

Qualitative Report on the 2019 College of Natural Science Climate Survey

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Introduction

This report presents an analysis of the qualitative, open-ended responses provided by students, staff, and faculty to the College of Natural Science's (NatSci) spring 2019 Organizational Climate Survey. It serves as a supplement to the full report released in November of 2019, which focused primarily on quantitative metrics of analysis. That report identified a generally positive climate, although opinions varied somewhat based on demographic variables such as gender, ethnicity, and citizenship status. The purpose of this supplemental report is to analyze responses to the open-ended questions posed at the end of the survey, which, while not as generalizable, allow for more detailed insight into specific experiences. A number of areas of potential concern were identified, including racial and sexual discrimination and tension between various types of faculty and staff. The following section will describe the methodology used in the analysis before providing a detailed overview of the relevant themes.

Methodology

This study was prepared through a qualitative analysis of open-ended prompts included at the end of the survey. All responses were anonymous, and any references to specific individuals were redacted to maintain privacy and confidentiality. The three prompts were as follows:

1. Please provide any additional information you would like to provide about how you have been treated within the College of Natural Science.
2. Please provide any additional information you would like to provide about bias / discriminatory incidents you have experienced or witnessed.
3. If you would like to provide any additional comments, suggestions, or input regarding conditions or the climate within the College of Natural Science, please do so below.

The report's author was only provided answers to these prompts, separated from any other demographic information absent what the survey subjects chose to disclose. Consequently, some responses are more vague than others. On the other hand, some responses were specific to one or two individuals and therefore cannot be included in the analysis due to confidentiality issues.

Qualitative analyses differ in several significant ways from quantitative statistical ones. While qualitative data can still be aggregated, the purpose is not necessarily generalized inferences designed to make broad statements about the state of the College as a whole. Instead, qualitative analysis typically focuses on the complex nature of particular phenomena, the *qualities* that often make experiences unique (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). In the case of this survey, the analytic process involved embracing the messiness of open-ended responses that did not always fit into larger categories. Nevertheless, the focused nature of the survey meant that responses could be gathered into several broad, recurring themes.

Data were analyzed in four stages consistent with best practices of qualitative research (Basit, 2003; Saldaña, 2014). The researcher used the latest version of NVivo, a qualitative research program that allows for more complex analyses. In the first stage, responses were reviewed semi-passively, a process that allows the researcher to become familiar with the data. In the second stage, relevant responses were coded inductively based on the nature of experiences being expressed by respondents. In the third stage, the coding schema was refined to better reflect the broad themes that began to emerge in prior stages. Codes were generally broken down into positive, negative, and mixed experiences in the College, and then between students, staff, and faculty when such divisions could be determined. Finally, themes were narrowed to focus on the most relevant topics, and particularly appropriate examples were selected for inclusion in the report.

Given that the survey was administered through the NatSci Task Force on Inclusive Initiatives, the data and themes were analyzed using a diversity focused theoretical lens. The academic literature on campus climate reports frequent hostility towards people of color, LGBTQ-identified individuals, religious minorities, and students from low-income backgrounds (Quaye & Harper, 2014). Therefore, the primary focus was on identifying the climate for these particular groups, although attention was paid to other categories as well. This focus, along with the relative brevity of positive responses, means that this report emphasizes negative experiences and interactions. Readers should be cautioned that the findings set forth are not necessarily representative of the whole College, or even a majority. Individuals appeared more likely to give more extensive responses when their experiences were negative. It is therefore possible that these findings only represent a small subset of the College. Nevertheless, they should not be ignored or discarded, but treated as serious issues that have impacted many faculty, staff, and students.

Reliability and validity are more difficult to establish in qualitative analyses, given that replicability is more challenging. Several of the most widely used measures, such as member-checking, are not applicable in this case. However, the popular strategy of triangulation, the act of comparing responses to one another for commonalities (Carter et al., 2014), was highly effective. Thus, while confident statements about generalizability cannot be made, there is good reason to believe that these findings are representative of a number of people who took the survey. In what follows, the major themes will be set forward using particularly relevant examples from the responses.

Students

Many students in the College of Natural Science at MSU report positive opinions of their education, with one even saying, “The college of natural science has been one of the most inviting and exciting programs I have been involved in at MSU.” Others describe College atmosphere as “supportive” and the professors as “some of the nicest professors I have ever met.” One student reports that “my professors really seem to care about the students.” A student with disabilities reported having a “great experience” in requesting accommodations. However, a number of the respondents note that they are “privileged” in one way or another, whether because they are white, male, or both. Only one person of color, a self-identified “Black woman”, describes an overall positive experience. As one respondent explained, “some areas the climate is good and in some it is not,” and many students experience what might be considered a normal phenomenon of enjoying some classes and not others. Unfortunately, there are far more detailed and numerous examples of negative experiences from both undergraduate and graduate students.

Graduate students

An extremely common response from graduate students was a feeling of being taken for granted by their departments and the College. One graduate student said they were “seen as cheap, expendable labor”, while another said graduate students are “generally not respected by many faculty members.” In one graduate student’s words, “mental health is basically ignored,” leading to a great deal of stress and even departure. As an example, another student related that they “have never felt more depressed and down about myself as an individual until I came to graduate school.” Faculty and lab supervisors “dump unnecessary loads of work onto graduate students,” with one student saying, “the bar is set much higher where you have to sacrifice your

health mental and physical in order to achieve what your PI and the college want.” Some students feel they have no guidance on how to “advance or progress through graduate school”. Yet, there is a “lack of options for us...to give feedback about how we’re being mentored by our mentor PIs.” Even among graduate students, there appears to be a “hierarchy,” with Master’s students placed below PhD students in importance. Other responses give examples of specific instances where they felt devalued by their PIs or advisors for what seem to be trivial reasons, although the anonymized nature of the responses makes it impossible to pinpoint individual offenders in most cases.

Beyond these general statements regarding the environment for graduate students, many also describe specific instances of racism, sexism, and prejudice that raise cause for concern. Unfortunately, the College appears to suffer some of the same issues regarding sexism that most STEM programs experience, with one male graduate student noting that “there are no women employed in our lab.” Another graduate student describes a “very masculine culture,” where faculty frequently make jokes, “at the expense of women.” One female graduate student recommended training for faculty and supervisors using the following examples from her own experience: “it is not appropriate to reference a female student's menstrual cycle, to comment on her appearance, or to ask to take her photograph for personal use.” Another student described a situation where “my male PI faced sexual harassment allegations, I was removed from the research lab because I was a girl while male students were allowed to remain.” Several graduate students, while not experiencing these issues themselves, relate that they have observed or heard of similar such issues.

Similarly, graduate Students of Color struggle to find acceptance and be taken seriously in their studies. One student of color described a situation where “My lab mate is recognized for

their achievements...in the department newsletter while NONE of mine were,” going on to say that “I am always made to feel like I only got into this college because of ‘affirmative action.’” Another Black student stated that “People of color are not treated with the same amount of respect in the department, especially in lab settings.” One student feels as if they were only admitted in order to make the program feel more diverse, but that the faculty do not believe they are actually capable. Many respondents partially attribute this negative climate to a “complete lack of professors of color,” with some saying that they have never had a professor of color in their time at MSU. These students feel that the College of Natural Science has a responsibility to address these problems.

Undergraduate students

Undergraduate students express many of the same issues as graduate students, if not in even stronger terms. Several students went as far as to say they “hated the College of Natural Science” and “MSU as a whole.” Like graduate students, undergraduates often experience racism and sexism from faculty and peers, with one saying that the College “is not a very welcoming space for minority students.” An African American student said that their opinions are “devalued by my peers and professor.” A female student reported being “removed [from her lab] because my male PI was facing sexual harassment allegations.” Numerous respondents used the word “condescending” to describe the treatment they have received from faculty and TAs. Multiple students also feel they “cannot go to anyone with...mental health issues” for fear of being looked down upon or not taken seriously.

In addition to sexism, racism, and other biases, many undergraduate students also feel that they are not valued by faculty or staff. Numerous students expressed the sense that they were “just a number” in the system. One student said, “The professors here don’t actually care about

the students or our education.” Another expressed that “some professors belittle you if you ask a question or don’t understand something that their 20+ years of studying know.” There were many examples of specific instances where professors singled out a student in class, questioned their abilities, or refused to provide assistance. Some students also expressed dissatisfaction with their TAs, feeling that their training or grading was inconsistent.

A number of undergraduate students also expressed difficulties managing the financial costs specific to the College of Natural Science. For example, a student in one department has struggled with the requirement to complete an internship, while also working full time to pay for living expenses. In their words, “I explained this to my advisor and they did not show or have any compassion for me whatsoever.” Other students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have echoed this sentiment, with one saying, “I’ve found a large disparity in treatment when it comes to finances.” One student reported being told by a College administrator that they should “go to community college if [they] cannot afford to attend university.” This issue may be exacerbated by difficulty in finding opportunities, with some students indicating that they know there are internships and lab positions out there, but are uncertain how to find them.

Hostility Towards Diversity Initiatives

A significant subset of responses, mainly from students, demonstrated a high degree of dissatisfaction with efforts to diversify the College. One student exemplifies this attitude, saying “I do not think it is moral nor fair to actively seek students of different race, sex, religion or any other physical or nonphysical characteristic that has no relation to their cognitive abilities.” This student, and a number of others, are under the belief that the push to diversify is antithetical to a meritocratic collegiate environment. Another student expressed the belief that Non-White students can “skate through.” There appeared to be some who were under the impression that

there were more opportunities for Students of Color than the majority. One in particular used the example of several research programs, such as the Summer Research Opportunities Program (SROP), apparently unaware that not all of these programs are specific to Students of Color. It is important that the College make an effort to clarify these misunderstandings and emphasize the value of a diverse student body for everyone.

Faculty

Several faculty members expressed satisfaction with their time in the College in their responses to the survey. One of the most effusive reported that “I generally feel that I've been treated extremely well by CNS and the members of it.” Several were particularly complimentary of their department chairs, saying, “Our chair is amazing and very supportive,” as well as “My department chair is very understanding and accepting and overall great.” Another faculty member noted that there have been many positive changes in the College’s culture with the new dean and administration. However, as with students, the balance of responses leans towards the negative.

Many of the faculty who took part in the survey expressed the feeling that the College administration was not interested in faculty input. One faculty member said that “The biggest problems in CNS have stemmed from a small group with ‘dean’ in their title.” Several other respondents also described conflicts with either the current or former leadership. A faculty member said they were treated “horribly” during their tenure promotion, while another said all interactions with the dean’s office have been “negative and condescending.” One faculty member considered bringing legal charges against the College based on their treatment from senior College leadership. One respondent posited that “it never occurred to leadership how to negotiate a win-win solution that would satisfy both parties.” It is worth noting, however, that

many of these respondents expressed their hope that the current administration would be less hostile and more inclusive, indicating an opportunity for the College to rebuild faith with the faculty.

That being said, there are wider issues within the climate that have less to do with leadership. A number of fixed-term faculty members described a stratified environment that devalues their work relative to their tenure track colleagues. The issue was summed up as “Fixed-term faculty and academic specialist are not treated with the same respect as tenure stream faculty.” Most fixed-term respondents point towards a sense of superiority on the part of tenure track faculty that creates a sense of disparity. One fixed-term faculty blames the “inherent power disparity” between the two groups. A particularly egregious example was summed up as “one fixed term male faculty member often calls me ‘kiddo’ even though we both have PhDs and are the same age.” Unfortunately, this dynamic is reflective of a common issue within higher education.

Staff

Unlike other groups, there were far fewer self-identified responses from staff members in the College, meaning that there are fewer insights to be gained. Two staff respondents expressed a high level of appreciation for the College, with one saying that “the College of Natural Science is far better than many other areas.” On the other hand, there appears to be conflict between staff and faculty, as one employee describes, “As staff, there are some that don't understand your value to the organization or your expertise.” Another echoed the sentiment, recommending that “The college should not judge the work staff does until they thoroughly understand position details.” Overall, the sentiment is that staff are considered “lower value” relative to faculty. One

staff member went as far as to say, “I would not recommend [the College] as a place to work and grow a career.”

International Community Members

It is worth noting that international community members at all levels of the College face their own unique challenges as a result of their citizenship status. One student related that other students and faculty “assumed I would not be able to communicate well in English, therefore they often ignore, or put less weight into my efforts.” Similarly, international faculty describe biases, such as the following: “I am never selected on their review committees and get pressured into accepting their opinions about what should be included on Reappointment-Promotion-Tenure bylaws.”

Reporting Mechanisms

Regardless of their place in the College, respondents expressed a nearly universal distrust of reporting mechanisms when prompted. One individual summed up the general attitude towards reporting thusly, “Nobody trusts the Office of Institutional Equity to properly investigate things.” Many people choose not to report bias incidents because they “do not think the university would do anything if an incident was reported.” Other individuals do not report incidents due to a “fear of retaliation,” whether from colleagues, teachers, or the administration. One graduate student explained that “any criticism towards [my] advisor can literally ruin my professional career” because, as another student pointed out, “it is easy to figure out who the reporter is.” This sentiment was echoed by several other students, who said “we feel that reporting such behavior by the PIs and other faculty feels too risky. We don't have any way to ensure that it won't cause more trouble down the road.” These fears do not appear entirely unfounded, as one respondent said, “I was even threatened with disciplinary action for filing a

complaint about bullying...despite the fact I had documented incidents.” Another said that after reporting issues once, “I was isolated within my unit and received a poor performance review.” Even in instances where there was no retaliation, several respondents reported that “no action was taken,” or that the issue was “handled at the lab level and never went further.” In the end, some have been told to simply, “let it go.”

Perhaps more troubling, a reasonably significant number of respondents indicated that they “had no idea you could report such things or how to possibly do that when bias/discriminatory behavior occurred.” One student summed up the general issue, saying, “I have never heard of the reporting system that was referenced. I would like to know what it is, how it works, and how it fixes the issues of bias that we encounter. There needs to be more transparency in policy.” Another individual said, “I would have reported this [incident] but I don't know how.” These responses indicate a pressing need for the College to make reporting processes clearer for students, faculty, and staff.

Conclusion

This survey has revealed areas of concern and potential improvement regarding the College of Natural Sciences climate. Like many other institutions of higher education, the College struggles to make women and Students of Color feel comfortable in their studies. Many have reported instances of both subtle and overt discrimination from peers, staff, and faculty. The hostility some students displayed towards diversity initiatives may contribute to an unpleasant climate for historically underrepresented groups. In the case of employees, divisions between tenure-track faculty, fixed-term faculty, staff, and administration have built a highly stratified, distrustful environment. However, these findings should be taken with the caveat that survey methodology is vulnerable to selection biases. While the respondents’ experiences should

be treated seriously, it is difficult to say whether these issues are endemic to the College as a whole.

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