

**Assessing the climate  
for  
sexual minority  
doctoral students  
at the University of Michigan**

**Executive Summary**

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**PREPARED BY THE ADVANCE PROGRAM  
INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH ON WOMEN AND GENDER**

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1,2</sup>

Scholars from a range of academic fields have documented numerous challenges faced by sexual minorities<sup>3</sup> in higher education. Among these projects are analyses of faculty and students' experiences with discrimination and demoralization; critiques of the ways in which university communities unwittingly reproduce expectations of heterosexuality as the norm; and suggestions for making universities more welcoming and supportive of sexual minorities (e.g., Champagne, 2002; Hilton, 2005; McNaron, 1997; Mintz & Rothblum, 1997; Tierney, 1997; Wallace, 2002). However, few have systematically investigated sexual minority doctoral students' experiences. This study explores sexual minority and non sexual minority Ph.D. students' morale, career goals, and experiences of departmental climate at the University of Michigan.

This assessment of the academic work environment for sexual minority doctoral students at UM parallels a recently completed investigation of the climate for women and underrepresented racial and ethnic minority doctoral students.<sup>4</sup> Data for both reports were drawn from the same survey. This study measured doctoral students' judgments of the climate, with the primary goal of assessing whether that climate varied for sexual minority versus non sexual minority doctoral students.

### Data Collection

The survey was initially developed by the NSF ADVANCE staff in conjunction with Rackham Graduate School and was based on feedback received from graduate students<sup>5</sup>. Survey topics included skills, training and learning experiences, advising and mentoring, career planning goals, department climate, and demographics.

In fall 2004 all doctoral students enrolled in Rackham for more than one year (N=5340) received a request to complete the on-line survey. The surveys were anonymous and all respondents were promised confidentiality. The students' response rate was 27% (N=1454). Demographic breakdowns of the analyzable sample generally reflect the overall rates of doctoral students reported by Rackham. However, female students responded at a higher rate than male students (they represent 44% of the Rackham student body but 60% of our sample), as is typical in studies of this kind (see discussion in Stewart, Stubbs & Malley, 2002).

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<sup>1</sup> Electronic versions of this report as well as the executive summary can be found on UM ADVANCE's website (full report: [http://www.umich.edu/~advproj/Sexual\\_Minority\\_Report.pdf](http://www.umich.edu/~advproj/Sexual_Minority_Report.pdf); executive summary: [http://www.umich.edu/~advproj/Sexual\\_Minority\\_Report\\_es.pdf](http://www.umich.edu/~advproj/Sexual_Minority_Report_es.pdf))

<sup>2</sup> This study was conducted, and the report prepared by Janet Malley, Abigail Stewart, and Janice Habarth for the ADVANCE Program with assistance from Keith Rainwater. The study was supported by combined funding from the ADVANCE Program, the Office of the Provost and the Rackham Graduate School. We are grateful to Rackham's Interim Dean Steven Kunkel and Senior Associate Provost Lester Monts for their support for this study.

<sup>3</sup> The term "sexual minorities" was used in the survey on the advice of graduate students that it was most economical and inclusive of students who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer and transgendered. We have preserved that language throughout this report.

<sup>4</sup> Electronic versions of "Assessing the Climate for Doctoral Students at the University of Michigan" can be found on UM ADVANCE's website (full report: [http://www.umich.edu/~advproj/PhD\\_Report.pdf](http://www.umich.edu/~advproj/PhD_Report.pdf); executive summary: [http://www.umich.edu/~advproj/PhD\\_Report\\_es.pdf](http://www.umich.edu/~advproj/PhD_Report_es.pdf)).

<sup>5</sup> We are most grateful to these doctoral students who generously provided their advice to us about the development of the survey.

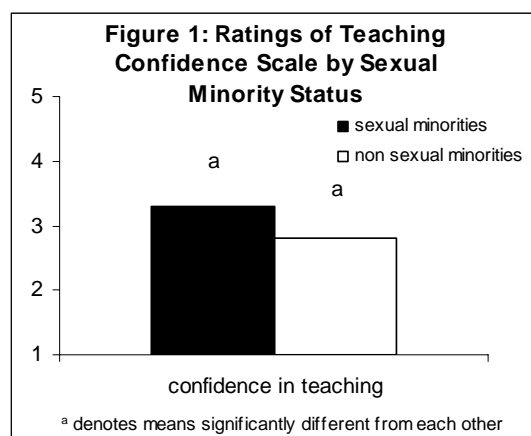
Differences between those identified as sexual minorities and non sexual minorities might have been undetectable had we included the entire sample in these analyses (7% identified as sexual minority). Therefore, the analyses reported here are based on a sample (N=177) including all those who self identified as sexual minorities (N=59) and twice that number of students who did not self identify as sexual minorities (N=118; randomly selected). All analyses were conducted controlling for the students' current financial situation and Rackham division; statistically significant findings reported here cannot be accounted for by differences in these areas.

The determination of sexual minority status is of particular importance to this study. Students were not asked directly about sexual orientation; however, they were given the opportunity to identify as sexual minority students when asked questions about the climate. The results summarized below might best be thought of as representing: 1. students who identified themselves as sexual minority students and 2. heterosexual students plus any sexual minority students who may not have divulged their identities on this survey. Throughout the report, we use "non sexual minority" to identify the second group; a more accurate label, albeit more cumbersome, would be "did not identify as sexual minority."

## DOCTORAL STUDENTS' MORALE

**Confidence.** Generally, both groups of students reported a high level of confidence and expected to pursue a career in their academic field, although sexual minority students rated themselves as more confident than non sexual minority students in their teaching skills and training (see Figure 1). This finding held regardless of the gender of the student's advisor<sup>6</sup>.

**Discouragement.** Approximately three-quarters of both sexual minority and non sexual minority students reported that they had felt discouraged about pursuing their current field of study at least once while at UM. In addition at least 30% of students in both sexual minority and non sexual minority groups reported that they had been discouraged about their departments' climates, interactions with advisors, and career opportunities, as well as their personal lives and financial concerns. No differences were found in overall discouragement between sexual minority and non sexual minority students.

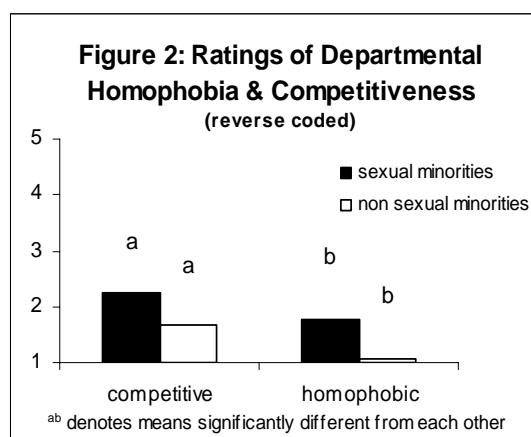


<sup>6</sup>One hundred eleven (63%) of the students in this sample had male advisors and 66 (37%) had female advisors. Twenty seven percent of the non sexual minority students and 58% of the sexual minority students had female advisors.

## OVERALL CLIMATE OF DEPARTMENT OR AREA

**Department Climate.** There were no significant differences by sexual minority status on overall departmental climate ratings. With respect to climate for specific groups, more than half of the total sample of students reported that their departments offered a supportive environment for women, international students and racial/ethnic minorities, while fewer indicated that it was supportive for men, sexual minorities and disabled students.

Non sexual minorities agreed with sexual minorities in reporting that their departments were not as supportive of or comfortable for sexual minorities and disabled students as they were for other groups. Even so, sexual minority students reported their departments to be more homophobic and competitive than did non sexual minorities (see Figure 2). They were also more likely to report that students and faculty in their departments were condescending toward and made negative comments about sexual minorities.



## DOCTORAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF GRADUATE SCHOOL

**Graduate School Experience.** Generally, the two groups reported similarly with respect to the importance of and opportunities for educational experiences. Like their non sexual minority peers, sexual minority students reported insufficient opportunities for a number of experiences, including internships and industrial experience, training in pedagogy, practice with job interviews, and training in interdisciplinary research. Sexual minority students rated opportunities to present research as less important than did non sexual minorities. They were also more likely to report sufficient opportunities for required coursework but insufficient opportunities for study groups.

**Sources of Information.** Few differences emerged regarding the ways in which students acquired various types of information, although sexual minority students were less likely to learn about internal funding sources or information resources on their own.

## ADVISING AND SUPPORT

**Advisors.** Both groups of students reported being generally satisfied with their advisors, and we found no overall differences in the adequacy or types of support provided by advisors to sexual minority and non sexual minority students. On the other hand, analysis of qualitative responses revealed two differences by sexual minority status: significantly more sexual minority students, as compared to non sexual minority students, mentioned lack of support as a reason for changing advisors and as having impeded their progress in graduate school.

**Non-Advisor Support/Advice.** Both groups were generally satisfied or very satisfied with all of the sources of support received, although they noted that they were most satisfied with the support they receive from family and friends and least satisfied with faculty support. There were no significant differences by sexual minority status on how much or from whom they received support.

## CAREER GOALS

**Future Career Goals.** Both sexual minority and non sexual minority students reported a desire to combine family life with a successful academic career, and many aspired to become a professor in a 4-year college. Career aspirations generally did not differ for the two groups. However, non sexual minority students found a research job in industry or the private sector more attractive.

**Influential Features of Academia.** Sexual minority students rated the specific items of faculty way of life and salaries in academia as more influential aspects of academia than did non sexual minorities. No other significant differences emerged.

## PERSONAL LIFE CONTEXT

**Background.** Few differences emerged by sexual minority status. Sexual minorities were more likely to partner with another student and with someone who was in their same field; they were also more likely to have debt from their undergraduate education. There were no significant differences regarding relationship status, mean current financial situation, parent status, or parental support for their careers.

## RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN KEY VARIABLES AND STUDENT MORALE

Correlations for both sexual minority and non sexual minority students revealed numerous strong and significant relationships between students' morale and career goals and the climate, experiences with advisor, and broader experience factors, although the pattern was slightly different for the two groups. For example, for non sexual minorities, climate ratings correlated with confidence in research; however, advisor ratings were even more consistently correlated with morale and career goals. For sexual minority students, climate ratings were the experiential variables most consistently correlated with morale and career goals. These findings suggest that the climate for sexual minority doctoral students is particularly important for their morale and career aspirations and that efforts should be made to ensure that departments are sufficiently welcoming.

Mean correlation coefficients between climate and advisor ratings (.26 for non sexual minorities, and .23 for sexual minorities) suggest that students are not equating the climate with advising relationships, and that other factors beyond their advisors play an important role in how they experience the climate in their departments. For example, confidence that their research interests were considered important in their field, discouragement about interactions with other students, and satisfaction with the support they receive from UM faculty are all also highly correlated with their ratings of departmental climate.

## IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

One of the most striking study findings is the similarity of experiences, morale, and career goals for these two groups. And, despite substantial agreement among all students that the climate is not sufficiently supportive of or welcoming towards sexual minorities, these students report confidence about and commitment to their academic careers. These results, while suggesting that sexual minority graduate students are generally resilient in the context of less than optimal environments, do not mean that negative aspects of climate have no detrimental effects.

**Improving the Climate for Sexual Minorities.** Based on students' perceptions of less welcoming departmental climates, we recommend that steps be taken to cultivate more effective and inclusive environments. First, assessments should be undertaken to determine specific features of the climate that lead sexual minorities to feel more or less welcome, supported, and able to be fully engaged members of the academic community. Our data suggest that climate conditions may vary by division and department; thus, assessments targeted at the departmental or divisional level will serve as an important foundation to these efforts.

In addition, we recommend that departments and divisions reflect on and implement the following guidelines aimed at reducing homophobia and enhancing inclusiveness in departmental climates:

- Be inclusive, and use inclusive language.
- Respond to inappropriate or discriminatory behavior.
- Assess subtle discrimination and bias.
- Include coverage of sexual minority issues in relevant coursework.
- Promote awareness of transgenderism.

### Conclusions

The results of these analyses are largely encouraging. In general, sexual minority doctoral students at the University of Michigan likely fare as well as their non sexual minority peers with respect to opportunities, support, and morale, and that in many cases their perceptions of departmental climate closely match those of non sexual minorities. Further, we note that there appear to be no egregious, systematic disadvantages or hardships for sexual minority students. However, students overall, and sexual minority students in particular, view their departments as less than optimally welcoming or supportive of sexual minorities. We found that these students observe bias in the form of disparaging comments or condescending attitudes by faculty and fellow students, and that they characterize their departments as being more homophobic and competitive than do their non sexual minority peers. Because our data suggest that the climate for sexual minority students may vary by Rackham division, specific assessments at the level of department or division would be most useful in determining how to improve the climate for these students. In addition to implementing interventions targeted at areas of particular concern, departments would do well to consider "everyday" aspects of the climate such as the language used to refer to significant others, responses and reactions to bias and discrimination, and representation of sexuality and sexual minority concerns in the curriculum. Efforts to improve the climate for sexual minority students will likely benefit not only these students but also the larger academic community.

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