

Graduate Student Exit Survey Report, 2006-2007 and 2007-2008

Office of
Institutional Assessment
D111 Mason Hall
MS 3D2
703-993-8834
assessment@gmu.edu
<https://assessment.gmu.edu>

Associate Provost for
Institutional Effectiveness
Karen M. Gentemann, Ph.D.
genteman@gmu.edu

Director
Ying Zhou, Ph.D.
yzhou@gmu.edu

Associate Director
Mary Zamon, Ph.D.
mzamon@gmu.edu

Assessment Analyst
Yuko Whitestone, Ph.D.
ywhitest@gmu.edu

Applications Analyst
Rawa Abdalla, M.S.
rjassem1@gmu.edu

Program Support
Karen A. Manley, B.S.
kmanley@gmu.edu

I. Introduction

This report summarizes the results of the Graduate Student Exit Survey (GSES) conducted in the academic years 2006-2007 (GSES07) and 2007-2008 (GSES08). The GSES examines graduate education experiences at Mason in the following five areas: (a) enrollment and employment, (b) academic program evaluation, (c) thesis and dissertation experience, (d) student satisfaction, and (e) other background information (i.e., time to degree, educational debt, and future plans).

The survey was administered to all graduating master's and doctoral students when they applied for graduation. Law students and students pursuing graduate certificates were not included in this survey. There was a separate survey for graduating law students. The overall response rates of the surveys were 87% for GSES07 and 83% for GSES08 (see Table 1). The demographic composition of the respondents mirrored very closely the overall population in both years.

Table 1. Response Rates of GSES07 and GSES08.

		2007 (GSES07)	2008 (GSES08)
Total Number of Graduates		2,715	2,729
Total Number of Respondents		2,359	2,260
Overall Response Rate		87%	83%
<i>By Degree</i> ¹			
Master's Students	Number of Respondents	2,192	2,102
	Response Rate	86%	83%
Doctoral Students	Number of Respondents	169	159
	Response Rate	93%	85%

¹ Respondents who received dual degrees at master's and doctoral levels (e.g., MA and PhD) are counted twice.

II. Highlights

Enrollment and Employment Status

- The percentage of full-time doctoral students is on the rise — it reached 62% in 2008. Doctoral students who did not work or worked occasionally in graduate school have more than doubled over the past three years. At the same time, the percentage of students

receiving part-time graduate assistantships has been declining.

Academic Program Evaluation

- At least 90% of both doctoral and master's students considered Mason faculty to be well qualified in teaching and willing to meet students to discuss their academic performance.
- Compared to doctoral students, master's students were significantly less satisfied with academic advising but more positive when it came to good communication with faculty and emphasis on teamwork in their programs.

Thesis/Dissertation Experience

- Overall, doctoral students reported significantly more positive experiences with their principal advisors than master's students (see Figure 5). Notably, 98% of doctoral students agreed that their dissertation advisors were interested in their goals and projects.

Student Satisfaction

- Other than academic advising, there was no significant difference between master's students and doctoral students in term of their satisfaction with departmental resources and supporting, career counseling, and mentoring.
- Over the past three years, doctoral students were increasingly less likely to agree with the following statements: "I would recommend my graduate program to prospective students"; "I would enroll in the same program again if I were starting over."

Time to Degree

- About 50% of doctoral students and 18% of master's students took *longer* than originally expected to complete their degree programs. Nearly one third of master's students identified the demands of employment, whereas one third of doctoral students identified difficulties in dissertation research as the primary reason for the delay.

NOTE

- Percentages in this report may not sum to 100% due to rounding.
- Frequency and mean calculations in this report exclude "don't know" and "not applicable" responses.

ONLINE SURVEY REPORTS

College and program level results and more student comments are available at the following websites:

- The GSES07: <https://assessment.gmu.edu/Results/GraduatingGrad/2007/index.cfm>
- The GSES08: <https://assessment.gmu.edu/Results/GraduatingGrad/2008/index.cfm>

The search function allows you to search student comments by keywords and program.

III. Enrollment and Employment

1. Choice of Graduate School

For three years in a row, 82% of master's students reported that Mason was their first choice among the graduate schools they considered. In contrast, the percentage of doctoral students whose first choice was Mason increased to 81% in 2007 but declined to 72% in 2008 (see Table 2).

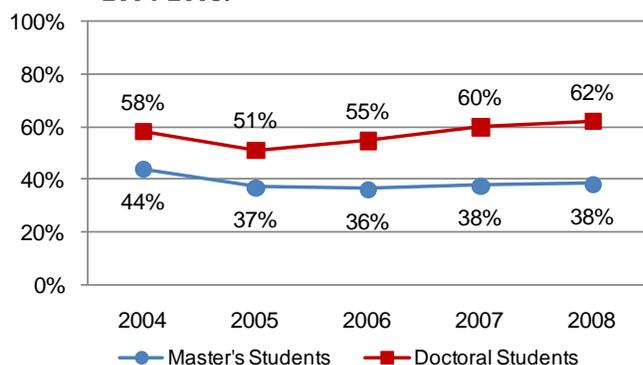
Table 2. Choice of Graduate School, 2006-2008.

	Master's Students			Doctoral Students		
	2006	2007	2008	2006	2007	2008
First choice	82%	82%	82%	78%	81%	72%
Second choice	15%	15%	14%	17%	13%	22%
Third choice	3%	4%	4%	5%	6%	6%

2. Primary Enrollment Status

Since 2005 the full-time/part-time student ratio of master's students has been steady —just under 40% full-time and just over 60% part-time (See Figure 2). On the other hand, the percentage of full-time doctoral students has been gradually increasing over the recent years and reached 62% in 2008.

Figure 2. Full-Time Graduate Students by Degree Level, 2004-2008.

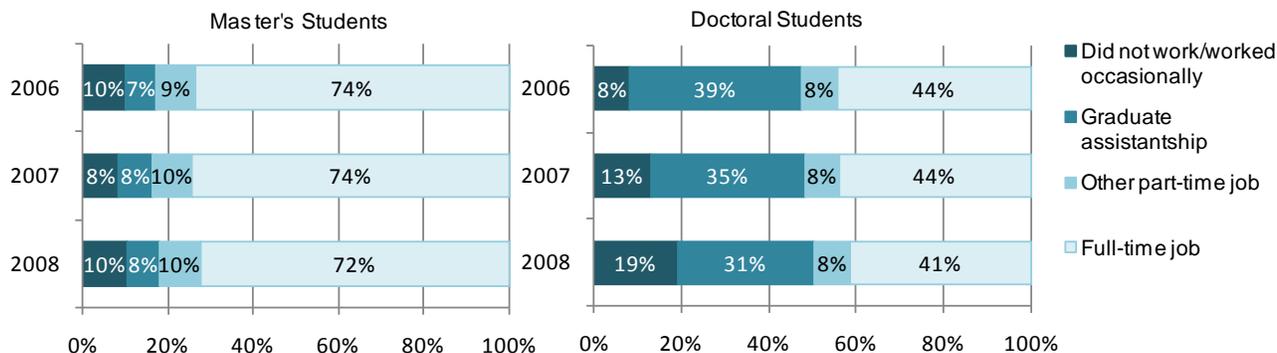


3. Primary Employment Status

For three consecutive years, the percentage of master's students with full-time employment has been virtually unchanged: about 75% of master's students worked primarily full-time during their graduate education at Mason. Among doctoral students, those who did not work or worked occasionally more than doubled between 2006

and 2008. Over the same period, the percentage of doctoral students receiving graduate assistantships has been declining steadily from 39% in 2006 to 31% in 2008 (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Primary Employment Status during Graduate School, 2006-2008.



IV. Academic Program Evaluation (GSES 08 Results ONLY)

In the survey, respondents were asked to evaluate their faculty, academic programs, and peers using a scale from 1= “strongly disagree” to 4= “strongly agree.” The GSES 07 results were very close to those of GSES 08. Therefore, the following section reports the more recent results only. The link to the GSES 07 results is listed on Page 2.

1. Faculty

On the 4-point scale described above, student evaluations of faculty averaged 2.9 or higher (see Table 3). At both degree levels, more than 90% of students “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with faculty being well qualified in teaching and willing to meet students to discuss their academic performance. In contrast, course offerings and out of classroom opportunities for student-faculty communication scored the lowest mean ratings with below 80% of positive ratings from master’s or doctoral students. **Master’s students** were *significantly more positive* than doctoral students about faculty-student communication on student needs, concerns, and suggestions. No other item on faculty evaluations showed significant difference in mean scores between master’s and doctoral students.

Table 3. Evaluations of Faculty by Degree Level.

	Master's Students		Doctoral Students	
	% of positive responses ¹	Mean	% of positive responses ¹	Mean
Teaching				
1. Courses listed in the catalog are offered frequently enough for timely completion of degree requirements.	74%	2.90	77%	2.97
2. The courses I took were well taught.	94%	3.22	89%	3.22
3. Faculty members were well qualified to teach their courses.	96%	3.37	94%	3.43
Communication				
4. Good communication between faculty and students regarding student needs, concerns, and suggestions.²	88%	3.16*	79%	3.03*
5. There were many opportunities outside the classroom for interaction between students and faculty.	71%	2.87	77%	2.97
Mentoring/Advising				
6. Faculty were interested in the professional development of graduate students.	89%	3.22	85%	3.15
7. Faculty were helpful and supportive in my search for professional employment.	80%	3.07	77%	3.02
8. Faculty were willing to meet with me to discuss my academic performance.	96%	3.37	92%	3.41

¹ A total percentage of those choosing “Strongly agree” and “Agree.”

² Bold font and asterisks indicate the level of significance in T-test results testing the difference in mean values between master’s and doctoral students: *: $p < .05$.

2. Academic Program and Students in the Program

Regardless of degree level, the majority of respondents rated their academic programs and students in their programs highly, with the average ratings over 3.1 on a 4-point scale (see Table 4). Significantly more master’s students selected “agree” or “strongly agree” that their programs encouraged student collaboration and teamwork (92%) than doctoral students (83%). One explanation for this difference might be that dissertation research, the culminating requirement for all doctoral students, is by nature an individual project. There was no other item showing significant difference in the average ratings between master’s students and doctoral students.

At both degree levels, the vast majority of students —94% of master’s students and 97% of doctoral students — viewed the student body of their graduate programs as socially, culturally, and racially diverse. Ninety-four percent or more students at both degree levels “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that “my program integrates current developments in my field” (see Appendix 3).

Table 4. Evaluations of Academic Program and Students by Degree Level, 2008.

	Master's Students		Doctoral Students	
	% of positive responses ¹	Mean	% of positive responses ¹	Mean
Academic Program				
1. My program prepared me well for my profession.	91%	3.2	90%	3.27
2. My program has high academic standards.	92%	3.25	92%	3.24
3. My program integrates current developments in my field.	94%	3.36	94%	3.31
4. My program encourages student collaboration and teamwork.	92%	3.41***	83%	3.10***
5. Program activities foster a sense of intellectual community.	88%	3.22	83%	3.11
6. My program was intellectually challenging and stimulating.	93%	3.29	92%	3.34
Students				
1. The intellectual caliber of students in my program is high.	89%	3.17	88%	3.14
2. There are students from different social, cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds in my program.	94%	3.45	97%	3.42

¹ A total percentage of those choosing “Strongly agree” and “Agree.”

² Bold font and asterisks indicate the level of significance in T-test results testing the difference in mean values between master’s and doctoral students: ***: $p < .001$.

V. Thesis/Dissertation Experience

At Mason, all doctoral programs and a small number of master’s programs require students to write theses or dissertations. As shown in Figure 4, only 6% of master’s students who participated in the survey in 2008 were required to write a thesis to graduate; 36% did not have any final requirement beyond course work.

In addition to all doctoral students, 54% of master’s students, who reported a culminating requirement such as “thesis (6%),” “research project/paper (19%),” “portfolio (18%),” or “internship/practicum (11%),” were asked about their experiences with principal dissertation/thesis/project advisors.

Doctoral students reported *significantly more positive* experiences with their dissertation advisors than master’s students for all five items (see Figure 5 on Page 5). Over 60% of doctoral students selected “strongly agree” for each of five statements, which is 14 - 23 percentage points more than master’s students. These favorable evaluations of their advisors among doctoral students might be associated with the nature of dissertation research.

Figure 4. The Culminating Requirement for Graduation: 2008 Master’s Students.

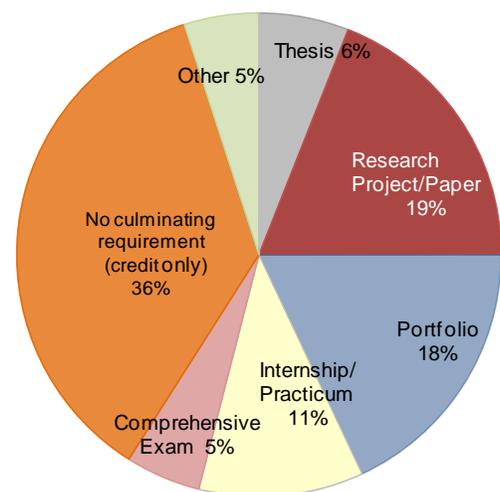
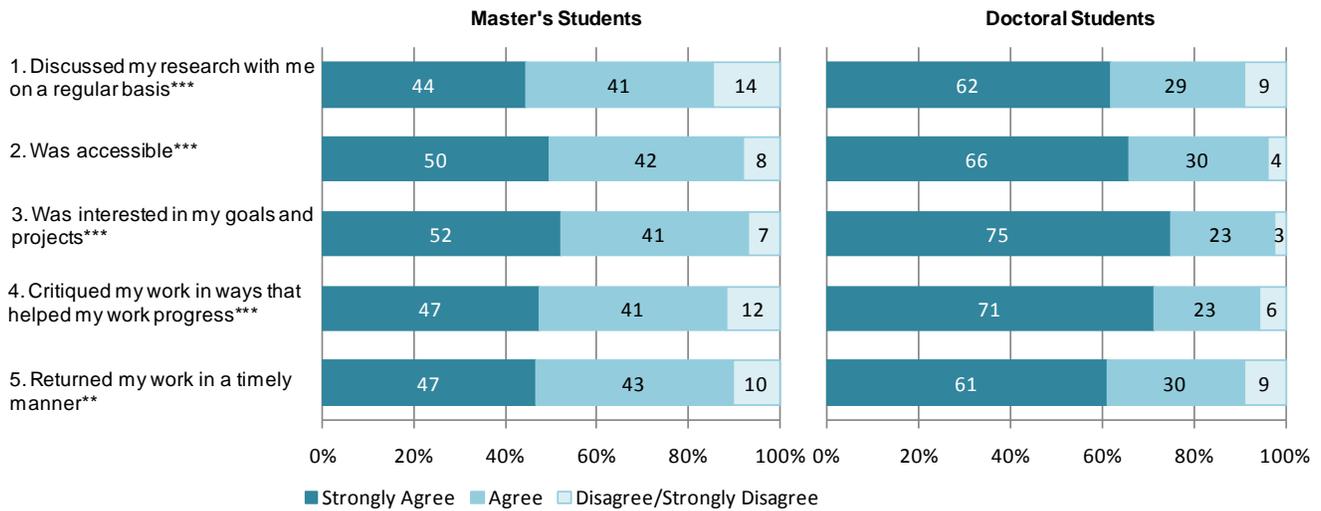


Figure 5. Experience with Principal Dissertation/Thesis/Project Advisor, 2008.



Note: The asterisks indicate the differences in mean values between master's and doctoral students are statistically significant at the following levels: **: $p < .01$; ***: $p < .001$.

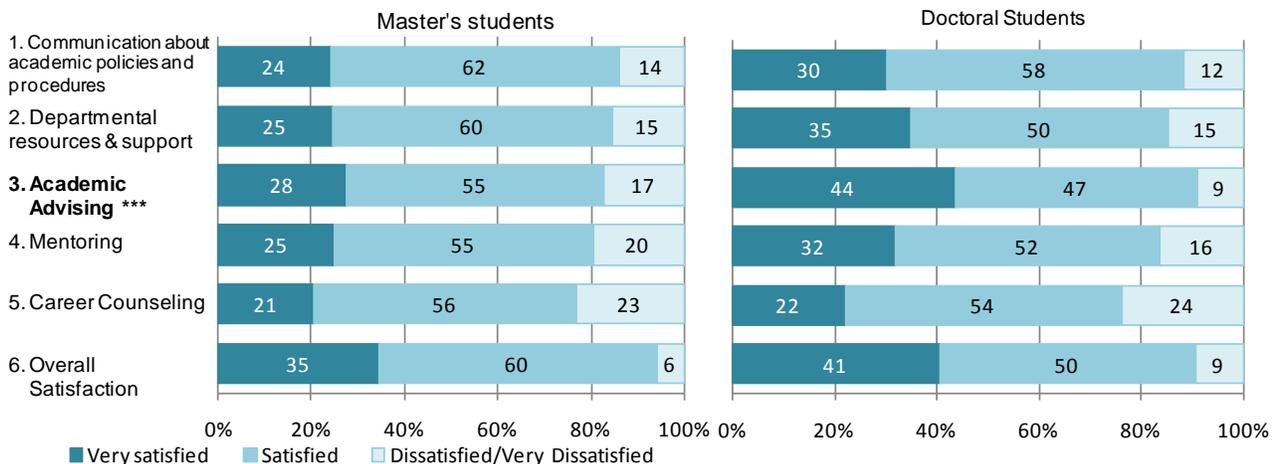
VI. Student Satisfaction

1. Academic and Non-academic Support

Overall, the graduating classes of 2007 and 2008 expressed similar levels of satisfaction with academic and non-academic support. On all items as shown in Figure 6, doctoral students were more likely to choose “very satisfied” than master’s students. In contrast, master’s students were more likely to choose “satisfied” than doctoral students. This led to t-test results indicating that academic advising was the only item with which doctoral students were significantly more satisfied than master’s students. The difference was also clear in percentages: 91% of doctoral students were either “satisfied” or “very satisfied”; 83% of master’s students shared this view.

One third of master’s students and one out of four doctoral students marked “not applicable/don’t know” for career counseling. One fourth of master’s students also selected “not applicable/don’t know” for mentoring. These cases were excluded from data analysis and readers are advised to interpret the results carefully. Among those who provided valid responses, nearly 25% said that they were *dissatisfied* with career counseling, which was the highest percentage of negative responses among all five items at both degree levels. There was some dissatisfaction with mentoring as well (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Student Satisfaction with Academic and Non-academic Support, 2008.



Note: Bold font and the asterisks indicate the differences in mean values between master’s and doctoral students are statistically significant at the following levels: ***: $p < .001$.

2. Three-year Trend Analysis of Overall Satisfaction with Mason

While overall satisfaction with Mason remains high, the results of a three-year trend analysis show that doctoral students are increasingly *less likely* to “strongly agree” that they would recommend their graduate programs to prospective students (see Figure 7) or enroll in the same program again if they were starting over (See Figure 8). Since 2006, there have been 15-17 percentage-point decreases in the proportion selecting “strongly agree” for both items.

Figure 7. Recommending their programs to prospective students: Doctoral Students, 2006-2008.

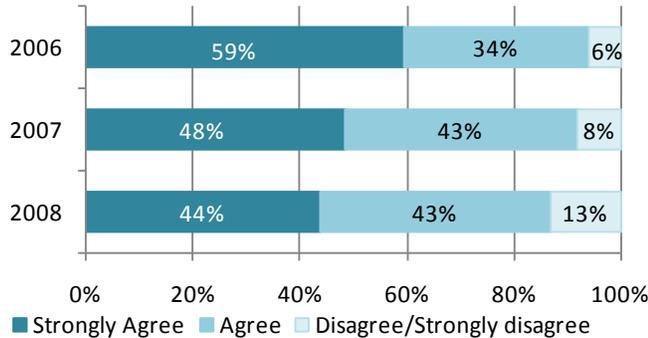
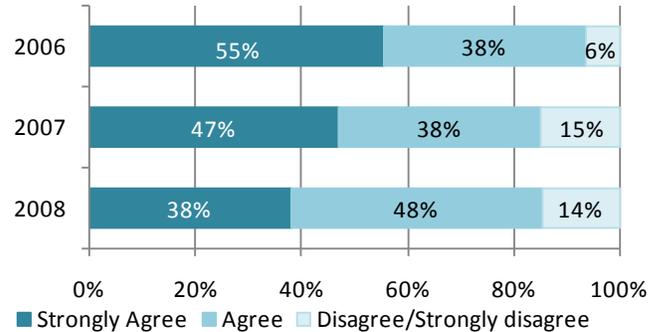


Figure 8. Enrolling in the same program if starting over again: Doctoral Students, 2006-2008.



VII. Time to Degree Completion and Future Plans

1. Time to Degree Completion

In the GSES 2008, students were asked a series of questions about time-to-degree. Nearly three-quarters of master’s students finished their degrees in about the same time as they originally expected (see Figure 9). Eighteen percent said that it took them longer than originally expected. This number nearly tripled for doctoral students: 51% of doctoral students said that it took them longer than originally expected.

Students who selected “more than originally expected” were also asked to choose the primary reason causing the delay from a list of 11 items shown in Table 5. There was a clear difference by degree level. For master’s students, the demands of their employment (31%) was by far the top reason, followed by family obligations (17%) and other (12%). In contrast, for doctoral students, difficulties in their projects, theses, and dissertations (33%) was the top, followed by the demands of their employment (15%), family obligations (12%), and other (12%). For both degree levels, “other” reasons often referred to items already listed.

Figure 9. Time-to-Degree (only asked in 2008).

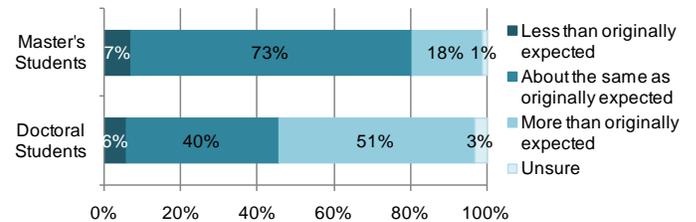


Table 5. The primary reason for delayed degree completion (only asked in 2008).

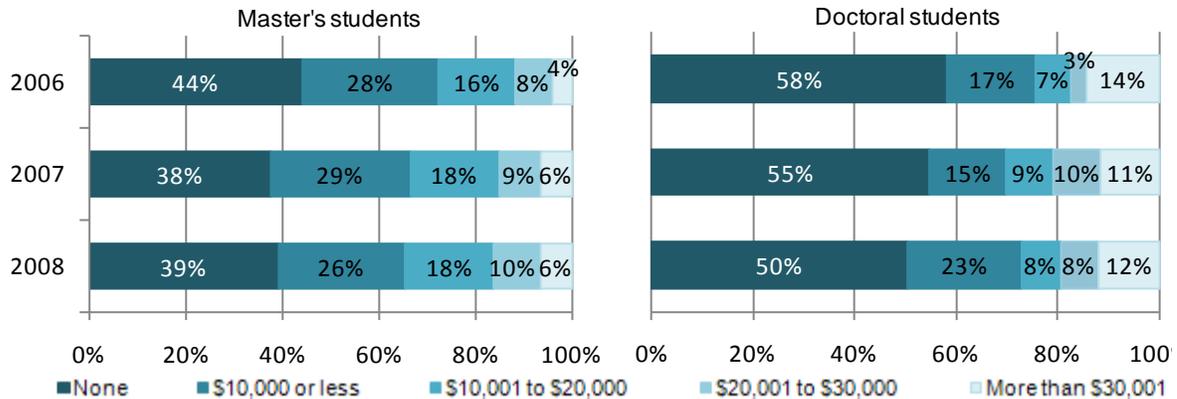
	Master's students	Doctoral students
Family obligations	17% ¹	12% ¹
The demands of employment	31% ¹	15% ¹
Financial problems	4%	5%
Lack of motivation	2%	4%
Other personal reasons	8%	4%
Lack of course availability	11%	2%
Inadequate advising	6%	7%
Difficulty in completing comprehensive/qualifying exams	2%	4%
Difficulty in my project, thesis, or dissertation research	2%	33%
Difficulty in fulfilling other degree requirements	4%	1%
Other reasons	12% ¹	12% ¹
Total	100%	100%

¹Top 3 reasons for each degree level are in bold.

2. Educational Debt

Figure 10 displays the results of a three-year trend analysis of educational debt. In 2007, the percentages of students with no debt at graduation *declined* at both degree levels. The percentage dropped to 50% in 2008 for doctoral students and to 39% for master’s students. Over the same period, the percentage of students owing more than \$30,001 remained almost the same at both degree levels. On the other hand, the percentage of doctoral students who owed \$30,000 or less in debt has been on the rise.

Figure 10. Educational Debt, 2006-2008.



3. Employment Plans after Graduation

For master’s students, employment plans after graduation have not changed much over the past three years (See Table 6): 61% said that they would continue working with their current employers in their current position or in a new position. Among doctoral students, the percentage of students staying with their current employers in their current or a new position declined from 48% in 2007 to 41% in 2008. At both degree levels, the percentage of students beginning a new position with a new employer increased in 2008.

Table 6. Employment plans after graduation from 2006 to 2008.

	Master's Students			Doctoral Students		
	2006	2007	2008	2006	2007	2008
1. Continue with my current employer in my current position.	46%	46%	46%	33%	33%	31%
2. Continue with my current employer in a new position.	15%	15%	15%	14%	15%	10%
3. Return to a previous employer in a new or previous position.	1%	1%	1%	2%	1%	4%
4. Begin a new position with a new employer.	17%	17%	21%	26%	26%	31%
5. Look for employment.	19%	19%	15%	25%	23%	20%
6. Unemployed	2%	2%	1%	2%	1%	1%
7. Self-employed	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%	3%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

VIII. Student Comments on Experiences at Mason

In the survey, students were asked to describe the reasons if they selected “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” with departmental academic and non-academic services (see Figure 6 for the list of the services) and to provide general comments on their educational experiences at Mason. In 2008, nearly 70% of the respondents submitted general comments. The following subsections summarize the results from these two sections citing actual comments.

Faculty Teaching and Communication with Students: Positive terms such as “outstanding,” “top notch,” and “excellent” repeatedly appeared in student comments describing the instructional quality of Mason faculty. Negative comments tend to be more specific about certain professors’ competency and interest in teaching.

“Overall, the quality of instruction was outstanding. The faculty were extremely knowledgeable, courteous, and willing to work with you. Their insights and experiences added a real-world dimension to the class.”

Academic Advising and Mentoring: The following are recurrent topics on academic advising: 1) the absence of advisor (no advisor was assigned; advisor left Mason), 2) very limited or no communication with advisors, 3) advisor’s lack of interest in advising, and 4) advisors’ lack of knowledge about degree requirements.

“My advisor was impossible to reach from the start. After countless emails and phone calls went unanswered I only met her when she happened to walk in my classroom and I cornered her. The information I received was always changed and I felt alone in my pursuit for my Masters.”

When it came to mentoring, mentoring programs/opportunities were often described as “non-existent.” Some students had peer mentoring by advanced-level graduate students. Positive comments on mentoring from faculty members mainly came from doctoral students. One doctoral student commented:

“Once I began the dissertation process, my chair was a terrific mentor, who challenged me appropriately, but was always there to help when I had difficulty. My chair’s guidance made a significant contribution to my efforts to complete the dissertation...”

Students: In both 2007 and 2008, at least 94% of master’s and doctoral students considered the student body in their graduate programs as socially, culturally, ethnically, and racially diverse (see Table 4). Students specifically acknowledged that student diversity enriched their educational experiences at Mason.

- “I was very happy to be a part of such a diverse, multicultural group of people. I have learned from my classmates a lot of useful and interesting, educational information that enriched my educational background [and I] got to understand other cultures and traditions.”

Departmental Resources and Support: Lack of financial support such as research/teaching assistantships was the primary issue raised by students in terms of departmental resources and support. Students also hoped the university would increase stipends to match high living costs in Northern Virginia.

- “If GMU wants to be a leading research institution..., it really needs more funding put into graduate students.”

Communication about Academic Policies and Procedures: Almost all the students who commented on this topic reported difficulty in receiving accurate and updated information about degree requirements in a timely manner. In some cases, students said that wrong information given to them caused them to miss major deadlines or not fulfill degree requirements as planned.

- “The department was constantly undergoing change and those that should have been able to produce answers in reference to degree completion often offered nothing more than a blank stare and redirection to another useless individual.”

Career Counseling: The majority of students who commented on this topic described career counseling as not available or inadequate if they had received any. The following are the types of career counseling that students hoped to receive: 1) career counseling meeting the needs of students with different professional and educational backgrounds; 2) career counseling for students in very specialized and in cutting edge fields of research.

- “Because the majority [of students] were already employed at a school, little career counseling was provided to the few still trying to enter the field (like me).”