

Title of Initiative: Graduate Students with Disabilities Needs Assessment

Institution Name & Type: University of Michigan (Carnegie I Public Research Institution)

Problem of Practice:

While there is significant research about accommodating undergraduate students with disabilities, there is almost no parallel research specifically on graduate students, despite their different educational experiences, opportunities, and requirements.

Evidence of the Problem:

In Winter 2020, all graduate students enrolled in the University of Michigan (U-M) Rackham Graduate School's various programs were surveyed (N=9,237) as part of the Graduate Student with Disabilities Needs Assessment. The total sample of graduate students who responded to the survey during the four-week period in which it was available was 1,070 (a response rate of 12%).

The sample included broad representation across gender, race, ethnicity, and disability status. Respondents were also well distributed across graduate student statuses (i.e. master's, pre-candidate, and doctoral candidates) as well as Rackham's four disciplinary areas: the biological and medical sciences, physical sciences and engineering, social sciences, and the humanities and arts. Detailed information about the survey sample and methodology can be found in the "Report from Committee on Graduate Student Experiences with Disability Accommodations at the University of Michigan".

In addition, six focus groups were conducted over four weeks during the same Winter 2020 term. There were a total of 20 participants with focus groups ranging in size between 2 and 5 participants, with most including 3. Two of the focus groups took place in person and four over encrypted video conferencing technology, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All focus group interviews were recorded, professionally transcribed, and then cleaned and de-identified as needed.

Initiative/Action/Result:

The findings of the study made clear the distinction between undergraduate and graduate students with disabilities and the difficulty graduate students experience when attempting to obtain and implement accommodations. It also shed light on the university's emphasis on undergraduate accommodations over the needs of graduate students; or, as one respondent explained, "I've heard from many other graduate students that there's more challenges in getting them as a graduate student because I think a lot of SSD [Services for Students with Disabilities] is more streamlined for the undergraduate students."

The study also demonstrated how graduate students' complex and multiple roles, as both students and employees of the university, can significantly complicate a graduate student's ability to receive the necessary accommodations when an institution lacks a centralized unit to coordinate accommodations for students and employees—or, in the case of graduate students, students who are also simultaneously employees.

One of the study participants explained the difficulty experienced by graduate students when faculty and leadership are unsure which office (e.g. Services for Students with Disabilities or the ADA Coordinator's Office) is responsible for providing graduate student accommodations. "When trying to request those accommodations I was on an email chain with my advisor and someone from SSD, my coordinator from SSD, the rec and resolution officer from Rackham and my department chairs, and it's just like it was a months long email exchange with everyone trying to basically shuffle me off to someone else and say that it's not their job to determine those accommodations. My department chair thought that it should be SSD's job and then SSD said it was outside their wheelhouse."

Another respondent echoed these frustrations, saying, "I also have it in writing from my department that my department will not give grad students who are in student status any disability accommodations because we're not covered as employees. We can only ask when we're covered as employees."

When a university does not have centralized and coordinated services, this study demonstrates how graduate students are often caught in the middle—or simply fall through the cracks.

"I'm in a master's program and I taught the last three semesters and so it was interesting to navigate...I've had mixed results with accommodations...SSD doesn't do it because it's not a student accommodation but the workplace. They didn't do it, it was just like I work with the professor to put some stuff in place....GSI [Graduate Student Instructor] accommodations were just this weird limbo where there wasn't really a set protocol for it."

Implications for Policy & Practice:

The authors of this report strongly recommend the centralization of the process of implementing policy with respect to students, faculty and staff with disabilities. This includes providing information about available accommodations, assistance with obtaining those accommodations and follow up as necessary to ensure that the accommodations are implemented. Without centralization of expertise and accountability for both information and action, situations in which graduate students undertake arduous and often fruitless efforts to obtain necessary accommodations, and others simply give up in frustration because they cannot obtain accurate and helpful information from reliable sources, are likely to continue.