

# Results of the UNM Biology Department BGSA DEI Student Climate Survey for Spring 2023

## Introduction

### Summary

In the spring of 2023, the BGSA DEI committee sent out an online survey to the BGSA e-mail list. The survey was designed and implemented by DEI committee members Liz Solis, Claire Doherty, Benjamin Garcia, and Austin Hendricks. This survey was originally inspired by two events on campus: the continuous removal and then defacement of LGBTQ+ pride flags in the Castetter basement, and the defacement of a graduate student's office door who had advocated for adding pronouns to the directory. The survey was then expanded to include other protected groups, including race and disability status. The central questions this survey sought to answer were:

- Do biology graduate students feel safe on campus?
  - ◆ If not, what circumstances make them feel unsafe?
- What interventions can we identify to improve safety and inclusion for biology graduate students on campus?

### Survey Design

The survey began with demographic questions that covered race, gender, and sexuality. We also asked if students were international, first-generation students, or if they identify as disabled. We then asked if students feel comfortable expressing their full identity on campus, in the department, and in their specific lab groups. Finally, the survey ended with four open-ended questions, including an opportunity to give feedback on the survey itself.

The survey was administered using a Google form connected to a private, non-UNM e-mail account managed by the DEI committee. We did not collect names, e-mail addresses, or IP addresses from respondents. The survey was distributed using the BGSA e-mail list.

We did not ask questions about graduate student stipends, housing, and general living conditions, given the Graduate Student Union is best positioned to tackle the issue of low stipends, and we have been following their leadership on this issue. However, we have still included any responses that relate to stipends or cost-of-living as this topic clearly weighs heavily on the graduate student community.

## Survey Interpretation

Because the majority of graduate students in this department identify as straight, white, and cisgender, we aggregated the results for race and sexuality to ensure anonymity and to not single out specific students. We are open to suggestions on how to consider these results in the future.

For open responses, we only included full comments that do not include identifying information. In these cases where information could be used to identify a respondent, we have either redacted or summarized that particular section.

## Demographics

In total, the survey had **32 anonymous respondents**. At the time of this analysis (summer 2023), there were 113 graduate students listed in the directory, meaning approximately **28% of Biology Department graduate students responded**.

Survey respondents were mostly women (59.4%), followed by men (25%), and non-binary people (12.5%). We further asked if respondents identified as non-binary or transgender, which was 18.8% of respondents. For sexuality, 34.3% of respondents identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer, and 56.3% identified as heterosexual. For race, 43.7% of respondents self-reported as either African American/Black, Asian American/Asian, Hispanic/Latino/a/e/x, Native American/Alaskan Native / Other / Not listed or multiple choices, and 53.1% identified as white. A quarter of respondents reported having or having had a disability.

## Recommendations

These recommendations are based on the results of this survey as well as issues identified by members of the DEI committee. We have split our recommendations into two groups: short-term goals that can be implemented in Fall and Spring 2023, and long-term goals. Many of the short-term goals are 'low-stakes' issues. This is intentional. We want to build a successful working relationship with faculty and administrators, using these small, easy to implement changes as a scaffold for more important requests. The long-term goals will require faculty cooperation and input, and many of these issues do not have easy or obvious answers. With this in mind, we are not setting a specific time frame for the implementation of these goals; however, we will be writing and publishing a progress report at the end of the academic year that covers each item listed. Members of the DEI committee met with department chair Dr. Takacs-Vesbach to discuss these recommendations on September 27. In light of this meeting, each recommendation also has a summary of the department's response or its current status.

This department must change.

Our survey results indicate the following interventions may help improve department climate and student outcomes.

The status of these items is as of **November 2023**.

### Short term

1. **Have at least one unlocked, gender-neutral bathroom on the first floor or in the basement of Castetter.** While many graduate students have access to the locked gender neutral bathrooms through their building key, we do not think bathroom access should depend on having keys at all, especially considering the long waits to get building keys for new students. This would have the added effect of increasing bathroom access to undergraduate students. We request the first floor or the basement to make sure these bathrooms are easily accessible to undergraduate and graduate students either taking classes or teaching.

**Status:** *Complete.* On October 17, Dr. Takacs-Vesbach sent out an e-mail announcing that two single stall bathrooms near the South entrance of the Castetter (room 1410 and 1412) have been unlocked.

**2. A list of what DEI-related trainings faculty are required to take, what those trainings cover, and which faculty are currently in compliance with required trainings.** This survey had multiple requests for faculty to receive more or better trainings on DEI issues. This will help us to identify areas that are not currently covered in the trainings that are already required.

**Status:** *In-progress.* Dr. Takacs-Vesbach reported that all faculty are up to date on required trainings, which includes the mandatory sexual harassment training.

**3. The PIBBS conference room should be available for booking under the same system as all other Castetter rooms.** PIBBS is the only space in the department that is, in theory, set aside as a communal space for graduate students. Currently, the booking system for PIBBS is the responsibility of Felisa Smith. We don't understand why a faculty member is being forced to do administrative work when all other bookings are covered by the front desk. This would simplify booking for both graduate students, and relieve a burden from Dr. Smith.

**Status:** *In-progress.* We are also investigating the use of other spaces.

**4. Update us on the status of the Graduate Student Handbook and give an explanation of delays.**

**Status:** *In-progress.* OGS has requested that the department update the handbook to reflect current OGS policies by the end of this academic year. To accommodate this request, the graduate coordinator, Tyler Clayshulte, has been put in charge of finishing the updates. The current timeline is that faculty will vote on the new handbook this semester.

**5. Upgrade Castetter to LoboID access in at least the main entrances.** There are repeated concerns of physical safety mentioned in this survey. LoboID access should provide a log of who has been in the building and at which hours, in addition to providing a security measure for the entire building. This could include the addition of cameras to key hallways.

**Status:** *In-progress.* Dr. Takacs-Vesbach has requested funding through a Capital Projects proposal that includes this amongst other updates for Castetter.

## Long term

### Funding

**Change the policy that means that international students can't TA in their first year.** This policy is discriminatory towards international students and cuts them off from the main source of funding in this department. We have made inquiries as to the origin of this policy and discovered this is not a requirement from UNM, but rather something unique to our department. We have already requested that at least one faculty meeting this fall semester include a training on how to properly on-board international students and what documentation is needed for them to work as teaching assistants.

**Status:** *In-progress.* Tyler Clayshulte has said he will not enforce this policy, and no graduate students were affected for the Fall 2023 funding cycle. We are still waiting on this to be addressed to faculty as a whole.

### Accountability & Transparency

**1. We request that serious incidents are reported to the department.**

Students should not find out about serious harassment through rumors exclusively. Incidents like the repeat graffiti on pride flags should be reported via the Biology listserv within a week of the incident being reported. This could follow a similar format to the "Lobo Alerts" sent out by UNMPD.

**Status:** *In-progress.* Biology Chair, Christina Takas-Vesbach, has taken it upon herself to communicate potential security issues to the department through the departmental listserv. We are grateful for this communication and it has translated to a greater sense of community well-being. We also would like to recognize the increased security patrols that have been requested by the department. These are the results of the communication on May 16th, 2023.

**2. We request that the department keep track of information related to degree completion, mastering out, and switching labs.**

If this information is already being tracked, then we would like access to this information in an anonymized form. The goal of this is to identify patterns of behavior without forcing individual students to come

forward. We understand that students may switch labs or master out for reasons unrelated to their advisors. This would be a part of a holistic review process.

**Status:** This is an urgent and ongoing conversation with no current progress to report.

## **2. There must be a process in place to hold abusive faculty accountable.**

This policy should include:

- a. A staff member or faculty in charge of ensuring that the process is completed. (This could be a member of the Biology Graduate Student Advocacy Committee or someone else).
- b. A definition of infractions (including but not limited to: shouting, abusive language, sexual harassment, racial harassment, refusal to recognize approved accommodations, etc).
- c. A consequence for each first infraction. For instance, frequent shouting in lab meetings could be addressed by an anger management course. Faculty would then be asked to 'Comply or Explain' - meaning that if the course is not completed by the end of the academic year (or the end of a sixth month period if the infraction is reported in spring), they will be required to explain why the course was not completed to the DEI committee. For faculty with repeated, serious infractions, **we are strongly suggesting barring them from taking on new students until these issues are addressed.**

**Status:** Dr. Takacs-Vesbach provided a transparent look into the current system. When reports are made, the Chair places them in a locked file cabinet and is the only person who has access to these files. It was unclear how often these files are reviewed or how many reports it takes to trigger an action. For faculty with "consistent patterns" of problematic behavior, they are sent to a senior review board.

## **3. Safety and security**

- a. Tiered security categories
  - i. **Security escorts:** Unsafe walking across campus.
  - ii. **Building security:** Locked doors from 6PM-6AM, UNM campus security patrols. Locked doors to levels containing research facilities. Biosafety sharp containers in bathrooms.
  - iii. **Transparent Reporting:** Continue open communication about safety concerns.

**Status:** Dr. Takacs-Vesbach is pursuing UNM funding to increase safety and security in Caster Hall. While this progress is ongoing, she encourages the use of the LoboGuardian App and reporting unlocked doors after hours.

## Other Work

### **1. Introduction of Individual Development Plans for advisee-advisor communication.**

The BGSA DEI committee and the Biology Departmental IDEA committee worked in conjunction to create the Individual Development Plan worksheets. The goal of the IDP worksheets is to have communication and standards clearly outlined for each advisor and graduate student. Tyler Clayshulte sent out an e-mail with a link to these forms, but they are also currently available on the Biology Department website under Graduate forms. The intention of these worksheets is that the student will complete the student version, the advisor will complete the advisor version, and then both people will meet to discuss the language for the final worksheet that is submitted to Tyler for record keeping. Faculty have already been encouraged to fill out IDPs with their new students. We would like to encourage the faculty to require a completed IDP be submitted to Tyler prior to the first Committee of Studies meeting.

### **2. Land Acknowledgement Plaque** This was an item on the 2020 Anti-racism letter. The plaque is being funded by a \$400 donation from Lucy Moore.

*Installing a permanent plaque to acknowledge that Caster sits on stolen Tiwa land is an action toward showing respect and gratitude to the territory where Caster resides. Doing so honors the Indigenous people who were part of that land long before UNM existed. Furthermore, colonialism in the United States continues to affect the daily lives of Indigenous people. Installing a land acknowledgement plaque shows Native American students that UNM biology acknowledges the legacy of the ill-founded Manifest Destiny, and helps to center Indigenous voices. The call for land acknowledgement is not new, not only across the country but also within our institution, as described [here](#).*



## Results

### a. Gender & Sexuality

To which gender identity do you most identify?	% of Respondents
Man	25 %
Woman	59.4 %
Non-binary	12.5 %
Preferred not to say	3.1 %

Do you identify as transgender or non-binary?	% of Respondents
Yes	18.8 %
No	78.1 %
Prefer not to say	3.1 %

What are your affirmed pronouns?	% of Respondents
She/Her	56.3 %
He/Him	28.1 %
They/Them	9.4 %
Other/Not listed	6.3 %

The “Not listed” responses included multiple pronoun sets such as ‘he/they’ and ‘she/they.’

Which best describes your sexual orientation?	% of Respondents
Lesbian / Gay / Bisexual / Queer	34.3%
Heterosexual	56.3 %
Prefer not to say	9.4 %

### b. Race

Please indicate the racial or ethnic groups with which you identify. (Check all that apply.)	% of Respondents
African American/Black, Asian American/Asian, Hispanic/Latino/a/e/x, Native American/Alaskan Native / Other / Not listed	15.6%
White	53.1%
Prefer not to say	3.1 %
More than one selection	28.1%

c. International status

Are you an international student?	% of Respondents
Yes	0.0 %
No	93.8 %
Prefer not to say	6.3%

d. First-generation

Are you a first-generation student?	% of Respondents
Yes; first-gen graduate, but not undergraduate	15.6 %
Yes; first-gen undergraduate and graduate	28.1 %
No	50 %
Prefer not to say	6.3%

e. Disability

Do you identify as having or having had a disability?	% of Respondents
Yes	25 %
No	62.5 %
Prefer not to say	12.5 %

## II. Survey Responses

The following questions assessed student comfort and safety within different campus environments. Not all respondents answered every question. For questions with less than 32 responses, the number of respondents is noted.

I feel comfortable expressing and sharing all aspects of my identity (racial, gender, etc)	...on campus	...within the biology department.	...with my advisor.	...within my lab group.
Strongly disagree; I feel uncomfortable expressing myself openly.	6.3%	9.4%	12.5%	9.4%
Somewhat disagree; I feel I can express some identities, but not others.	28.1 %	34.4%	28.1%	15.6%
Neither agree nor disagree; I feel I can express myself, though within certain bounds.	15.6 %	12.5%	9.4%	15.6%
Somewhat agree; I mostly feel comfortable expressing myself, though not always.	34.4 %	28.1%	21.9%	18.8%
Strongly agree; I feel comfortable expressing myself completely	15.6%	15.6%	28.1%	40.6%

I feel comfortable expressing and sharing my affirmed pronouns (select all that apply).	% of Respondents that selected yes
Within the biology department	82.1% (23)
With my advisor	85.7% (24)
Within my lab group	92.9% (26)
Within the campus community	78.6% (22)
No response	12.5% (4)

I have personally experienced discrimination or been treated unfairly because of one or more of my personal identities and attributes within the UNM biology department.	% of Respondents
Yes	25% (8)
No	65.6% (21)
Prefer not to say	9.4% (3)

Do you feel or have felt your safety is compromised (select all that apply):	% of Respondents
Within the department	57.9% (11)
With my advisor	5.3% (1)
Within my lab group	5.3% (1)
On campus	78.9% (15)

To the extent that you are comfortable answering, do you feel you have experienced the above behaviors due to the following identities or attributes? (Select all that apply)	% of Respondents
I experienced this, but I don't know if it was because of a particular identity or attribute	11.8% (2)
Yes, my racial or ethnic identity	35.5% (6)
Yes, my gender identity or gender expression	47.1% (8)
Yes, my sexual orientation	5.9% (1)
Yes, my transgender identity	5.9% (1)
Yes, my ability or disability status	29.4% (5)
Yes, my socio-economic status	23.5% (4)
Yes, my national origin or citizenship status	0% (0)
Yes, an identity or attribute not listed here	11.8% (2)

If you selected "Yes, an identity or attribute not listed above" in the previous question, could you please specify your answer below: \*Note: If you are uncomfortable specifying, you may leave this area blank

- Religion; STEM in general and UNM in particular is often anti-theist. I am not calling for greater religious expression but rather less public anti-theistic commentary by UNM Biology affiliated individuals.
- Practical centrist that avoids identity politics

At the time of these events, how were the people who behaved in these discriminatory ways affiliated with the UNM Biology department?	% of Respondents
Undergraduate student	29.4% (5)
Graduate student	29.4% (5)
Faculty or instructor	58.8% (10)
Postdoc	17.6% (3)
Office staff, administrator, or research staff	23.5% (4)
Other person associated with UNM	17.6% (3)
This person was not associated with UNM	23.5% (4)
Someone not listed above (please specify below)	11.8% (2)

If you selected "Other person associated with UNM" and/or "Someone not listed above" in the previous question, could you please specify your answer below: \*Note: If you are uncomfortable specifying, you may leave this area blank.

- An administrator from another department
- UNM PD
- There are individuals who are not students that are on campus. I have been catcalled and followed by these people, and I do not feel safe on campus.
- Adjunct professor
- Retired professor

For the following section, [...] indicates something was redacted due to identifying information. (Summarized) indicates that we did not use any language from the comment but instead rephrased the key point.

Do you have unheard concerns? Do you have unmet needs?

- I think that to truly be inclusive, fixation on identity politics need to be addressed with a mutual respect and understanding between all people associated with the bio department.
- I'm concerned for future resistance upon attempting to implement changes
- The lack of transparency from faculty on safety concerns related to DEI safety concerns has repeatedly escalated the feeling of insecurity and an unsafe environment here in the department.
- I could use more financial support.
- I feel like there is not a great way for students to report issues that have occurred with members of the faculty
- I have heard from other first generation and international students in the department that unfair and unrealistic expectations are placed on them by their adviser. I am upset that advisers would admit a student who on paper makes their lab look 'diverse' and then make that student feel as if they are failing because they do not have the financial support to meet their advisers expectations.
- There is a severe disconnect in communication throughout the department. Our department lacks strong leadership - from the chair, to the faculty, to the department administrator. These people function without clear direction or communication to those they supposedly lead.
- This department does not take the concerns of its graduate students' seriously. The faculty have a disposition that graduate students consistently and unnecessarily complain. Further, some faculty justify the harness of the environment using their own traumatic experiences. My concerns I feel are represented of other graduate students. I have concerns that the faculty are disconnected from the typical graduate experience, where housing, medical, and food insecurities are large detractors from work. These baseline survival worries are exacerbated by the harsh environment of some laboratories (PI is rigid when it comes to deadlines or production even under these circumstances, PI is disengaged and/or does not truly value graduate

student wellness). I have large unmet needs when it comes to the social component of science as I come from a very different background. That can make social situations difficult to navigate and forces me to present a version of myself that is inauthentic but acceptable/respectable in the eyes of people of power. It is exhausting to continuously put up a wall or ignore the numerous stereotyping or racist comments that surface in this department. I obviously do not need a sense of belonging because I would not be in this department if so. Long term though, I do see that as a need.

Is there anything you would like to see changed or newly implemented in the department to improve the department's cultural climate?

#### *Training suggestions*

- Mentorship training for PIs should be required.
- Required DEI training for students staff faculty
- It wouldn't hurt some of the faculty and students to receive a few guidelines on updated language etc. that might cause distress e.g., use of "spaz", "idiot", "freak", etc.-- I've heard these terms or phrases like these used (in apparently good natured and humorous ways, so I don't want to assign ill intent) and realize they could exclude or harm those with disabilities or diverse gender identities.

#### *Faculty accountability*

- Punish faculty who abuse their students
- Advisers should put forethought into the support needed by first gen and underrepresented students and make sure that they have the funds to support the achievements that they expect from these students, an appropriate project that fits the resources that the student and professor have access to, or the time and resources to help those students obtain their own funding.
- Hire a professional leader to be department chair and establish departmental rules document. The faculty meetings are an embarrassing joke. Establish a mission statement and have program evaluation (using standards of evaluation science - ask UNM school of public admin for guidance).



- Exit interviews or accountability for PIs that push out students either through MS routes or leaving the program. There should be a meeting with the chair for the PI to discuss why the student is leaving followed by an exit interview with the student to gain the student's perspectives. Targeted trainings should be implemented based on the PIs faults that led to the student leaving. Additionally, every single thing that was in the antiracism demand letter sent in 2020 should be implemented.
- Actual enforcement of bad actors in the department with respect to discrimination.
- Repercussions for tenured track faculty that are consistently abusive to incoming grad students
- More support for graduate students who have issues with their advisors

#### *Material support*

- Support for graduate students in economic need and support for mental health for graduate students.
- More funding

#### *Departmental transparency*

- When things happen in the department, and those things affect the well-being of student/staff/faculty here, I'd really like to know what happened while preserving the privacy of affected individuals. I feel like there is a lack of transparency in the department, and it makes me feel uneasy. For example, a while back, someone had written hateful things on someone's door, but I don't know what happened of that situation or how the department is working to make sure it doesn't happen again.

#### *Other suggestions*

- I would love to see some regulation of the departmental list-serv. Perhaps one of the Biology Front Office staff members could read emails prior to their launch to the entire department.
- Make PIBBs into the space it was meant to be - leave the hallway door unlocked and accessible by ALL. It is functionally treated as a private office suite and I have been told this is because people leave their office doors unlocked (i.e., an assumed privilege). Have a central scheduling through the front desk for ALL reservable spaces within

Castetter Hall (i.e., PIBBs conference room should not be scheduled by a faculty member - Felisa Smith).

- Make the Graduate Student Handbook priority #1. It is over a decade outdated and the practice is so far from policy that it's meaningless. Also make clear what are policies and what are preferences.
- More Unisex Restrooms - especially ones without locks - would be very useful. Maintaining only segregated restrooms means that often using one of them either requires finding one that is empty of the correct sex/gender or using one that will be more accepted with appearance but of the wrong sex/gender. It also reinforces the division between the sexes without providing alternatives.

Do you have any other comments related to the topic of this survey?

- Incidents of discrimination, retaliation, and disrespect are hurtful for the reputation of this department and hurts its reputation, people, and science.
- I don't feel like I've been discriminated against based on visual/non-visual identities, but I do experience semi-regular micro aggressions within the biology department, my lab, and in interactions with my advisor.
- [...] I have found it difficult to live off of the provided stipend for graduate students because I don't have a safety net. I have a second job, but I fear it's not accepted by the department.
- (Summarized) Students have been pressured to front the cost of items required for research despite not having available funds.
- [...] UNM has some major cultural deficiencies that will never truly be healed if the laboratories continue to be fragmented and insulated. PI 's are largely unaware of how other labs are run and even of who is a part of their own departmental community. This collective of individuals fails to capitalize on the wealth of perspectives, skills, and approaches available. The department runs inefficiently and ineffectively. If you can improve some of the operations/logistics workloads while incentivizing mentorship, community building, and participation you might see improvement.

- The only times that I find myself discriminated against on campus are those times when I am - incorrectly - assumed to be 'white' 'male' and 'conservative'. These categories seem to be assumed as fair game and have been used to try and silence perspectives.

Do you have any feedback on the survey questions?

- For sexual orientation and gender identity, we should be able to select all that apply and not just one. Also, some questions were unclear or I didn't know how to answer them due to the type of experience I had. For example, I didn't have discrimination directed at me as an due to my identity since it is not something noticeable, but the graduate students were mocking people that shared the same identity as I have. So even though they weren't directing it at me since they don't know about my identity, they were still unknowingly mocking me which made me feel unsafe.
- Define discrimination.
- Most of my encounters are not \*BIG\* events. They feel more like repeated comments/aggressions that make me feel exhausted and frustrated, resulting in me being a more closed off person in department spaces as a protection mechanism. I wasn't sure where/how to make this known earlier in the survey.