

# SNAPSHOT

CAWG

of  
Student Experiences

## The Strategic Plan and Graduate Education

Comparing Campus Objectives  
and Student Perceptions

This Campus Assessment Working Group (CAWG) Snapshot explores how well the goals for doctoral students outlined in the University's Strategic Plan, released in 2008, align with the perceptions and experiences reported by doctoral students on the University of Maryland Doctoral Student Survey. The questionnaire was administered online by the Retention and Completion subgroup in Spring 2009. Out of the 4,423 enrolled doctoral students, 1,377 (31%) completed the survey. Use caution when generalizing.

**The Strategic Plan's Vision for Graduate Education says PhD students will normally:**

**Graduate students reported the following experiences on the Doctoral Student Survey:**

Be full-time.	85% of those who reported being in pre-dissertation stage were full-time, and per campus policy, virtually all dissertation-stage respondents were full-time.
Complete the degree in 4-6 years.	89% expected it would take 4-6 years for degree completion.
Be fully funded for their term of study.  Be provided with outstanding financial support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ 73% relied on an assistantship, a UM scholarship or fellowship, and/or an external scholarship or fellowship.</li> <li>◆ 54% (also) relied on loans, savings, and/or family support.</li> <li>◆ 26% (also) relied on non-assistantship employment on or off campus.</li> </ul> <p>Note: respondents could identify up to 3 current sources of primary support.</p>
Graduate with little or no debt.	59% anticipated they would complete their degree with no graduate educational debt.

Question to consider:

⇒ How can the university help to increase the percent of doctoral students who complete their degree with no graduate-level educational debt?

## THE BIG PICTURE and A CLOSER LOOK

**THE STRATEGIC PLAN** outlines a vision for graduate education that can be facilitated by the University and its departments in several ways, including activities to develop instructional skills, quality mentoring and advising, professional development opportunities, and department resources and services.

This snapshot explores how well the goals outlined in the 2008 University Strategic Plan align with the experiences reported by doctoral students on the 2009 Doctoral Student Survey. In each of the following sections, this Snapshot first presents overall results from the survey in **THE BIG PICTURE**.

Then, in **A CLOSER LOOK**, respondents are categorized in one or more of the following ways in order to take a closer look at differences in how their experiences align with the Strategic Plan:

- ◆ Stage in program: Pre-dissertation (53%) or dissertation (47%)
- ◆ Academic discipline: Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM; 63%) or non-STEM (37%)
- ◆ Career aspiration: Tenure-track faculty at a doctoral degree granting institution, other faculty/instructional, research-oriented, or applied practice/higher education administration position (see the following section)

### Career Goals and Activities to Develop Instructional Skills

**THE STRATEGIC PLAN** aims to prepare graduates for positions at prestigious educational institutions and responsible research positions in government, industry, and non-profit organizations. In addition to the opportunity to be a TA/instructor, UM offers activities to help students interested in a teaching career develop skills needed to be an effective teacher, including courses on teaching, departmental workshops, campus workshops (e.g., Center for Teaching Excellence), and in-class observation and critique.

**THE BIG PICTURE** reveals that the self-reported career aspirations for 70% of the survey respondents align with those outlined in the Strategic Plan:

- ◆ 40% want a tenure-track faculty position at a doctoral degree granting institution.
- ◆ 30% want a non-tenure track research-oriented position (e.g., government, industry, higher education).
- ◆ 16% want a tenure-track faculty position at a non-doctoral degree granting institution or a non-tenure track faculty/instructional position.
- ◆ 14% want an applied practice or higher education administration position.

**A CLOSER LOOK** shows that among the respondents who identified as a primary career goal a position that involved teaching, 75% had served as a TA/instructor. Among these future faculty respondents, aside from possibly having served as a TA/instructor:

- ◆ 31% had not participated in any of the other instructional or pedagogical training activities;
- ◆ 23% had participated in one such activity; and,
- ◆ 46% had participated in more than one.

Questions to consider:

- ⇒ Given the Strategic Plan's focus on supporting students' pursuit of tenure-track faculty positions or other research positions, do these findings have implications for the University's doctoral programs (e.g., marketing and admissions, training and curricula, mentoring, etc.)?
- ⇒ Should all PhD students receive some sort of training to develop their instructional and pedagogical skills?

## Quality Mentoring and Advising

**THE STRATEGIC PLAN** specifies that, during their time at UM, doctoral students will receive personal mentoring and rigorous training by faculty. The survey asked respondents to assess various aspects of their experiences with faculty, including perceived quality of general advising, faculty engagement and accessibility, and—for those at the dissertation stage—quality of dissertation advising and perception of publication support.

**THE BIG PICTURE** (see table) indicates that over 80% of all respondents agreed that faculty are accessible. They rated the dissertation advising they received somewhat higher than general advising. Additionally, the majority of dissertation-stage respondents perceived that there is departmental support available for publication activities.

**A CLOSER LOOK** reveals differences in responses across groups of items by academic discipline, program stage, and area of career aspiration:

- ◆ Respondents in the early stage of their program were more positive about the degree of faculty involvement and accessibility than respondents in later stages.
- ◆ Non-STEM respondents had more positive perceptions of general advising than those in STEM disciplines.

Among dissertation respondents only:

- ◆ Those in a STEM discipline perceived more publication support than those in non-STEM disciplines.
- ◆ Those interested in tenure-track faculty positions at doctoral degree granting institutions and research-oriented positions perceived greater publication support than those interested in other faculty or instructional positions.

Question to consider:

⇒ What is a realistic expectation for student satisfaction with advising?

<b>Student Perceptions of their Program</b>	
<b>General Advising</b> (All respondents)	% Strong or Very Strong
Advising regarding course selection	44
Advising during first year	44
Advising regarding qualifying exams or papers	46
Advising regarding other specific program requirements (e.g., internships, program benchmarks)	40
<b>Faculty Engagement</b> (All respondents)	% Agree or Strongly Agree
Faculty are accessible	81
Faculty give timely feedback on academic work	71
Faculty give sufficient feedback on academic progress	64
<b>Dissertation Advising</b> (Dissertation-stage only)	% Agree or Strongly Agree
Dissertation advisor provides criticism/feedback outside proposal meeting to improve scholarship	81
Dissertation advisor responds appropriately to requests for feedback	80
Dissertation advisor responds in a timely manner, enabling student to proceed with work	78
<b>Publication Support</b> (Dissertation-stage only)	% Reporting Advisors Offer
Advice about suitable publication outlets	75
Help in preparing work for publication submission	71
Help understanding and responding to comments from publication reviewers	66

## Professional Development Opportunities

**THE STRATEGIC PLAN** asks PhD programs to set high expectations for student accomplishments, including publications or professional presentations at the national/international level and original work produced through research, scholarship, creative arts, or performance at the cutting edge of the field.

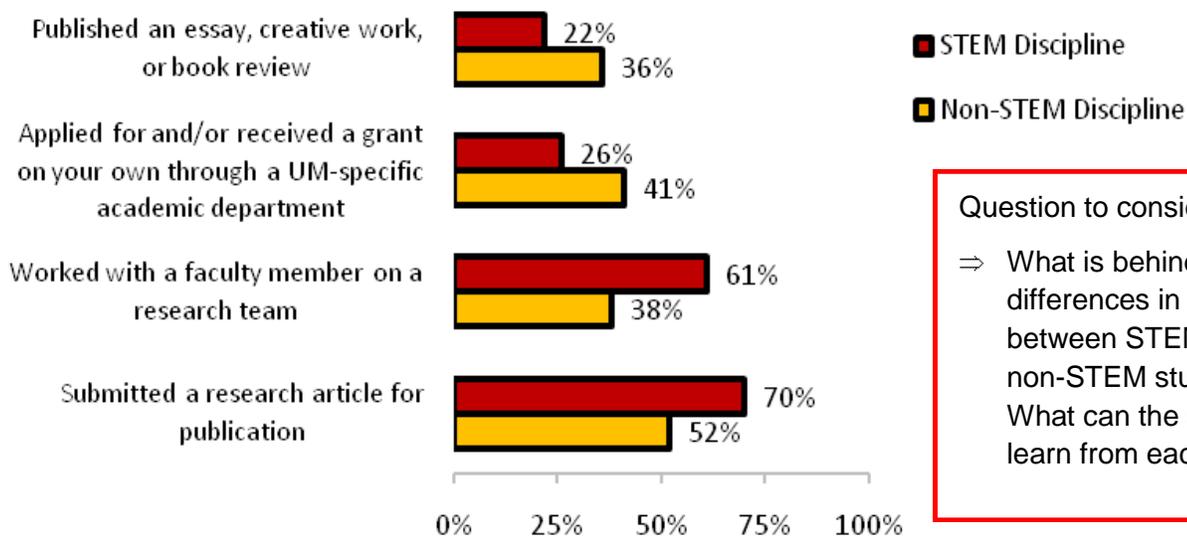
**THE BIG PICTURE** shows that, for each of the professional development opportunities listed below:

- ◆ Roughly half had: (a) presented an oral or poster session for an international, national, or regional organization; (b) presented an oral or poster session for a UM-specific event; (c) worked with a faculty member on a research team; (d) submitted a research article for publication.
- ◆ Roughly a quarter had: (a) applied for and/or received a grant through an international, national, or regional organization; (b) applied for and/or received a grant through a UM-specific academic department/event; (c) published an essay, creative work, or book review.

**A CLOSER LOOK** shows a steady increase in reported frequency of participation in professional development activities across program stages, with fewer of the pre-dissertation stage respondents having indicated that they had participated in such activities. For those in the dissertation stage:

- ◆ Compared to respondents with other career aspirations, fewer of those interested in applied practice/higher education had presented an oral or poster session for either an international, national, or regional organization or for a UM-specific event.
- ◆ More of the respondents interested in tenure-track faculty positions at doctoral degree granting institutions had submitted a research article for publication than respondents interested in other faculty/instructional positions.
- ◆ Differences by academic discipline are depicted in the chart below.

*Dissertation-stage respondents who report they have done the following since enrolling in their doctoral program:*



Question to consider:

⇒ What is behind the differences in reports between STEM and non-STEM students? What can the disciplines learn from each other?

## Departmental Services

**THE STRATEGIC PLAN** sets as a goal that graduate students will be provided with outstanding financial and scholarly support. For graduate students to take advantage of any available department resources, they need to be aware of these services.

**THE BIG PICTURE** shows that, across all survey respondents:

- ◆ 78% said their department offered opportunities to present a seminar or paper to the department/campus community.
- ◆ 75% said their department offered information on available fellowships/grant money.
- ◆ 73% said their department offered funding for conferences and/or conference travel.
- ◆ 66% said their department offered help finding available assistantships.
- ◆ 60% said their department offered funding for doctoral student research; 24% said they were unsure about the availability of such funding.

**A CLOSER LOOK** shows differences in degree of awareness of resource availability for research and conference funding and presentation opportunities:

- ◆ Pre-dissertation stage respondents were less sure that these department resources existed than were dissertation-stage respondents.
- ◆ Respondents in non-STEM programs were less aware of opportunities than those in STEM programs.
- ◆ Respondents interested in a career of applied practice were less aware of opportunities than those with career aspirations as faculty or researchers.

## For more information ...

### Related Snapshots and Reports:

Crossing the Ph.D. Finish Line Snapshot

The University of Maryland Doctoral Student Survey  
2009 Report

Campus Assessment Working Group (CAWG)

[www.umd.edu/cawg](http://www.umd.edu/cawg)

### Upcoming Snapshots:

Behavior and Responsibility in the Classroom