

Diversity and Inclusion in Northwestern University's
Graduate Psychology Department:
An Exploratory Report

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Graduate Student Diversity and Inclusion Committee
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Diversity and Inclusion Committee Mission Statement

The Northwestern Psychology Graduate Student Diversity and Inclusion Committee addresses issues of both representational and research-oriented inclusion and diversity. We are responsive to the needs of Northwestern graduate students and the needs of the field. Through collaboration with students, faculty, and staff, we aspire to create a thriving community based on mutual respect, authenticity, and influential scholarship.

Our goals are to continually improve upon departmental transparency and accountability practices using a data-driven approach; to encourage and facilitate a culture of inclusion, safety, respect, exploration, and mutual understanding; and to provide resources and support for students and for initiatives in pursuit of inclusion and diversity goals.

Report Abstract

The Northwestern Psychology Graduate Student Diversity and Inclusion Committee presents the results of our first exploratory survey of the department's graduate students with regards to diversity and inclusion issues. We hope that this report will generate dialogue, feedback, and action within the department, and we look forward to collaborating with our colleagues to pursue our mission.

Students agreed that the department needs to be concerned about issues of diversity and inclusion, but expressed less unanimity about whether the department was currently acting effectively. Students said the most important areas of representational diversity were race & ethnicity, economic status, gender, and sexual orientation. Students reported experiencing or witnessing discrimination within the department itself. In matters of financial need, students feel they can meet their basic needs, but many feel unable to pursue professional development.

Students expressed considerable interest in diversifying research methodology, including pursuing research with non-WEIRD populations, interdisciplinary collaboration, developing expertise in mixed and qualitative methods, and involving members of study populations in the research team. This included interest in having these goals addressed in coursework, Advancement of Research Expertise (ARES), and visiting speakers. Despite this interest in diverse research methodology, students reported a lack of support for this kind of work. We expand on these findings below.

Background

The psychology department at Northwestern University has a stated aim of promoting “diversity and cultural competence in research, teaching, professional training, and representation among faculty and students.”¹ This specific aim exists within a larger university commitment to diversity.² In January 2016, the Psychology Graduate Student Council found that diversity and inclusion was of particular concern to students and put out a call to form a relevant committee. As a result, in spring 2016 our newly-formed committee conducted an exploratory survey seeking to identify concerns and opportunities related to diversity and inclusion within the department. We construed “diversity and inclusion” broadly, related to both representational and methodological diversity. The results of the survey, presented here, inform the Committee's recommendations, priorities, and aims.

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Respondents

Forty-two participants began the survey and 29 completed it. Within these numbers, some participants chose not to respond to particular sections. At the time, there were 63 graduate students in the department. Students from all years and all areas answered the survey, with a

¹ <http://www.psychology.northwestern.edu/diversity/>

² <http://www.tgs.northwestern.edu/documents/diversity/TGSDiversityReport2016.pdf>

concentration of early-program students, and students from the cognitive and social areas. In some cases we could compare our sample directly to demographics within the department, which it closely matched. The gender breakdown of our respondents was 29% male and 71% female, while the department's as a whole is 31% male and 69% female. The race and ethnicity breakdown of our respondents was 8% Asian, 4% Black, 19% Multiracial, and 69% White, while the department's as a whole is 9% Asian, 7% Black, 16% Hispanic, 3% Multiracial, 58% White, and 6% unreported. U.S. citizens were 89% of our respondents, while 11% were not citizens—within the department, 84% are citizens and 16% are not.³

In other cases, it wasn't possible to directly compare our sample demographics to the department. Respondents ranged in age from 23 to 34 years old ($M = 27$, $SD = 2.8$). The bulk of our respondents rated themselves as middle to upper-middle class relative to the U.S. population using the 10-point MacArthur scale of subjective socioeconomic status ($M = 6.57$, $SD = 1.53$). When asked about their sexual orientation, 79% of respondents self-identified as heterosexual while 21% identified as sexual minorities. While no direct departmental comparison point is available for sexual orientation, TGS reports that 11% of Northwestern graduate students overall identify as members of the LGBTQI community.⁴ Regarding religion, 21% identified as Christian, 7% identified as Jewish, 4% identified as following another religion (not Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist), 21% said they were agnostic, 21% said they were atheist, 21% said they were not religious, and 6% said they were spiritual but not religious. Regarding family, 58% of respondents have a long-term partner or spouse, 7% have a familial caretaking responsibility, and 7% have financially dependent family members (caretaking responsibility and dependent family members were not always overlapping).

97%

of respondents agreed that the department needs to be concerned about issues of diversity and inclusion

Reflecting a Need

The majority of participants agreed that the department needs to be concerned about issues of diversity and inclusion (68% strongly agree, 26% agree, 3% somewhat agree on a 7-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”). However, perceptions of whether the actions of the department reflect that concern were mixed: 9% strongly agreed that the department is acting in accordance with these concerns, 9% agreed, 47% somewhat agreed, 21% were unsure, and 15% disagreed. Overall, these results demonstrate that the department may be making an effort to encourage diversity and inclusion, but could improve communication about their current initiatives as well as take additional steps.

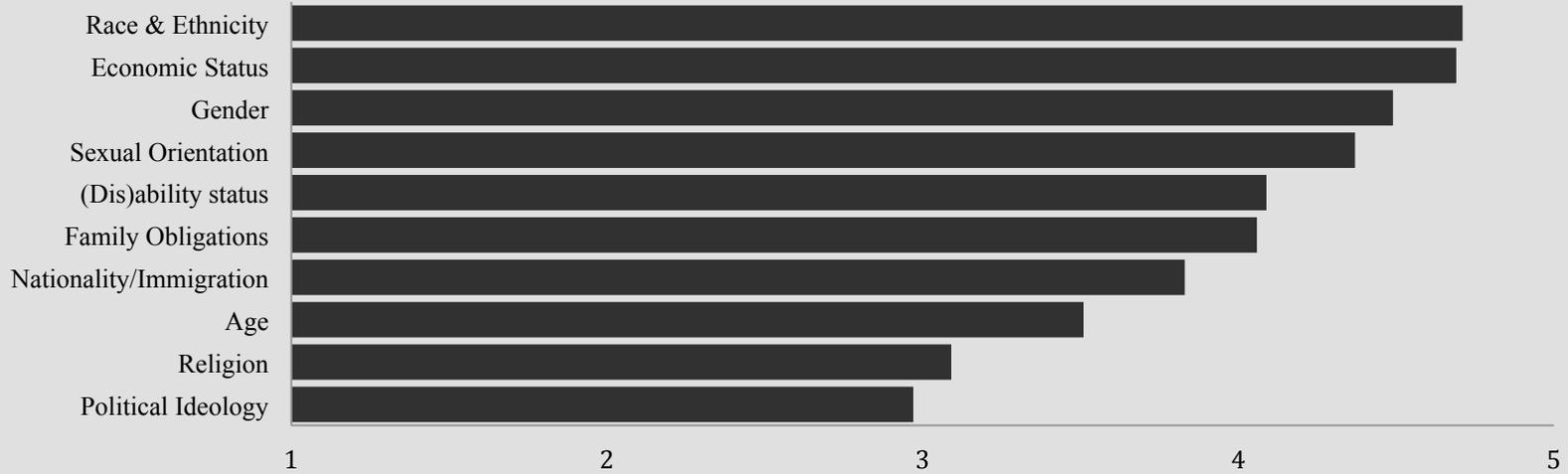
Importance and Action on Representational Diversity

Representational diversity was assessed for dimensions included in the department's definition of diversity: *race and ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, economic class, and (dis)ability status*. Due to their relevance in academic conversations about representation, we also assessed representational diversity for the dimensions of *familial obligations, immigration status,*

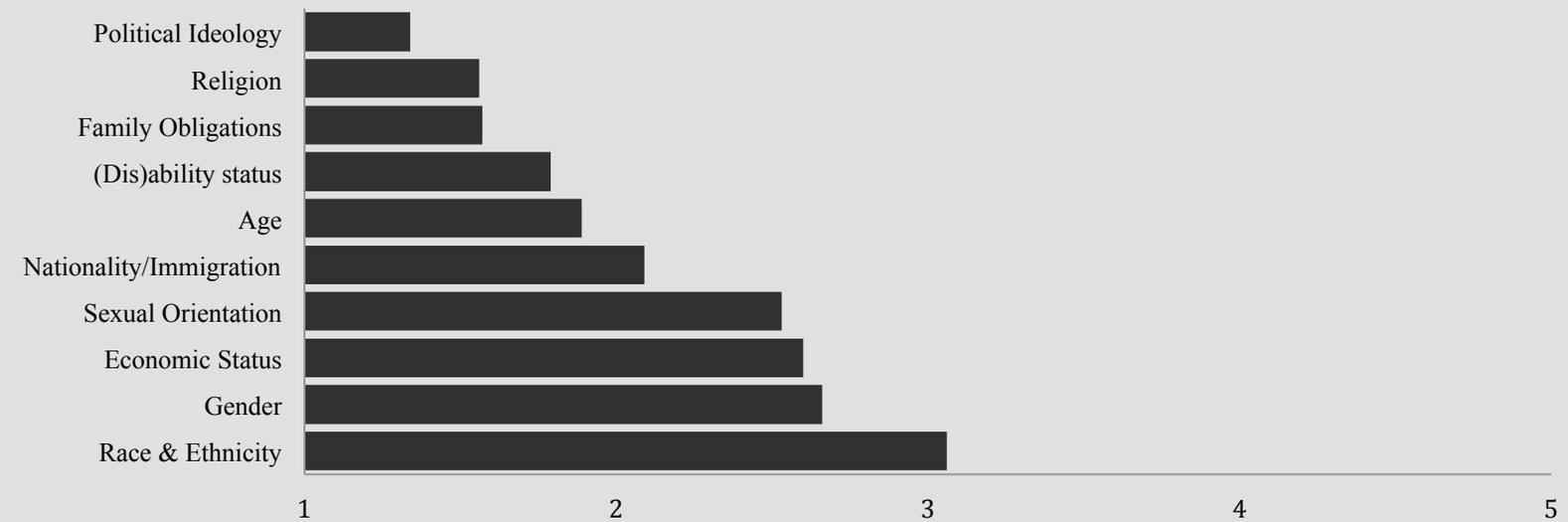
³ http://www.tgs.northwestern.edu/documents/program-statistics/P50PH_adm_enr.pdf

⁴ <http://www.tgs.northwestern.edu/documents/diversity/TGSDiversityReport2016.pdf>

religion, and political ideology. We asked students whether they thought it was important that the department attend to diversity and inclusion issues regarding each category on a 5-point scale from “not important” to “very important.”

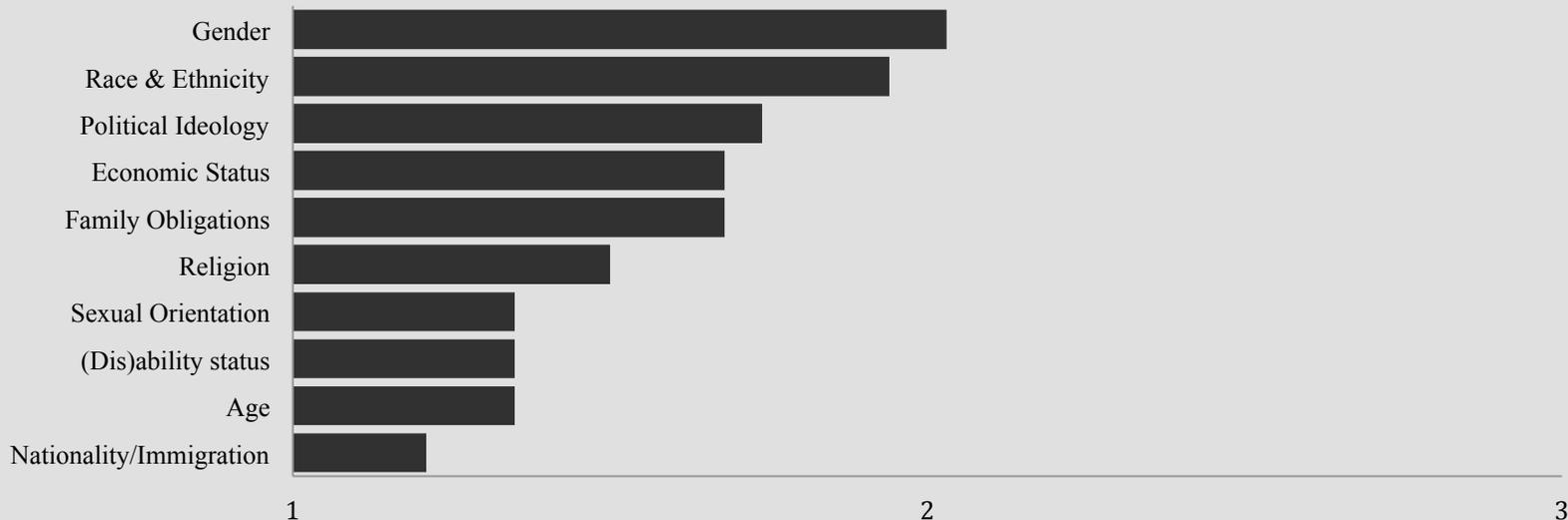


To capture whether students perceive the department to be acting on these issues, we asked students to rate departmental effort in each area, on a 5-point scale from “not at all” to “a great deal.”



Representational Discrimination

In addition to asking students about the importance of working to encourage representational diversity and inclusion, we also asked about observations of discrimination within the department as related to each social category. Frequencies of observed discrimination were reported on a 5-point scale from “never” to “daily.” The greatest frequency in observed discrimination was in relation to gender, with race and ethnicity as a close second.



For each case where a participant mentioned they had experienced or observed discrimination on the basis of a given category or identity, we asked for further description. Summaries of descriptions are below.

Gender (N = 12): Students reported a variety of forms of gender discrimination. Multiple respondents mentioned inequitable distribution of work, wherein women are assigned more administrative work than men. People also reported intrusive body commentary about women, including both that women are scrutinized for professional attire more than men and that there is an assumption that women (but not men) are more successful if they are attractive. This is also seen in the department’s continuing academia’s non-prioritization of families or other typically non-male goals.

Race + Ethnicity (N = 11): Students reported a damaging adherence to upper-middle-class white norms accompanied by demographic underrepresentation of many groups. Multiple microaggressions against members of underrepresented groups were reported, including but not limited to unequal application of academic standards, cutting off students of color while they are speaking, and a generally less friendly atmosphere towards people of color.

Political Ideology (N = 6): Students mentioned that the department does not seem open to conservative points of view, which is expressed via an implicit norm.

Family Obligations (N = 6): Students specifically referenced spouses not being welcome at departmental events and stigma about having children in graduate school. There was also mention of a departmental norm that taking family time is not worthwhile and detracts from research.

Religion (N = 4): Students referenced a general hostility towards religion in psychology as well as in scientific disciplines more broadly.

Sexual Orientation (N = 3): Students referenced off-color jokes and microaggressions as instances of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

(Dis)ability status (N = 3): Students referenced a general lack of discussion about (dis)ability status and related issues, as well as the sense that it is difficult for the department to make need-based accommodations.

Age (N = 3): Students referenced discrimination against younger students in the form of presumed ignorance as well as against older students in the form of presumed youth.

Nationality/Immigration Status (N = 0): No descriptions were provided.

Financial Matters

Because the effect of socioeconomic status on the pursuit of a graduate degree is directly related to financial support by the university, this topic had its own section. Almost all (97%) respondents indicated they could meet their daily needs, but only 33% indicated being able to afford to do sufficient professional development. While 32% of respondents reported receiving outside financial support of some kind (from parents, spouses, etc.), respondents overall were divided over whether outside financial support is an expectation in the program (48% agree, 16% neutral, 29% disagree). This is true even among students who do receive outside financial support (60% agree, 40% disagree). Additionally, 57% of graduate students think that financial status is a significant part of the culture in the department.

Diverse Research Methodology

In addition to representational diversity and associated concerns, the survey asked participants about their interest in diverse research methodology, defined as:

working with diverse research populations, including or consulting members of your target populations in decisions about research design and execution, using or developing mixed methods and qualitative methodology, and seeking collaboration with interdisciplinary partners inside and outside of academia.

We believe these practices fall well within the department's description of its diversity research initiatives.⁵ The broad picture of student responses is that they support and are interested in diverse methodology, but are not finding resources or support to do this kind of research within the department.

Students are particularly concerned about addressing the so-called WEIRD problem,⁶ or psychology's reliance on American undergraduate research populations—97% of participants agreed that this was an important issue that deserves more attention within the program. Most students—88%—are interested in interdisciplinary collaboration, 60% in working with diverse populations, 60% in developing mixed and qualitative methods, and 44% in including members of studied populations in the research team.

97%
of respondents agreed that psychology's reliance on American undergraduate research populations deserves more attention within the program

79%

of respondents are interested in taking courses related to research diversity

A full 79% of students are interested in taking courses related to research diversity. Regarding departmental home of such coursework, 43% of respondents indicated an interest in coursework related to research diversity both inside and outside of the department, while 30% would prefer classes inside psychology and 27% had no preference as to their hosting department. Addressing whether there should be specific courses related to research diversity or whether research diversity should be addressed in all classes, there were a variety of responses: 59% of respondents would like to see both specific diversity-research courses and diversity integrated into all courses, 25% want diversity integrated into all courses without specific diversity-research courses, and 16% prefer specific diversity-research courses without such issues integrated into all other courses. In response to the idea of a diversity science distribution requirement, 53% of students supported making a diversity science distribution requirement, while 31% were unsure, and 16% said they were not interested.

Department Climate

Students reported a variety of positive things that faculty members do in relation to diversity and inclusion: open conversation about issues of diversity, validation of questions and concerns related to diversity, pursuing or encouraging interdisciplinary interests, and advocating to other faculty for their students. They also pointed to several department strengths: recent faculty hires under the umbrella of Diversity Sciences, the Sneak Peek program, participation in TGS's Summer Research Opportunity Program (SROP), professors interested in research with minority groups, and professors who are from minority groups.

Students also pointed to several weaknesses of the department's approach to diversity and inclusion: lack of urgency and effort, and only partial support of diversity initiatives (e.g., fewer professors showing up to diversity science speakers than other colloquia).

⁵ <http://www.psychology.northwestern.edu/diversity/research.html>

⁶ Henrich, J., Heine, S.J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010). The weirdest people in the world? *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 33, 62–135.

Another element of department climate is perceived support for milestones, which may be particularly important to first-generation graduate students. Regarding milestone accomplishments, 62% of students felt they had adequate support for successfully achieving milestones (i.e., earning a Master's degree), yet only 31% felt the department adequately acknowledges and celebrates such accomplishments.

An important consideration facing graduate students in psychology today is whether to seek jobs inside or outside of academia, making professional training an increasingly important consideration for PhD programs. While 93% of students reported feeling that the department prepared them for academic jobs, only 31% indicated the same about preparation for non-academic jobs. This is particularly interesting given that, of graduates from our program from 2006–2016 who reported their first jobs out of graduate school, a full 27% were outside of academia.⁷

93% feel prepared
for academic jobs
31% feel prepared
for jobs outside
academia

Suggestions from Students

Students had the opportunity to suggest programming that would support the department's efforts towards diversity and inclusion. All respondents indicated support for at least one kind of meaningful interpersonal exchange. Ninety-three percent of respondents indicated support for meaningful exchange between graduate students in the department, 97% indicated support for meaningful exchange with graduate students and faculty, 59% for exchange with graduate and undergraduate students, and 83% for everyone within the department.

Suggestions for particular programming to address issues of diversity and inclusion included mentoring, workshops, calling attention to diversity issues within the department, facilitated dialogues, retreats, relevant ARES, symposia about diversity science and with diverse scientists, events to support students from underrepresented groups once they've arrived, and departmental resources to support students working with non-WEIRD populations.

Discussion

As we hoped, this survey illustrates *areas of both concern and opportunity*, while pointing toward ways that graduate student voices can be part of making Northwestern psychology a more inclusive and diverse environment. It is clear that students are concerned about diversity and inclusion, both in terms of representation and research. Reports of a lack of attention to these matters interact in a troubling way with research in a field that habitually fails to adequately represent diverse populations. Students are appreciative of current departmental efforts related to diversity: Sneak Peek, diversity science hires, involvement with TGS initiatives such as SROP, etc. Students are interested in expanded efforts toward building inclusion, such as dialogues and coursework devoted to relevant issues.

⁷ http://www.tgs.northwestern.edu/documents/program-statistics/P50PH_Placement.pdf

Conclusion and Aims

The results of our survey indicate that there is a strong need for the continued existence and action of the Diversity and Inclusion Committee, where *the Committee serves to identify, amplify, and make recommendations in response to student concerns and interests in collaboration with students, faculty, and administration of the department.* As a launching point, we have drafted a set of aims that we believe reflect the concerns, needs, and hopes of graduate students. We look forward to feedback on these statements and to working in partnership with the entire department to continue to create an inclusive, supportive environment for students' diverse personal identities and scientific pursuits. These aims are:

- 1) To ensure that the within-department complaint system for diversity and inclusion related issues—discriminatory or otherwise—is effective.
- 2) To continue and improve upon demographic tracking of applicants and accepted students.
- 3) To make university-level resources known to psychology students. For instance, students interested in community research might benefit from knowing about the Graduate Engagement Opportunity program, which reduces teaching load for students actively engaged in research with external groups.
- 4) To support the continued inclusion of diversity researchers in symposia and hosted talks.
- 5) To expand opportunities for meaningful exchange among students, staff, and faculty NU's psychology department.
- 6) To continue to serve as a conduit and advocating body for student interests and concerns related to diversity and inclusion.
- 7) To actively partner with the Faculty Diversity and Inclusion Committee to support the aims above and others.

Contact Us

For any questions, comments, concerns, or suggestions please e-mail us at nu.psychgrad.di@gmail.com.