

# GRADUATE FOCUS

FEBRUARY 2000

ISSUES IN GRADUATE EDUCATION AT UCLA

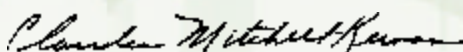
## *Members of the Academic Community:*

The relationship between a doctoral student's faculty contacts and the student's relative success in graduate school and beyond is a crucial one. By capturing and quantifying data from recent doctoral degree recipients on specific issues measuring their satisfaction with dissertation chairs, we take one step toward a greater understanding of these pivotal relationships.

The information presented here is a snapshot of UCLA doctoral recipients' impressions of the overall quality of mentoring, assistance with finding professional employment, and general interest in the student shown by the dissertation chair.

I am pleased to present this issue of *Graduate Focus* to further the discussion of issues directly related to the quality of graduate education at UCLA. This *Graduate Focus* is one in an ongoing series produced by the Graduate Division to update you on academic and administrative concerns that relate directly to your activities with regard to graduate student recruitment, retention, mentoring, placement, and a host of other issues.

Sincerely,



Claudia Mitchell-Kernan  
Vice Chancellor Academic Affairs  
Dean Graduate Division

## DOCTORAL RECIPIENTS RATE THEIR DISSERTATION CHAIRS: ANALYSIS BY GENDER

*UCLA doctoral degree recipients are very pleased with their relations with their faculty mentors, but survey results show they wanted a closer mentoring relationship and more help in finding jobs. Women and men expressed similar reactions on the majority of questions analyzed for this report. Men were more positive than women about the issues of faculty mentoring and time spent with dissertation chair(s), and men reported more regular discussion of their research initiated by their chair(s) than women. Nonetheless, women were more likely than men to select the same advisor if starting the university again.*

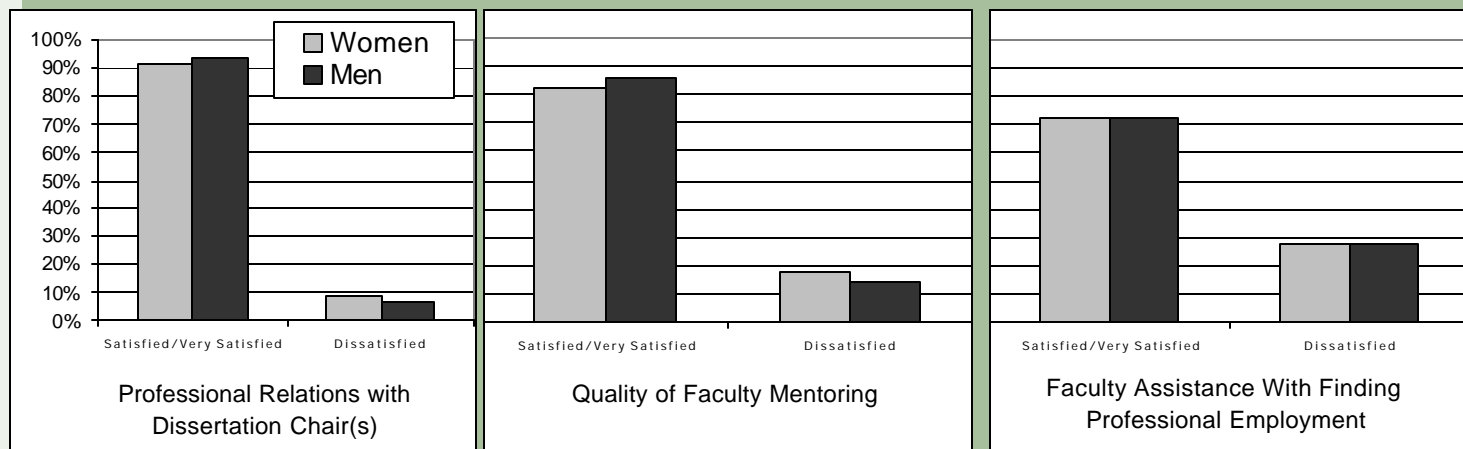
These findings come from an analysis of data from the UCLA Graduate Division Doctoral Exit Survey completed by UCLA doctoral recipients from Winter Quarter 1994 through Spring 1999. The survey sought opinions on a number of topics and gathered data that had not been available in other campus databases. Exit surveys of doctorate degree recipients are being used by a growing number of research universities nationally as a means for better understanding a broad range of issues in graduate education and professional training. UCLA has been a leader in the development of such an exit survey.

Research into doctoral education consistently emphasizes the importance of student-faculty relationships. Faculty-student interaction directly affects whether students complete degrees, the time to degree, and student satisfaction with the experience of obtaining a doctoral degree. Baird (1993), Bowen and Rudenstine (1992), Hodgson and Simoni (1995), Nerad and Cerny (1993), Tinto

(1993), and numerous other researchers have cited the advisor-advisee relationship as crucial to successful degree completion. A UCLA study (Benkin, 1984) designed to determine the factors that distinguished between ABDs and degree completers concluded that the faculty-student relationship was the decisive factor in whether students did or did not complete their dissertations. In addition, a review of several self-help books designed to guide students through the doctoral degree process shows that each spends considerable time advising students to work closely with their advisors.

**“UCLA doctoral recipients were quite positive about their satisfaction with professional relations with their dissertation chairs; 92% of women and 93% of men were satisfied or very satisfied.”**

**Figure 1. Degree of Satisfaction in Three Aspects of Relations with Faculty**



Following up on this research, this report analyzes several Doctoral Exit Survey questions focused specifically on the experiences that degree recipients had with their dissertation chairs and faculty.

Surveys were completed by 3,165 of the 3,401 students (93.1%) who received UCLA doctoral degrees during the five-year period. The makeup of the respondents closely mirrored the population of degree recipients. For example, in this time period women were 41.93% of doctoral recipients and 41.86% of the survey respondents.

### Comparisons by Gender

Women at UCLA tend to take longer to complete degrees than men. In the five years included in these survey data (1994-1995 through 1998-1999), women had a mean time to degree of 7.7 years compared to 7.0 years for men. Because of this, we decided to look at gender in relationship to satisfaction with mentoring, to see if there were any significant differences.

Although women constituted almost 42% of these UCLA doctorates (mirrored by the national figure of 42% of all U.S. doctorates in 1998), they are not equally represented in all fields of study. For this cohort, women were 58.3% of humanities doctorates; 53.6% of life science doctorates; 26.3% of physical science

doctorates, 41.0% of social science doctorates, 67.6% of Education and Information Studies doctorates, and 10.0% of Engineering and Applied Science doctorates. Although we recognize the differences in gender by field, this report deals only with the total population of degree recipients. A complete analysis of the Exit Survey is being prepared that will include a look at each field of study by demographics.

Three of the survey questions asked doctoral recipients to rate their satisfaction with different aspects of relations with their faculty:

- Professional relations with dissertation chair(s)
- Quality of faculty mentoring
- Faculty assistance with finding professional employment

Figure 1 shows the responses to these items by gender. Preliminary analyses examining very satisfied and satisfied responses as separate categories revealed no significant gender differences. Thus, for the present discussion, satisfied and very satisfied responses are combined into one category and no opinion responses have been excluded.

On all three questions, men were slightly more satisfied than women. The biggest difference (almost 4%) was in response to the question on the quality of faculty mentoring.

UCLA doctoral recipients were quite positive about their satisfaction with professional relations with their dissertation chairs; 92% of women and

93% of men were satisfied or very satisfied. In fact, this was the highest rated satisfaction question on the survey. Although they were still overwhelmingly satisfied, these doctoral recipients were less pleased with their faculty as mentors; 82% of women and 86% of men were satisfied or very satisfied. Further, even though nearly three-fourths of the doctoral recipients were

satisfied with faculty assistance in finding professional employment, this is the lowest satisfaction rating in the entire survey; 72% of both women and men were satisfied or very satisfied. Note that this question elicited a relatively high percentage of no opinion responses: 21% of women and 19% of men had no opinion. This high

**“Faculty-student interaction directly affects whether students complete degrees, the time to degree, and student satisfaction with the experience of obtaining a doctoral degree.”**

percentage of no opinion responses may suggest that some students do not expect faculty to assist them with securing future employment.

Chi-square tests were done on these items to determine if the differences between men and women were significant. While the differences on the items about professional relationships with committee chairs and the item on faculty assistance in finding the student professional employment were not significant, the difference in the question on the overall quality of faculty mentoring was statistically significant at the  $p=.003$  level.

These data suggest that while students had pleasant professional experiences with their faculty advisers, they were less pleased when it came to rating the advisers on specific activities such as mentoring and employment assistance, and that men and women had statistically different response patterns on mentoring.

Several other questions related directly to the experiences of women and men with their dissertation chair(s). Figure 2 illustrates the students' responses to the item asking them to rate the time they were able to spend with their dissertation chair(s).

Men again rated their experiences more positively. There was a 2% difference between the genders; 90% of the men and 88% of the women said the time available with their dissertation chair(s) was at least adequate. While an overwhelming majority of both men and women felt they had enough time with their dissertation chair(s),

11% of students overall would have liked more attention from their chair(s). The chi-square test showed that the difference between the genders on this item was statistically significant at the  $p=.05$  level.

A separate section of the survey asked the doctoral recipients whether they agreed or disagreed with statements specifically about their dissertation chairs. The three statements that received the highest satisfaction ratings were:

- Willing to spend time to advise on academic matters
- Interested in my goals and projects
- Encouraged and supported my research idea

**Figure 2.** Amount of Time Spent with Dissertation Chair(s)

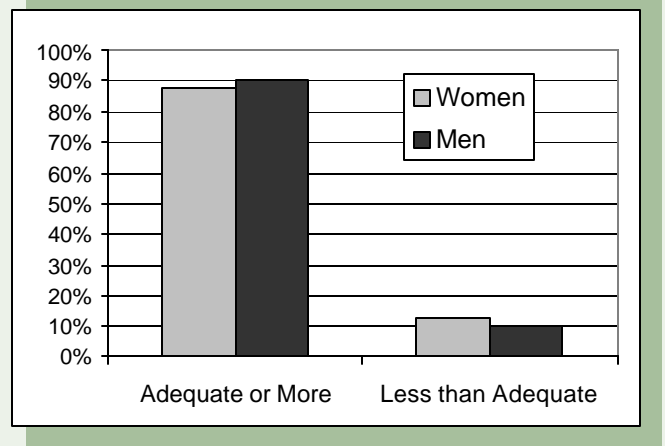
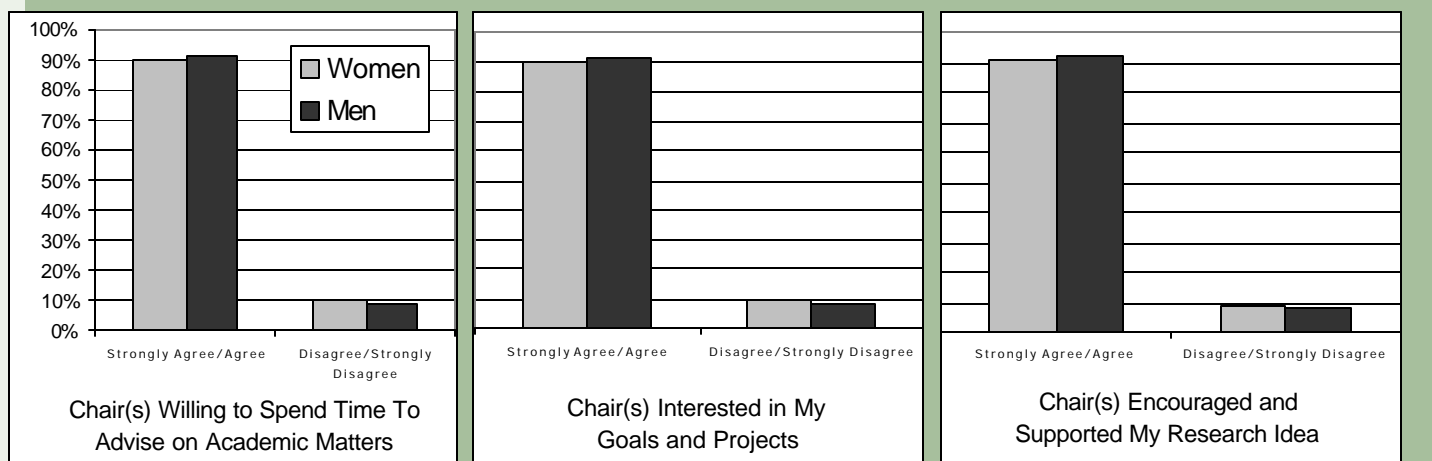


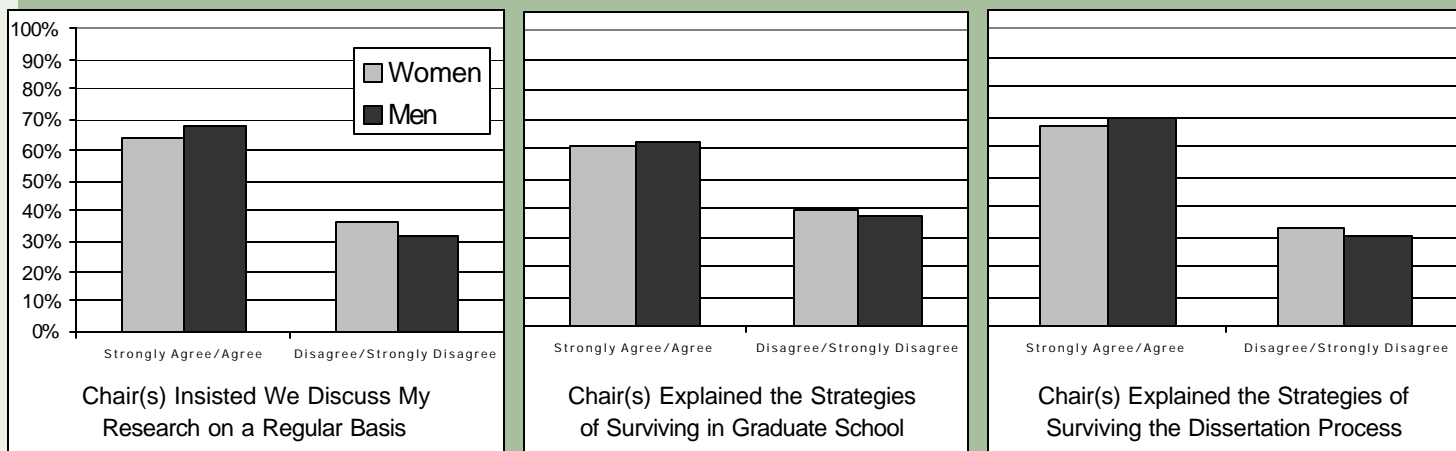
Figure 3 depicts the responses to these items by gender collapsing strongly agree and agree, and strongly disagree and disagree. Although the categories were combined for presentation and the current discussion, initial analyses revealed some interesting patterns. On all three questions, a higher percentage of women than men selected strongly agree whereas there was a larger percentage of men than women selecting the category agree. This gendered response pattern for strongly agree and agree was significant for all three questions, as determined by chi-square tests. However,

*Continued on page 4*

**Figure 3.** Survey Items with Highest Satisfaction with Dissertation Chair(s)



**Figure 4. Survey Items with Lowest Satisfaction with Dissertation Chair(s)**



chi-square tests revealed no significant gender differences in distribution of disagree and strongly disagree responses.

When considering the overall agreement and disagreement using the collapsed categories, the three graphs show slight differences between men and women, none of which were shown to be significant by chi-square tests. Ninety percent of these doctoral recipients agreed or strongly agreed that their chairs were willing to spend the time necessary to advise them on academic matters, 91% agreed or strongly agreed that their chairs were interested in their goals and projects, and 92% agreed or strongly agreed that their chairs encouraged and supported the students' research ideas.

Figure 4 shows the items with the lowest satisfaction ratings. These included:

- Insisted we discuss my research on a regular basis
- Explained the strategies of surviving in graduate school

- Explained the strategies of surviving the dissertation process

Again, data were collapsed for strongly agree and agree, and strongly disagree and disagree. Analyses done on gender and the four separate categories revealed that on all three questions, a higher percentage of women than men selected strongly agree whereas more men than women selected the category agree. This gendered response pattern for strongly agree and agree was significant for two (graduate school and dissertation strategies) out of the three questions, as determined by chi-square tests. However, chi-square tests revealed no significant gender differences in distribution of disagree and strongly disagree responses.

Considering the collapsed categories, students were still generally positive about these items; over 60% of the doctoral recipients responded in a positive manner to each item. What makes them noteworthy is the comparison with the items discussed above, in which over 90% received positive agreements. Again, men were slightly more positive than women, although only

one item showed statistical significance. Overall, 62% said their chairs explained the strategies of survival in graduate school, 67% agreed that their chairs insisted that they discuss the student's research on a regular basis, and 69% said their chairs explained the strategies of survival in the dissertation process. The difference between men and women on the item about the chair's insistence to discuss the student's research on a regular basis was found to be statistically significant at the  $p=.023$  level.

Comparing the data in Figures 3 and 4, a conclusion could be that these chairs were easy to deal with and very approachable, but that they did not meet some students' needs in specific areas such as regular meetings and advice on how to get through their degrees.

Note that men were more satisfied than women with the time they had with their committee chairs and that more men than women felt that their chairs insisted on discussing their research on a regular basis. Both of these findings were statistically significant.

The last question reviewed in this report sums up the students' experiences with their dissertation chairs. Figure 5 displays these responses. When asked if they would choose the same advisor if they were to start their graduate careers

**"... while students had pleasant professional experiences with their faculty advisers, they were less pleased when it came to rating the advisers on specific activities such as mentoring and employment assistance."**

over again, 68% of these doctoral recipients responded affirmatively. However, in this case, women were more positive than men in their responses; 69% of women and 67% of men said they would choose the same advisor, while 20% of men and 17% of women said they were undecided. Almost the same percentage of men and women (14% of women and 13% of men) said they would not choose the same advisor if starting over again. The chi-square test on this item indicated that the difference between the genders was marginally significant at the  $p=.054$  level.

The data presented here show some interesting, although small, differences between these women and men doctoral recipients. Men were slightly more positive on all nine chair-related items including professional relations, quality of faculty mentoring, assistance in finding professional employment, and the time spent with their advisors. Women, on the other hand, were more likely to respond positively to the idea of choosing the same advisor again.

Looking at the doctoral recipients as a totality, it is clear that while there were areas of concern, such as mentoring and assisting students with their careers, and taking the initiative to advise students on specific areas of concern, UCLA doctoral

recipients held their faculty and dissertation chairs in very high positive regard. While this may seem surprising in an era when graduate students complain about their mistreatment by faculty, two factors have to be remembered. One is that these are doctoral students surveyed as they are completing their degrees and that they are likely to be most positive at this time in their careers. The other is that these results do not reflect the opinions of doctoral *students*, but of doctoral *recipients*, and that a survey of current doctoral students might reveal differing opinions.

In November 1990, the Association of American Universities (AAU) published a brochure summarizing *Institutional Policies to Improve Doctoral Education*. This publication notes that advice and support from faculty mentors, beyond their formal teaching role, are critical to the success of students in doctoral programs. The responses by UCLA's recent doctorates leads us to conclude that, although there are areas for improvement, the level of satisfaction with faculty mentors is generally quite high.

## References

Baird, Leonard L. "Using Research and Theoretical Models of Graduate Student Progress." In *Increasing Graduate Student Retention and Degree Attainment*. Ed. Leonard L. Baird. New Directions for Institutional Research, no. 80. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993, p. 3-12.

Benkin, Ellen. *Where Have All the Doctoral Students Gone? A Study of Doctoral Student Attrition at UCLA*. Unpublished Dissertation, UCLA, 1984.

Bowen, William G. and Neil L. Rudenstine. *In Pursuit of the Ph.D.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992.

Hawley, Peggy. *Being Bright is Not Enough: The Unwritten Rules of Doctoral Study*. Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1993.

Hodgson, Carol S. and Jane M. Simoni. "Graduate Student Academic and Psychological Functioning." *Journal of College Student Development* 36.3 (May-Jun 1995): 244-53.

Moore, Richard W. *Winning the Ph.D. Game*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1985.

Nerad, Maresi and Joseph Cerny. "From Facts to Action: Expanding the Graduate Division's Educational Role." In L. Baird (ed.) *Increasing Graduate Student Retention and Degree Attainment*. New Directions for Institutional Research 80. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993. 27-39.

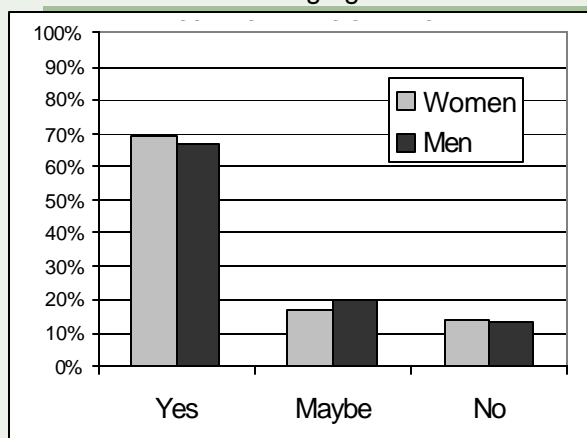
Tinto, Vincent. "Toward A Theory of Doctoral Persistence." In *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*. (2nd ed.) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. 230-243.

*Graduate Focus* is a publication of the UCLA Graduate Division. This report was prepared by:

- Ellen Benkin, PhD, Information Services Coordinator
- Jo Anne Beazley, MA, Graduate Student Researcher
- Patricia Jordan, MA, Publications Manager

For details on data in this report and other Graduate Division data, contact Ellen Benkin at [ebenkin@gdnet.ucla.edu](mailto:ebenkin@gdnet.ucla.edu) or (310) 206-0282.

**Figure 5.** Would Choose the Same Advisor If Starting Again



---

University of California, Los Angeles  
Graduate Division  
1237 Murphy Hall  
Box 951419  
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1419

Non-Profit Organization  
U.S. Postage Paid  
UCLA

GD32