

MIT Political Science Graduate Climate Survey: General Findings

In this report, we discuss the gender-related results of the graduate student climate survey, fielded at the MIT Political Science Department in March 2018. The design of this survey was informed by a focus group with 15 graduate students, where participants were asked to reflect on gender issues at the department. In the first section, we talk about quantitative findings, including results from questions about the general climate at the department, activities such as speaking in class and non-academic tasks, mentorship, and finally behaviors such as unwanted personal comments and sexual harassment. In the second section, we summarize findings from open-ended questions about gendered experiences with students and faculty, and about the department's approach to inclusiveness and well-being.

Results of this survey are based on 57 survey responses out of a population of 67 current Political Science graduate students. 29 male and 21 female students answered the survey, and 7 respondents declined to indicate their gender.

Quantitative findings

Department climate

Questions on the survey about the general climate at the department paint an encouraging picture.¹ Most students give positive or strongly positive evaluations of the overall climate at the department. 96% of students either “agree” or “strongly agree” that students at the department treat each other with respect. 66% of students say the opportunities for female graduate students are at least as good as those for male students. And 82% “agree” or “strongly agree” that faculty and staff at the department care about gender issues.

These results are reinforced by two findings from open-ended questions. First, even when reporting negative gendered experiences with individual fellow students, many students mentioned that they felt the overall climate is one of professionalism and mutual respect. Second, when asked about gendered experiences with faculty and staff, many of the male students and some female students reported having had no gendered experiences, or only reported positive gendered experiences.

Non-academic tasks

The first set of questions about gendered topics on the survey were about how often students of different genders engage in non-academic tasks: planning social events, maintaining the office space, and doing administrative tasks for group projects (see Figure 1). Responses are about the Fall 2017 semester. Results show that there is limited disparity between genders in social planning: women are only somewhat more likely than men to plan an event. The disparity between genders in helping to maintain spaces are striking: far more female than male students report doing this more than once. Gender differences in administrative tasks are less clear: women are more likely to report doing this either very often or not at all.

Speaking in seminars and talks

The climate survey included a number of questions about speaking in classes and talks. Gender differences are rather small across the board, but some of the results are unexpected. In class, female students report raising

¹Note that in the survey, these general questions were asked at the very end, in order to avoid priming students by explicitly referring to gender.

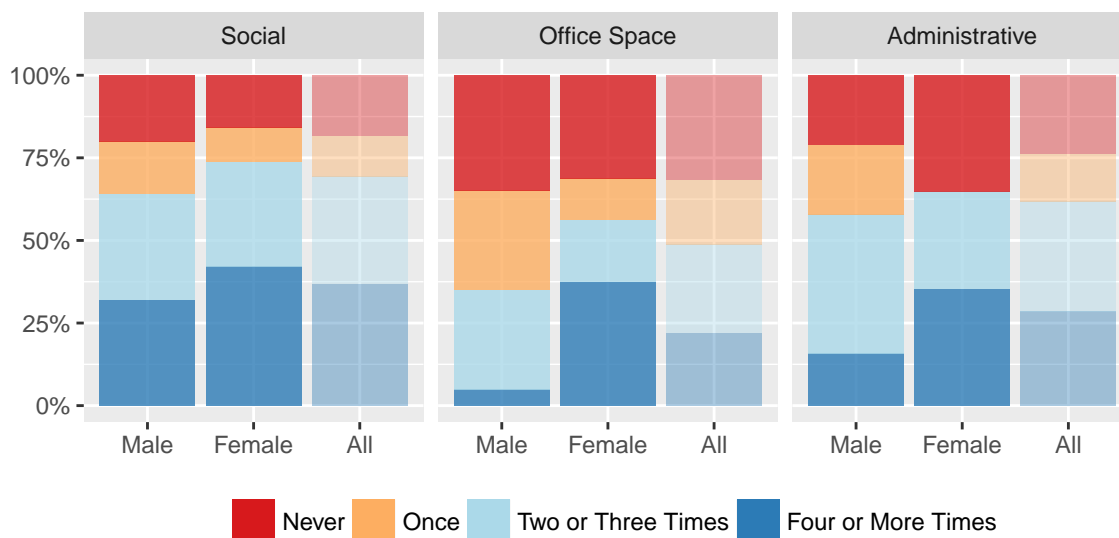


Figure 1: Taking on non-academic tasks in Fall 2017. n=55-56.

their hand somewhat more often than male students (67% of women report doing this four or more times per class, versus 56% of men). Male students, in turn, report being called on far more often, though being called on is a much rarer experience for both genders than speaking up spontaneously (for 35% of women it happens at least once per class, versus 72% of men). Most male students (20%) report being interrupted at least once per class, while fewer female students had the same experience (5%). Finally, there are no notable gender differences in how often students say they ask questions or more comments are talks by outside speakers. About 65% students of both genders say they do this at least once per talk.

Open-ended questions reveal some of the reasons why students speak at different rates. One student writes that they talk less than others because they only speak once they have their comment fully formulated in their mind. A few students note that all of their answers reflect a lot of variation across settings. For example, some students are shier about speaking in larger groups, and others remark that they get interrupted more in small classes and student-led sessions (as opposed to classes). One student notes that women seems to get interrupted more when the discussion is about a topic that women are perceived to be less qualified to comment on. Conversely, a male student reports that a professor explicitly asked him to contribute after a female student had talked, because of their genders.

Mentorship

Next, the survey asked students to report a number of experiences related to one-on-one mentorship relationships with faculty (once again referring to the Fall 2017 semester). There are no striking gender differences in the way faculty encourage students to take a number of professional steps, including submitting a paper to a journal or conference, or attending a conference without being part of a session (see Figure 2). However, female students report being introduced to someone in a faculty member's professional network more often than men do. This may help to counter the effect of majority-male academic networks in some subfields, which some students flagged as a problem.

Another set of questions asked students how often a faculty member brought up a number of non-academic topics with them in one-on-one exchanges (see Figure 3). For some of the topics, there is no clear gendered pattern: this includes career plans, work-life balance, and "other topics" (which students took to include small talk and conversations about academia in general). Women report that faculty bring up mental health with them somewhat more than men. Overall, it is relatively rare for students to be approached by faculty about any of these topics. For example, only about a third of students had a faculty member bring up the topic of mental health with them. Across topics, open-ended follow up questions showed that the conversations that

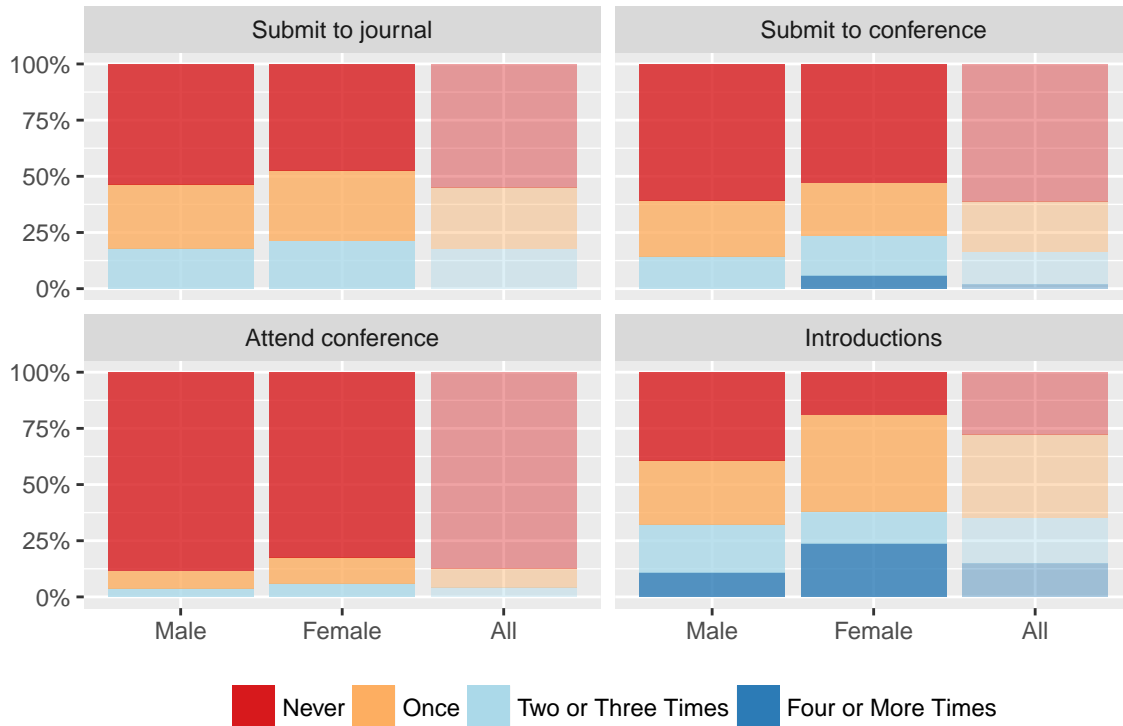


Figure 2: Faculty encouraging students to take professional steps, in Fall 2017. n=55.

students were reporting on in these questions were sometimes conversations that they had actually started themselves.

Far more striking are the gender differences in what topics students are comfortable broaching with faculty. We asked students whether they would be comfortable bringing up (with at least one faculty member) the same topics as above: mental health, work/life balance, and career plans (see Figure 4). Women report feeling significantly more comfortable speaking about all of these topics. Especially in the domain of work/life balance, the difference is remarkable. These results are important given that earlier findings suggest that students, not faculty, typically start conversations about these issues. It means that men and women end up having very different experiences being mentored on topics outside of the content of their work.

Open-ended questions show that both men and women feel particularly hesitant about bringing up careers outside of academia. When students feel comfortable talking about mental health or work/life balance, it is often because the faculty member has signaled being concerned with that topic in general, or because they have talked about facing similar issues themselves. Conversely, a student mentions that they would not bring up mental health with any faculty member, because in their first semester a professor mentioned in class that students should go to their family and friends with mental health issues instead. In sum, it seems that signaling from faculty sets the tone for students.

Unwanted comments

Because the preparatory focus group pointed out potential issues with unwanted comments, the survey included questions about two types of comments: about someone's appearance, and about their personal life. We asked separately about comments from students, staff and faculty, again limiting the question to experiences from Fall 2017 (see Figure 5). It appears that unwanted comments are a fairly rare occurrence for students of both genders. When they happen, they seem to come from fellow students far more often than they come from staff or faculty. They also happen to women far more often than to men.

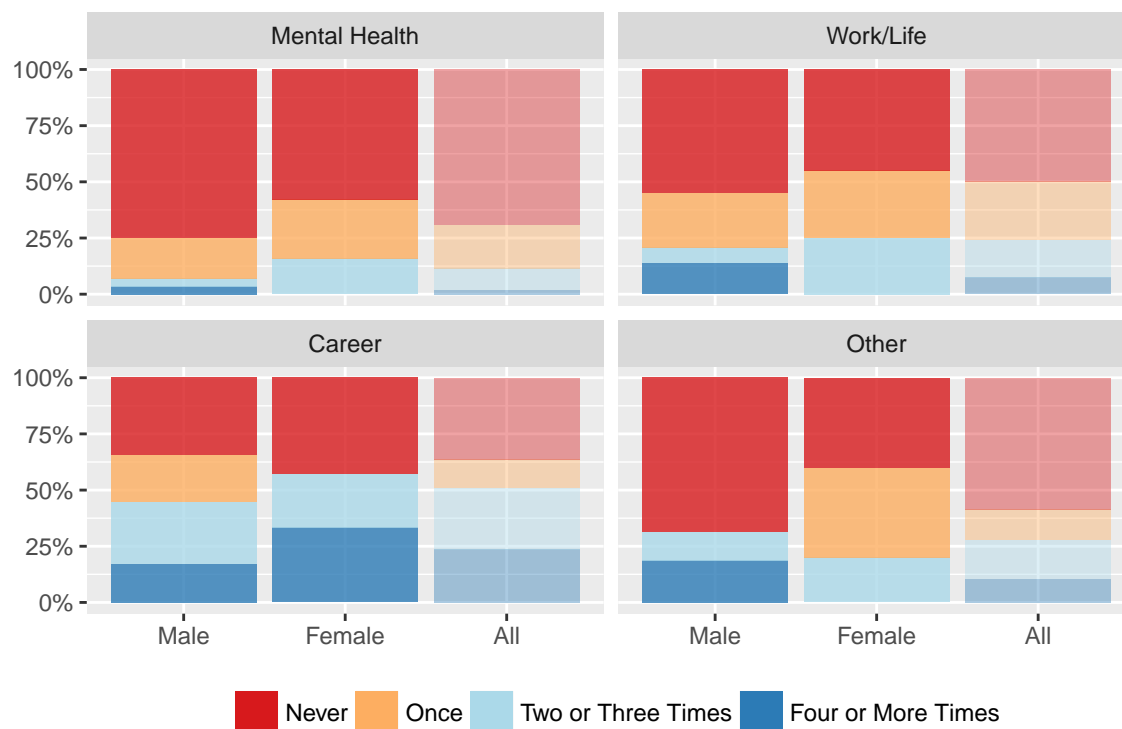


Figure 3: Faculty bringing up non-academic topics with students. n=55.

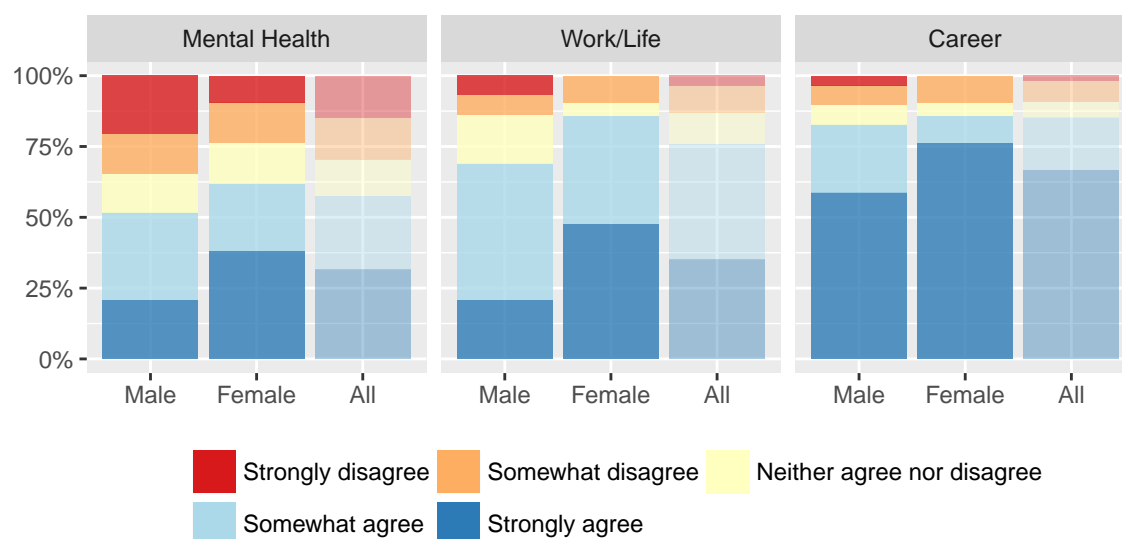


Figure 4: Students feeling comfortable bringing up non-academic topics with at least one faculty member. n=54.

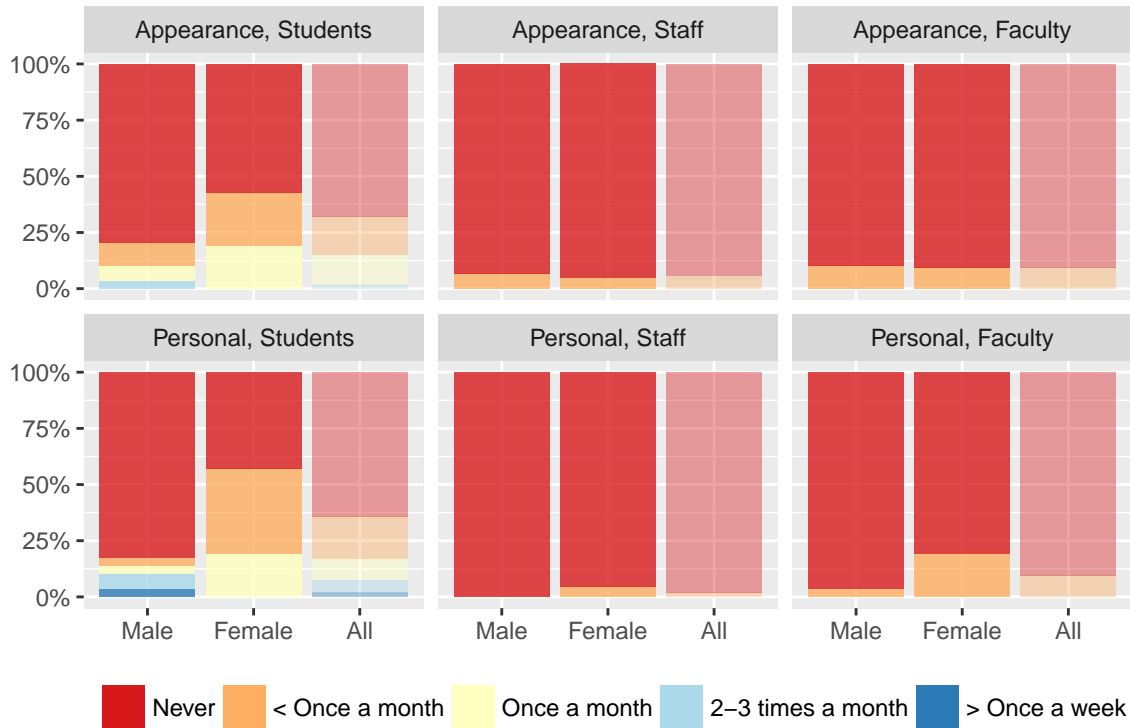


Figure 5: Unwanted comments about students' appearance and personal life, from students, staff and faculty, in Fall 2017. n=53.

Both types of remarks are about equally common: 34% of students reported having gotten unwanted comments about their appearance, whereas 36% reported comments about their personal life. On the topic of personal life, unwanted remarks are most often about dating: out of 18 students who received such remarks, 13 mentioned dating as a topic. One student noted that unsolicited advice on family planning was particularly unwelcome. However, not all comments and questions about students' personal life are unwanted. Students also mention that they enjoy feeling close to one another, and for some, that includes sharing personal experiences.

Hostile workplace experiences

We asked students to report four types of gendered behaviors that would contribute to a hostile work environment:

- Making sexist remarks or jokes about women
- Making sexist remarks or jokes about men
- Making inappropriate comments about someone's body, appearance or attractiveness
- Suggesting or implying that women don't have to meet the same intellectual standards that men do in order to get into MIT

We asked students whether they had experienced these behaviors at the Political Science department, either from students or from faculty (see Figure 6). We see a notable gender imbalance: 16 out of 25 women reported having one or more of these experiences, compared to 10 out of 25 men.

Two types of comments were a rather common experience among graduate students. 48% of students report having heard sexist remarks about women, and 42% say they heard others comment on their or another person's body or appearance. Open-ended responses suggest that these comments tend to come from men. These and other "hostile environment" behaviors overwhelmingly come from fellow students, though 5 students

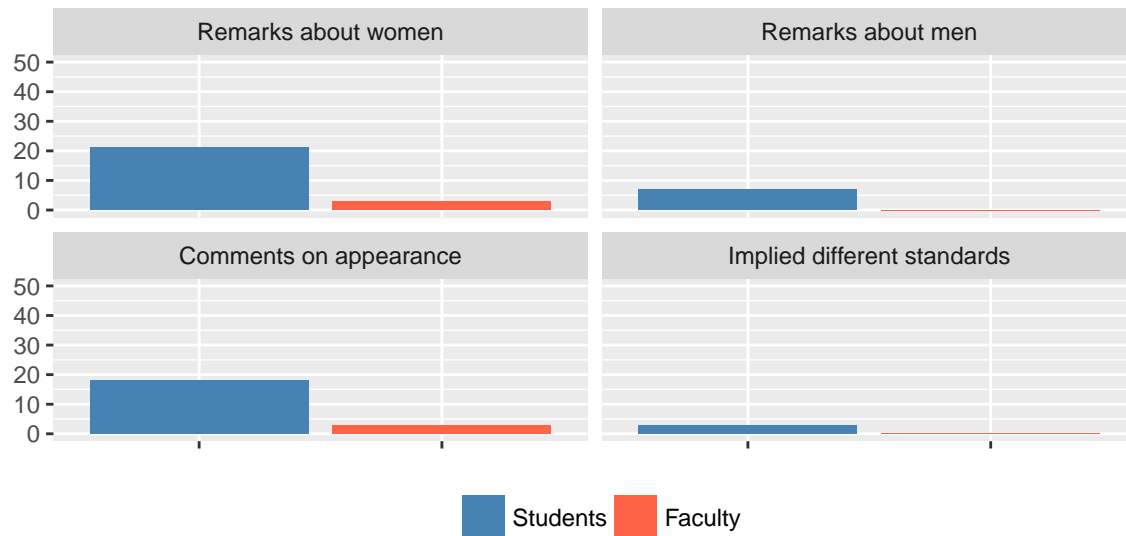


Figure 6: Number of students who experienced types of hostile workplace behaviors. n= 50 .

reported experiencing one or more of these behaviors with faculty.

Sexual harassment

Finally, we asked students about five types of behavior that would fall under the definition of sexual harassment (“such unwelcome sexually determined behavior as physical contact and advances, sexually colored remarks, showing pornography and sexual demands, whether by words or actions”, according to the UN²). The behaviors are:

- Saying crude or gross sexual things, trying to get someone to talk about sexual matters when they did not want to
- E-mailing, texting, or messaging offensive sexual jokes, stories, or pictures
- Telling someone about one’s own sexual experiences when they did not want to hear them
- Repeatedly asking someone on dates, to go to dinner, or get a drink even after they have said no
- Bribing someone with any sort of reward if they agree to engage in a romantic or sexual relationship

Once again, we asked students whether they had experienced these behaviors at the Political Science department, either from students or from faculty. Reports of sexual harassment came exclusively from women: 9 out of 25 women reported any experiences of sexual harassment, compared to 0 out of 25 men.

Most of these types of experiences are rare, and behaviors that were reported came from fellow students far more often than they came from faculty. 5 students reported unwanted sexual talk from fellow students, and 3 said that other students had told them unwanted stories about sexual experiences. One student reported (a) faculty member(s) talking to them about sex when they did not want to. Students did not report any instances of offensive sexual messages, being asked out repeatedly, or attempts at bribing them into a relationship.

²<http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/gencomm/generl19.htm>

Qualitative findings

Qualitative findings on gendered experiences

The survey asked students to share the gendered experiences they have had at the department, either positive or negative, and either with faculty and staff or with other students. Among the positive experiences related to faculty and staff, female students highlight empathy with women dealing with family issues. However, some students feel that verbal empathy and support on those issues does not always correspond to actions. Female students also say they received support on family issues from other female students in the department. More generally, students include among their positive gendered experiences the invitation of female speakers and the informal networks of support among women. Students also report that the department offers a friendly environment for gay students.

Regarding negative gendered experiences related to faculty and staff, a female student reports that a faculty member implied some women were chosen for TAs not based on their merits, but because of a need to show gender balance. Another student recalls a male faculty member suggesting male students to get married soon so as to have someone to care about family and housework and be able to focus more on work. A female student, finally, feels that travel policies are sometimes unequally applied, and that female students are asked to meet more safety requirements than male students for similar destinations.

Negative gendered experiences more often involved students. Female students report male students implying that they are only in grad school to find a partner, even during classes. They also feel that some male students have condescending attitudes toward women. Some female students feel they have to more actively prove what they know, as they are assumed to know less than their male colleagues. Similarly, female quant TAs reported some hostility, especially from male students and not only during recitations, but also in comments of problem sets. Conversely, a male student says that he feels that any criticism or disagreement with a woman in the department will be read as gender bias. Other experiences include men making jokes and inappropriate comments about women. One female student recalls a male student repeatedly telling other female students that he wanted to see them drunk and how that made them uncomfortable drinking in department events.

Finally, students also report gendered experiences they do not classify as either good or bad. For example, they find that male faculty are more likely to joke with male students, and that same-gender students socialize more with each other.

What the department does and what the department could do³

Students were also asked about what they think the Political Science department does or could reasonably do to ensure a positive experience for all graduate students in the department. The answers mainly dealt with four topics: academic issues, organization and administrative issues, interpersonal relations, work-life balance and mental health, and gender and diversity.

Academic issues

Among the things the department is already doing, students highlight that “the high-touch of the faculty and student collaboration is great. The class selection is great. The workshops are generally great”. They also appreciate being encouraged to make a positive difference in the world. However, students also feel that faculty members could do more to help students build ‘soft skills’ as teamwork, presentation skills or time management. Also, students think that faculty could be made “even more aware of the fact that students differ in shyness, and that people who have equally interesting comments or questions to make in a class

³This report includes only a summarized version of the answers to these questions. A more complete version is available upon request and has been shared with the department.

or talk may not be equally likely to raise their hand (and keep it raised if they weren't called on)". Finally, students would like more clarity about the expectations on general exams.

Organization and Administrative issues

Perceptions of the department staff are generally quite positive; one student writes that "the staff are fantastic". They feel that the department could "be more communicative in the summer regarding finances, scheduling, etc". Students also think that "greater access to internal policies, procedures, and standards in a published or posted form would be extremely helpful, and take the burden off some of the staff to answer questions or correcting student ignorance". Similarly, some students think the department should make the students' rights as students clearer and more publicly available.

Interpersonal Relations

"The culture of the department encourages students to form strong bonds with each other, to contribute to each other's efforts, and to help everyone succeed". This is one of the most common positive characteristics mentioned by students. Respondents also appreciate the efforts to encourage community building among first years (such as having a common office, shared compulsory classes, and assignments to work in groups).

There is still room for improvement, though. Students suggest "training for faculty members about mentoring best-practices" and implementing measures to ensure more regular contact between students and advisors (for instance, by asking for monthly meetings). Another suggestion is "training for faculty members about how to identify excessive imbalances in commenting in seminars and how to bring it into greater balance". One student suggests that "seminar instructors could ask students to prepare in advance at least one specific comment on a reading, and then call on that student specifically, to ensure more balanced participation". Somewhat related, a student suggests that "moderators / those who introduce speakers at talks could politely announce at the outset that there is a norm against interrupting, as well as asking questions of a non-clarifying nature in the middle of presentations". Moreover, students think that we should reconsider norms about aggressive commenting styles. Finally a student thinks that "faculty should intervene a little bit more for those in the department who are not behaving very well" towards their fellow students in class.

Work-Life Balance and Mental Health

Students think that "there is a very strong commitment by department administrative staff to the well-being and professional lives of students". They think, as well, that "the student-to-student discussions at the beginning of the year about work-life balance, gendered experiences, etc. is very important, and should be expanded upon".

Students also appreciate that some professors directly addressing these issues in class. However, they think that more could be done to "encourage faculty to mention both types of issues at the beginning of the semester in class, and/or to mention them in one-on-one meetings". Another student writes that "there could also be a broader culture that accepts that studies and professional development are not all of who we are; [allowing] us to treat others as more than just fellow students, and [...] ourselves as people first and students second."

Gender and Diversity

Many female students feel that the annual Women in Political Science dinner is "helpful in feeling connected to other women at the department", especially across subfields. Others suggested that more could be done to increase the gender balance in some subfields. One student thinks that an event aimed at women or minorities during the Open House could be useful. Finally, students think that the department could raise more awareness around diversity issues.