

# 2011 EEGSA Graduate Student Survey Results

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## Executive Summary

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This document summarizes highlights and key takeaways from the EE graduate student survey conducted by the EEGSA from April 19, 2011 to May 2, 2011.

To members of the UC Berkeley Electrical Engineering community,

In this document are the key results of the recent student survey of the EE graduate student community. The survey was composed of 101 questions and run between April 19 and May 2. 135 students responded with 93 completing all questions. The questions were drawn from previous surveys and in conjunction with the CS graduate student survey. The complete results are in a separate PDF file<sup>1</sup> that is packaged along with this summary online.<sup>2</sup> An attachment of the initial EEGSA presentation after the faculty retreat is also part of this package online.<sup>3</sup> Mental health data is sourced from the ACHA-NCHA.<sup>4</sup>

Key Points:

- Mental Health:
  - Students report high levels of depression and alienation.
  - Students request support with stress, sleep, and health-related issues.
- Equality and Diversity:
  - Women feel less comfortable and experience more passive harassment.
  - Low income and LGBTQ students also report negative experiences.
- Advising Performance and Practice:
  - Most students do not provide feedback to their advisor regarding management style.
  - Students find it difficult to discuss relevant personal issues and management style.
- Thoughts and Recommendations:
  - Provide a secondary advisor contact to students for advice independent of their research advisor.
  - Rewrite the student review forms to encourage more two-way dialogue between students and advisors.
  - Support faculty seminars and workshops on advising best practices, leadership and group management.

The key points presented here are described more fully in the summary that follows. Thoughts and recommendations by the authors are provided at the end of the document. Other relevant data is presented in Appendix B. For a comprehensive look at the student survey results please review the full survey and the post-retreat presentation. Your feedback is welcomed either to the authors directly or via email to the EEGSA at [eegsa-officers@eecs.berkeley.edu](mailto:eegsa-officers@eecs.berkeley.edu).

Best regards,

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<sup>1</sup> Full results available at <https://www.eecs.berkeley.edu/~bschneid/EEGSA/FullResults.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> This summary is available at <https://www.eecs.berkeley.edu/~bschneid/EEGSA/ExecutiveSummary2011.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Presentation available at <https://www.eecs.berkeley.edu/~bschneid/EEGSA/SSFollowupFinal.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> ACHA-NCHA survey summaries available at [http://www.achancha.org/reports\\_ACHA-NCHAI.html](http://www.achancha.org/reports_ACHA-NCHAI.html)

## I. MENTAL HEALTH

The general “happiness statistic” of the EE graduate student body, on a scale of 1-7, 1 being very unhappy and 7 being very happy, is 5.25. While this indicates students are on average content and satisfied, there are some common work-related worries that lead to dissatisfaction among graduate students. The two most common categories of worry among graduate students concern their research and career. On a 1 to 5 scale, 1 meaning not causing worry and 5 meaning extremely worrying:

- Uncertainty about the future (average = 3.49)
- Balancing work/life (average = 2.92)
- Managing work duties / time management (average = 2.80)

Dividing the student body into unhappy students (those reporting a ‘1’ or a ‘2’ on the “happiness stat”) and happy students (those reporting a ‘6’ or a ‘7’) two issues arise in which the two groups diverge in their responses. On the same 1 to 5 scale, unhappy students are more dissatisfied regarding:

- Lacking a social network (averages: 4.00 vs. 2.38)
- Difficulties with motivation (averages: 4.50 vs 2.78)

One of the survey questions featured questions copied from the ACHA-NCHA nationwide annual student mental health survey. The question asked students what they experienced at any point during their time in school. There are a few notable categories in which the EE student body stood out from the national rankings.

Have you ever...	EE (out of 94)	Nat'l Avg.
Felt things were hopeless?	72.0 %	43.9 %
Felt very lonely?	71.3 %	54.4 %
Felt very sad?	71.3 %	58.3 %
Felt so depressed that it was difficult to function?	46.8 %	28.4 %

Another routine question revealed that many students report not receiving information on department and university resources to help them cope with physical and mental health issues. In particular, several students requested or were interested in additional information regarding the following topics.

Have you received information from the university or the department on the following topics:	Yes	No	No, but I would like to
How to help others in distress	10	66	11
Nutrition	12	68	7
Physical activity	18	63	6
Sleep difficulties	7	72	8
Stress reduction	16	62	9

## II. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

The key finding from the equality section of the EEGSA survey is that female graduate students report a very high number of instances of passive harassment, discrimination, and judgment. As opposed to instances of active harassment or discrimination (defined in the survey as harassment/discrimination with malicious intent) these passive cases are defined as unintentional insult or undirected remarks, jokes, etc. To a lesser degree international students also report such instances. Sample sizes from low income and LGBTQ students are low, but students identifying with these groups also report instances of passive discrimination or judgment.

<b>Incidence Type</b>	<b>None 27</b>	<b>Intl 26</b>	<b>Female 17</b>	<b>Ethnic minority 12</b>	<b>With family 11</b>	<b>Low income 3</b>	<b>LGBTQ 2</b>
PH Faculty/Staff	1	1	4	0	1	0	0
PH Under/Grad	3	6	9	3	4	0	0
AH Faculty/Staff	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
AH Under/Grad	0	0	1	2	1	1	0
PD Faculty/Staff	1	1	4	1	0	1	0
PD Under/Grad	4	3	5	2	1	1	0
AD Faculty/Staff	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
AD Under/Grad	1	0	2	1	0	0	0
PT Faculty/Staff	4	5	3	1	1	0	2
PT Under/Grad	4	3	3	2	0	0	1
JS Faculty/Staff	6	5	10	3	5	3	1
JS Under/Grad	5	11	16	6	7	3	1

On average female and low income students report feeling less comfortable than others in the classroom, with their research group, at technical conferences, and interacting with other students. Low income students also report feeling uncomfortable during advisor meetings, and feel the department is not as welcoming and supportive towards minority students. On a scale of -2 to +2, where -2 represents very uncomfortable and +2 represents very comfortable, the average score by group is as follows:

	<b>None</b>	<b>Intl</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Ethnic minority</b>	<b>With family</b>	<b>Low income</b>	<b>LGBTQ</b>
Classroom	1.19	1.54	1.00	1.33	1.36	0.67	1.50
Research Group	1.44	1.54	1.00	1.50	1.64	0.67	1.00
Technical Conferences	0.93	1.38	0.79	1.00	1.18	0.67	1.00
Advisor Meetings	1.22	1.54	1.25	1.25	1.73	0.67	1.50
Interactions with students	1.44	1.46	1.13	1.25	1.45	0.67	1.50
Interactions with staff	1.26	1.50	1.38	1.33	1.91	1.00	1.50
while teaching as a GSI	0.96	1.00	1.00	0.92	1.20	0.67	1.00
Trying to find an advisor	0.88	1.13	0.53	0.82	1.18	0.67	1.00
The department is a welcoming and supportive environment for students not in the majority	0.88	1.19	0.94	1.25	1.00	0.33	1.00

### III. ADVISING PERFORMANCE AND PRACTICE

When queried about the difficulty of finding an advisor, only 9% of students reported that the process was hard, an 11% reduction from last year’s findings. 56% reported it was easy, consistent with last year’s findings, and 35% reported the search process presented moderate difficulty.

Only 18% of students report discussing with their advisor management style. 41% of students report having no reason to discuss the issue and 41% report not discussing the issue. Of those who did discuss management style with their advisor results on improvement were mixed, with most (17 out of 21) reporting some improvement in further advisor management.

Students were extensively questioned on their advisor’s performance in various aspects. Students reported advisors are on average approachable regarding work but students feel less comfortable discussing personal issues, even those that affected their work performance. As indicated above, management style is also another issue students feel less comfortable discussing with their advisor.

An important result from the advising section of the student survey arises when student responses are separated by those happy or unhappy with their advisor and/or advising relationship. On a scale of -2 to +2, where -2 represents strong disagreement and +2 represents strong agreement, students happy with their advisor and students unhappy with their advisor significantly diverged in their responses to the following questions:

<b>Significant differences: Advising Style</b>	<b>Happy</b>	<b>Unhappy</b>
My advisor provides enough guidance to do better research.	1.12	-0.62
My advisor values my work/life balance.	0.87	-0.17
My advisor is a great mentor.	1.25	-0.34
My advisor connects me to other researchers in my field.	1.01	-0.07
My advisor is approachable about personal issues.	0.62	-0.79
My advisor cares if I'm happy.	1.03	-0.28
<b>Significant differences: Conversational Comfort</b>	<b>Happy</b>	<b>Unhappy</b>
Frustrations with research/progress	1.05	-0.1
Career goals	0.93	-0.28
Communication problems with advisor	0.41	-0.9
Mismatch of expectations/management style	0.35	-0.97
Personal/health problems that affect my work	0.62	-0.72
Personal issues unrelated to work	0.02	-1.52

60% of students said they were satisfied with their average weekly meeting time with their advisor. 30% wanted to have a few more meetings and 5% wanted to have a few less meetings. 3.5% of students wanted much more meeting time; all of these students reported meeting 15 minutes or less with their advisor. Weighting the reported average weekly meeting time with the student’s satisfaction with the amount of advisor meeting, it is estimated from the survey results that the optimal student-advisor meeting time is roughly 60 minutes per week.

## IV. THOUGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One primary recommendation that the EEGSA has pursued over the last year is the idea of (re)instituting a secondary faculty contact for all graduate students. In the interest of improving student health and reducing stress levels, a policy for providing students with additional faculty support has been drafted and is currently in progress. A survey of students conducted in December 2010 showed a large majority in support of enacting such a policy and faculty have been receptive at informal talks to the idea.

As a quick summary, this policy would require students to select or be assigned a secondary faculty contact, kept on record with the administration. There are currently three required meetings between the student and the secondary faculty contact; once during the first semester, once to sign the blue card, and once to sign the white card. The required meetings can be waived if both sides agree, and more meetings are possible if both sides agree, leaving the nature of the relationship to be determined by the student and the faculty rather than the administration.

Another reform the EEGSA is undertaking is the revision of the annual student review process, currently a student review form. Responding to students' discomfort with providing direct feedback to their advisor, and faculty desires to receive more advising feedback from their students, the revised student review process will include both student and advisor review forms with leading questions designed to initiate dialogue on issues not normally discussed between a student and his or her advisor. The intent is to remove the barriers that prevent otherwise useful dialogues that can in turn reduce stress on a student-advisor relationship.

A final thought presented here has been raised by the faculty themselves, again stemming from the desires to advise more effectively and to learn the best practices for group management and leadership. Much like 301 courses that help the interested graduate student improve his or her lecturing, several such courses and programs exist through the Graduate Division or outside the University that can help faculty become better advisors. The UC system hosts annual advising conferences and UC Berkeley hosts a similar conference biennially.<sup>5</sup> Penn State hosts an online advising journal that is free to read for all interested faculty and students.<sup>6</sup> The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) is another such resource of which the department can take advantage.<sup>7</sup> The EEGSA supports a departmental effort to organize seminars or workshops for faculty interested in improving their graduate advising.

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<sup>5</sup> From <http://ls.berkeley.edu/?q=advising/helpdesk/training>

<sup>6</sup> <http://dus.psu.edu/mentor/> Available online only.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/index.htm>

## APPENDIX A: OUTPUT FROM STUDENT SURVEY FOLLOWUP DIALOGUE

Courses of action decided upon by the department chairs in a post-survey meeting:

1. **Educating the faculty** on issues of inclusion, passive harassment, advising tactics and their overall impact on the quality of the graduate student experience in our department. The idea that a faculty advisor must have some management training was mentioned as well. To this end we will likely explore campus resources (the MIT “leadership” short course was also mentioned by Kubi. Maybe he can provide more information?) for presentations at faculty meetings.
2. **Educating the students** about Campus / Dept resources that are available to them. The idea here was to utilize the GSAs and our Staff to compile the available information, hold educational meetings for our students. Erika also mentioned the possibility of creating and maintaining a Wiki that maybe a good means of making the existing information (mostly on printed media) more available. The creation of a “go to” guide was mentioned.
3. **Providing the appropriate support to our staff** who are often the first to know about stress and strain caused to individual students by faculty actions. This is a professional development issue, and we will continue to pursue through access to continuous education, by sending key staff to relevant conferences, etc.
4. **The surveys** used seem to have worked extremely well. Maintaining those as an annual event and making an effort to integrate them across the department will be highly beneficial. Our EECS and Campus staff can be very helpful in further developing the questionnaires and analyzing the results.
5. **Safety** was also discussed. We will pursue low hanging fruits (like additional lighting, etc), and we will possibly invite UCPD speakers to department meetings.
6. **Additional resources** can be made available as appropriate. For example Lisa mentioned a book that could be distributed as appropriate.

## APPENDIX B: SUMMARY OF OTHER RELEVANT DATA

### Funding:

- 20% of students report being directly affected by budgetary issues.
- 12.6% (14 students) report their advisor cannot support as many GSRs.
- 15% of students report lifestyle changes due to reduced funding.

### Coursework:

- In response to: “How do you find the number of course requirements for the Ph.D. program?”
  - Appropriate 76.8% 86/112
  - Too many 20.5% 23/112
  - Too few 2.7% 3/112
- 30% of students (32/109) cannot find enough courses to meet their major/minor criteria.
  - 3 report Devices as lacking in course choice
  - 3 report E+M as lacking in course choice
  - 4 report MEMS as lacking in course choice
  - 5 report Opto as lacking in course choice

### GSI and the Supplement:

- “Are you aware that GSIs are eligible for supplemental income to bring their salary up to GSR levels?” (Yes = 76.1%)
  - Yes and I have received it 46.6% 41/88
  - Yes but I did not receive it 14.8% 13/88
  - Yes, but I don’t know if I received it 14.8% 13/88
  - No, I was not aware of this 23.9% 21/88
- Students who received the supplement reported it does not cover the full difference between GSI and GSR levels.

### Town Hall:

- 23.6% (25/106) of EE students reported attending.
- Of those who reported attending, average level of satisfaction (scale 1-10) was at 6.9.
- In response to “Would you like to continue having town hall meetings?”
  - Yes, every semester 24.6% 14/57
  - Yes, every year 63.2% 36/57
  - No 12.3% 7/57
- In response to “Would you prefer another joint EE/CS town hall or separate town halls per side?”
  - Joint 33.9% 20/59
  - Separate 66.1% 39/59