciate cardkey access to large office spaces, where other graduate students sit, as current policy stifles collaboration in research. Lack of cell phone signal in many places makes it difficult to even reach someone inside when meeting for collaboration. For example, non-CITRIS students do not have after hours cardkey access to CITRIS at all. EE grad students would like to have access to large office spaces such as 307, 373, Wireless Foundations, 550, 5 and 7th floor of CITRIS, etc. This has come up for a few years now, and we recommend a consistent and generous policy.
- **EE Lounge:** This past May, the EE grad students had their lounge taken away for the expansion of lab space. We were promised a new lounge by the beginning

of fall, but this promise has not been honored and we are still without a permanent space.

- **Adviser search:** Work on the the process for finding an advisor. This could include, for example, an optional rotation program for incoming grad students with fellowships of GSIs unsure of their research interests. Especially for students on fellowship or GSI, professors offering 6-8 week mini projects would be useful for students and professors to "test the waters" before committing.
- **EE301:** Standardize and shorten EE301 to maximize learning and minimize time spent. There is no standard syllabus or course website, and the content varies each semester.

More Detailed Summary

Advising

Nearly 20% of respondents found that it was **hard or at least somewhat hard** to find a research advisor, while about 57% found it very easy or somewhat easy to find an advisor. In looking for an advisor, students listed these as the most salient issues:

- 60% - Your own research interests were not clear
- 50% - Not knowing the protocol for introducing yourself to a potential advisor
- 35% - Lack of a structure, i.e. rotations in different research labs

Some interesting comments include:

- "Was picked by an advisor immediately and didn't know protocol and etiquette for changing"
- "Shyness"
- "This is not really other but I'd just like to emphasize, a structured method of doing this would be GREAT. This has been by far the worst part of my Berkeley experience so far, although it has worked out in the end."
- "I felt over-pressured by the department to find an advisor quickly"
- "Professors failing to reply to emails."
- **For emphasis: Introducing research lab rotations would be a great help in the research lab/advisor search process**

52.5% of students meet with their advisor weekly, with 39.9% meeting less often and 7.7% meeting more often. 75% of students feel like their advisor gives them the right amount of guidance, with 21.7% giving not enough.

Funding

Even though the department mandates that GSIs receive a stipend to give them the same pay as a GSR, **83% of students who were GSIs (54/65) reported not receiving it.**

Comments about the stipends included:

- "I'm a GSI this semester (Fall 09), the stipend is about \$400 less than my GSR. I feel very bad."

Other comments included:

- "Our stipends need to be higher. Especially for GSIs."
- "There is a general worry about next year and feeling an urgency to apply for fellowships."
- "Other schools provide students with liberal travel grants and money, even to attend conferences that they don't have papers at"

- "I'm in the Parlab, and I feel like it is a little unfair that we are so much better funded than some other areas. I would support more sharing/pooling of graduate student funding in the department."

New Student Recruitment

This year, we asked first year students about their recruitment experiences and what influenced them to attend UC Berkeley over other schools. Interesting comments included:

- "Unsafe reputation of Berkeley - Negative impact"
- "The grad student facilities (offices, building) look old and shabby compared to the other departments I visited (e.g., MIT and UW). Like -- chairs are old and usually visibly dirty and are not ergonomic at all. My first year office had wires coming out of the wall (which didn't look like it had been painted in years) and the carpet was dirty. It made me think that students were cared about less at UCB than at other places."
- "I came to Berkeley, because I knew who I wanted to work with. But just based on the visit day, I would not have come to Berkeley. I thought that the Berkeley visit day was poorly designed compared to the Stanford and MIT visit day. There was more interaction with students and professors, and better guidance about the decision to make from professors at the other schools."

On visit day, 81% said they had an ample opportunity to meet with faculty. Comments on visit day included:

- "Again, make it easier to get paid back for travel expenses. UC Berkeley was by far the most difficult in this regard."
- "Further cross-department faculty availability during visit days. Notify faculty from other departments, help to arrange meetings, if possible."
- "At MIT, they scheduled regular meetings with the professors I was interested in talking to, but also choose some other professors that were not on my list (and not necessarily related to my area of research) that they thought I might find interesting. In the end, I found these "random" meetings very helpful and interesting."

Space/Offices

81.3% of students say that having cardkey access to research centers other than their own would foster collaboration between grad students.

70.9% of students say they use their desk every day. 59.3% of students would not be willing to share their desk with another student.

62.7% of first-year students said that they would use an office if one existed just for first-years.

There is mixed reaction to the new move to CITRIS. Particularly on the 7th floor, students find it too noisy and distracting. For students who moved to CITRIS, 51.7% are happy or very happy, and 24.9% are unhappy or very unhappy. This is split between CS and EE. 64.7% of EE students are happy/very happy, but only 33.3% of CS students are. Comments included:

- "More private space like cubicles in the 6th floor would be much better than the current 7th floor office with large benches with 5 students sitting in a row!"
- "Everything has been good so far. I wish we had access to other floors. Also, I wish it wasn't such a huge ridiculous cubicle farm (5th floor). I prefer the little rooms on the 6th."
- "Really unhappy about the loud cubicle environment - I've been sitting elsewhere so that I can actually get work done."

Course Requirements

A majority of students say there are enough classes in the fall (62.1%) and spring (78.5%) semesters. **69.8% of students now say the new course requirements are "Just Right".**

There were many requests for additional courses. Some examples are:

- "more power and energy class related to circuits"
- "More optics, physics-based classes, quantum optics, E+M, etc."
- "More security-related courses."
- "Theoretical programming language courses"

GSI Experience

54.6% of students say it is best to GSI between prelims and quals, with 21.5% saying it is best before prelims and 19% saying it is best after quals.

56% of students recommend that the mandatory GSI 301 course be shortened instead of letting it run through the whole semester.

Mental Well-Being

Only 9% of grad students are unsatisfied with their happiness at UC Berkeley. The largest component of unhappiness for students was "uncertainty about future" from 50% of students. 48% of students report feeling "Guilt when taking a break", and 37% report "Feel that there is no time for hobbies and you're always thinking about work"

27% of students report feeling depression or general unhappiness while being a graduate student at Berkeley.

Masters' Program?

59% of students were concerned that an addition of a large masters program would negatively affect the PhD program. Concerns about negative effects included:

- 88% Space in Department
- 84% Class size
- 61% Administration

Comments included:

- "Maybe a great way to grow the department, but classes have to be well thought of, not to create a mega-sized graduate courses for Ph.D's."
- "There's barely enough space and resources in the department as-is. Where would masters students go? My office is crowded enough, and we have a hard time finding space to hold meetings! Would we hire more faculty so that class sizes don't increase? My advisor already has a lot of students, I can't imagine how he could possibly manage more students."
- "We're not Stanford, and we shouldn't aspire to be."
- "I am very supportive of this program IF it means we get more classes."
- "not having one was a reason to choosing Berkeley over other schools..."
- "One of the reasons that Berkeley was so desirable to me is because it is very much committed to "basic/pure/fundamental" research, in contrast to Stanford or UCLA, which seem to me more corporate and career oriented."

IT Resources

51% of students said that they would like access to a department printer and copier.

Comments included:

- more printers, and general use computers (similar to Athena quickstations at MIT say) around the department
- Wireless in Soda is terrible. E-mail seems flaky, too, but I forward to Gmail.
- The department should consider offering, on a department-wide basis, services that are not as commonly needed, such as a scanner and a poster printer.
- Why can't we change our e-mail addresses? I changed the name I go by, and apparently I would have to pay several hundred dollars to change my e-mail address. That seems ludicrous. Why can't we at least be allowed one alias to be added?

Jobs

60% of students said they would like their adviser to put them in touch with more contacts for potential internships. 57% students said that they know a little about the job market (academia or industry) but would like to learn more.