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**US graduate students in geography: what can knowledge of everyday experiences tell us about departmental climate? (0164)**

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**Research Domain: Student Experiences**

In this US-based study, structured logs were used to complement data from a survey of graduate experiences of departmental climate in geography, which found differences between subgroups within the graduate population (gender, race etc). Findings are illustrated with respect to who students said helped them with their studies and how this varied with gender. In general, women's support networks are as diverse as those of their male counterparts, but in everyday experiences women tend to focus more on those most immediately linked to them – academic peers, or faculty with whom they are structurally connected through advisory or committee relations. Findings challenge us to think about diversity issues within the graduate population, and how to manage sensitivity to gender, race, nationality and student status without resorting to oversimplified generalizations or stereotypes.

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*Context*

Many early career academics struggle in their graduate work, implying a need to understand the overall context in which graduate students work and develop. Infighting, territoriality, excessive competition, and the biases of colleagues who are dismissive of talented scholars because of their gender, nationality, minority status, or research focus can degrade a department's climate and ultimately cause many people to leave, just as supportive colleagues and programs can create a climate where students and early career faculty are more likely to thrive (Cameron and Ettington 1988; Petersen and Spencer 1990; Rosser 2004).

In this US-based study, structured logs were used to complement data from a linked survey of graduate experiences of departmental climate in the discipline of geography (Solem, Lee, and Schlemper 2009). Analysis of the survey focused on differences between subgroups within the graduate population. Statistically significant differences were found in many cases. For example, doctoral students were more likely than master's students to describe working environment as unfriendly or difficult, and more likely to report difficulties and stress coping with personal (emotional and financial) issues and program requirements. Women reported greater difficulties with program requirements and personal issues and placed a higher value on a supportive community characterised by strong interactions among graduate students.

The use of structured logs provided a means to dig down into some of these findings – to explore interactions, difficulties, access to support and emotional aspects of experience as they play out from week to week.

### *Methods*

A representative sample was sought (at both institutional and individual levels), and initial recruitment targeted 10 carefully selected institutions which had participated in the prior project and 60 students across these. Data were provided by 53 students (from nine institutions across seven US states). The 31 PhD students were from five different research doctoral institutions. Of the 22 master's students, 13 were spread across four research doctoral institutions, and a further nine were from one of two comprehensive master's institutions. Comparisons with the national population of geography graduate students confirmed this sample to be representative save slight over-representation of females and non-US citizens. Each student was asked to complete a log once a month for six months, and 285 completed logs were received.

Reflecting its links to the previous survey work the analysis of logs in this study focused on exploring whether the day-in day-out experiences of particular sub-groups differed from each other. While the six month duration would allow for individual trajectories to be analysed longitudinally, the focus in this paper remains at the aggregate level (the UK-based study in this symposium focuses on longitudinal analyses).

### *Findings*

Findings are exemplified here with who students said helped them with their studies and how this varied by gender.

In each log students were asked to identify the different types of people who had provided support of some kind (e.g., advisor, committee member, other professors in/beyond department, other students, family, friends, etc.). Patterns were broadly similar for all sub-groups, with help being most commonly received from students in their department, other students on campus, and advisors. There were, however, some interesting differences which speak directly to issues of climate. Females tended to rely more on the aforementioned types of people, while male students drew more frequently on graduate program directors, other professors within and beyond their department, a range of university support services (writing centres, library staff etc.), and family and friends. In general, women's support networks are as diverse as those of their male counterparts, but in everyday experiences women tend to focus more on those most immediately linked to them – academic peers, or faculty with whom they are structurally connected through advisory or committee relations.

Students also nominated the person most significantly influencing their progress each week. Here, males were much more likely than females to name academics (other than their advisors), while females were twice as likely as males to say that other students were the most important in a particular week. This fits prior findings suggesting a stronger emphasis in female perceptions on peer community. Respondents also explained why their nominated individual was so significant. Women were much more likely than men to cite affective traits (such as trust, being supportive, dependable, available), which perhaps explains a preference for other students – people who are more like them and able to empathize with their experiences. Males were more likely to cite the other person's ability to assist with coursework and comprehensive exam related issues or general degree administration – offering an explanation for their more frequent naming of other faculty as the most important source of help.

### *Conclusions*

The initial survey produced some provocative findings relating to the different ways in which subgroups of the geography graduate student population experienced departmental climate. Data generated through the logs provides insights into the everyday patterns of interaction and the way students perceive these which are helpful in explaining many of these findings. They challenge us to think carefully about diversity issues within the graduate population, in particular raising questions about how to manage a sensitivity to gender, race, nationality and student status without resorting to oversimplified generalizations or stereotypes.

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