

2009 Graduate Women Student Support Survey Highlights

In early December 2009, Senior Associate Dean Blanche Staton invited 1,853 graduate women students at MIT to participate in a web-based survey sponsored by the Office of the Dean for Graduate Education, the Division of Student Life, and the Graduate Student Council. The survey was administered by the Institutional Research Group of the Office of the Provost. The goal of the survey was to better understand how well MIT currently meets the needs of graduate women and how MIT can further improve the quality of life of graduate students.

The survey asked graduate women about their awareness and usage of various programs, services, and events available to graduate women students and groups. The survey also asked students to rate the importance of a range of functions of support for graduate women students. Finally, the survey asked graduate student mothers to share their experiences with specific institute-wide resources.

The survey closed in early February 2010 with 970 total responses, or 52% of graduate women invited to take the survey. As a thank-you for completing the survey, three survey respondents were randomly selected to receive a TechCash prize.

Data from this survey will guide programmatic and support efforts directed toward graduate women in the future. To this end, a working group, representative of the sponsors of the survey, has been convened. This group is charged with developing a strategic plan for communication of the survey results and themes to the MIT community.

The following pages present an overview of the complete survey results highlighting trends and areas for potential improvements in the future. If you have questions or requests, please contact Alicia Erwin (aeerwin@mit.edu) or Blanche Staton (bestaton@mit.edu).

Graduate Women Community

Overall, a sense of community is present among graduate women students at MIT, however women also agreed that they would like to see stronger connections between women across schools.

- 54% of women strongly or somewhat agreed that they feel a sense of community among graduate women students at MIT.
- 64% women strongly or somewhat agreed that they would like to see a greater connection among graduate women at MIT across schools and departments.

“Still very difficult to establish a community across graduate women when people are in split across many different places (lab, etc.)”

“Need better ways of publicizing or disseminating information.”
-Survey Respondents 2010

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Feelings of Individual Support

Most Supported Graduate Women

Consistently those graduate women who reported feeling supported were more aware of campus resources, and were more aware of and more likely to have participated in programs and services available to graduate women students.

Those Who Felt Most Supported:

- Were more like to feel that MIT is supportive overall to the needs of graduate women students.
- Were more likely to feel a sense of community among graduate women at MIT.
- Were more aware of campus resources.
- Were more likely to feel empowered to voice their academic contributions and request professional acknowledgement.
- Were more likely to feel empowered to voice their personal concerns and request personal support from MIT when needed.
- Felt more confident handling difficult situations in their research group.
- Were less likely to have had difficult conversation(s) with their advisor, where the difficulty could be attributed to their being a woman.
- Were less likely to have experienced or observed inappropriate or negatively stereotyping comments directed toward graduate women students either in the classroom or other professional settings.

Least Supported Graduate Women

Graduate women in the School of Architecture and Planning as well as the School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences reported feeling the least supported as an individual at MIT, while also feeling that MIT is not supportive to the needs of graduate women students.

Those Who Felt Least Supported:

- Thought it is essential or very important to hold events and programs that address feelings of isolation for graduate women.
- Wanted more formal mentoring opportunities.
- Were more likely to think it is essential to provide opportunities to learn how to communicate more effectively with male colleagues and advisors.
- Were more likely to think it is essential to provide conflict resolution training.

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Mentorship and Personal Counseling

Personal counseling is one service that well over the majority of female graduate students deem “very important or essential” however statistics show that most women are not aware of this resources that exist. There also appears to be variability in the availability of mentorship with the School of Architecture and Planning as well as the School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences reporting a greater amount of one-on-one mentoring from a female faculty member than other schools.

- 58% of graduate women strongly or somewhat agreed that they would like to have more formal mentoring opportunities from within MIT.
- 55% of international graduate women were unaware of personal counseling from faculty or staff (someone to talk to if anything happens) in comparison to 39% of U.S. citizens and permanent residents who were unaware.
- 52% of graduate women with children were unaware of personal counseling from faculty or staff in comparison to 43% of graduate women with no children or who are undecided.

Communication and Individual Empowerment

Graduate women reported being more likely to have had difficult conversations or experienced negative comments as a result of their being a woman, as their time at MIT increased.

- The likelihood of having had a difficult conversation(s) with their advisor, where the difficulty could be attributed to their being a woman, increased from 5% in the 1st year to 32% in the 5th year or higher.
- The likelihood of having experienced or observed inappropriate or negatively stereotyping comments directed toward graduate women students either in the classroom or other professional settings, increased from 22% in the 1st year to 50% in the 5th year or higher.

Graduate women who live off-campus reported feeling more empowered to voice their opinions and concerns than on-campus graduate women.

- 28% of off-campus strongly agreed, in comparison to 14% of MIT affiliated housing, that they felt empowered to voice academic contributions and request professional acknowledgement.
- 20% of off-campus strongly agreed, in comparison to 10% of MIT affiliated housing, that they felt empowered to voice their personal concerns and request personal support from MIT when needed.

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Awareness of Resources, Programs, and Services

When looking at the data across years at MIT, from one to five plus years, awareness of available Institute resources and programs increased over time.

- 71.9% of graduate women said it is very important or essential for information regarding existing MIT resources to be made available to graduate women.
- Consistently SLOAN graduate women reported being less aware of Institute resources and programs in comparison to other schools.
- *International graduate women were not as aware U.S. citizens or permanent residents of the Office of the Dean for Graduate Education, Student Support Services, MIT Ombuds, MIT Medical resources, or the Student Activities Office.*

Programs, Events, and Workshops

Overall, graduate women said that it is very important or essential to have programs that build community amongst women at MIT. While these events could take many forms, 44 percent of graduate women were in favor of gatherings where the participants are largely and/or entirely women.

Types of Events

Overall graduate women showed a strong interest in social events with peers on-campus, events that focus on networking with faculty, and events that focus on networking with alumni.

- When looking at the data across years at MIT, from one to five plus years, graduate women's desire for events focused on career planning advice increased.
- *International graduate women, at 57% in comparison to 44%, displayed greater interest in technical and professional conferences at MIT or elsewhere than U.S. citizens or permanent residents.*

Types of Workshops

Overall graduate women showed a strong interest in workshop topics that focused on academic, professional, and personal mentoring; academic development and career path choice (post graduate degree); and academic development and advising relationship (as graduate student).

- Workshops focused on balancing work, family, and life ranked higher for those graduate women with children.
- *50% of international graduate women reported being interested in workshops focused on communication and interpersonal skills.*