

COMPUTER SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING

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To solicit feedback from graduate students in the Department of Computer Science and Engineering (CS&E), GPSS sent out an e-mail questionnaire and participated in a meeting of graduate students (held on April 5th). Twenty-one students responded to the questionnaire and eight attended the meeting.

Degree requirements

Students responding to questions about the degree requirements noted that they feel they are comprehensive and adequate in expectation. Additionally, they said qualifying exams tested both ability and knowledge gained through coursework and research.

Funding

CS&E is able to offer most full-time graduate students several years of funding. Respondents to the questionnaire were happy with the fellowship, research, and teaching awards made available and with the process the department uses to allocate these funds. In one case a student noted that he/she would not be able to pursue a doctoral degree nor his/her specific area of research without this support.

Time-to-degree

Students in the Professional Masters Program take about 2 to 3 years to complete their degree and are content with this amount of time (it should be noted that this is a new program, so this number may not yet be established as the norm).

Ph.D. students indicated that their peers took anywhere from 5 to 7 years to complete a Ph.D.. Some students noted that this length of time is adequate and normal for the field of computer science; this time-to-degree is comparable to that at other top computer science schools.

While newer students generally seem to be more comfortable with the time-to-degree, some older students felt that a shorter time-to-degree is desirable. One seventh-year student felt that some faculty focus on doing “great stuff” with students, and do not make students’ graduation a high priority. Another, newer student said that it is nice to be able to stay longer in the graduate program and gain more experience.

Women and minorities

All respondents noted that the proportion of women in the department (as students and faculty) is comparatively low. They quickly added that there are not many women in the field as a whole; in fact, several people stated that CS&E appears to have a higher proportion of women than the rest of the field.

A similar sentiment exists over the representation of minorities in the field – while their numbers are low at this school, this is an industry-wide phenomenon.

Facilities

The greatest problem with CS&E identified by graduate students who participated is space. The department's growth in recent years has transformed Sieg Hall. Because the department's top priority is keeping graduate student, faculty, and staff offices in the same building, most of the space has been converted to offices. Apart from two very small conference rooms, there is only a single moderately-sized conference room. There are two research labs available to graduate students, the LIS (hardware) and Grail (graphics) labs with one additional lab (systems) planned. A few years ago, two offices were built inside the LIS lab taking away most of the available space in this lab. AI, database, and other groups are left without research labs (creating situations such as a database group server being located on a student desk). The lack of conference rooms and research labs have made the hallways the primary meeting location for students. Cubicle walls and chairs have been placed in many hallways for this purpose. There are three offices available for TA office hours; yet, TAs have found these insufficient to fit their needs and responsibilities. Furthermore, there are no lecture rooms left in Sieg Hall and CS&E students must attend their classes in nearby buildings. Despite these efforts of maximizing the space available for offices, many graduate student offices had to be relocated to the "Chateau" (Guggenheim Annex) trailer. While this does not foster a sense of departmental community, it does ensure that all graduate students have a cubicle space. Continued growth is expected to worsen the situation.

The best solution to this problem is a new building, of course. Graduate students have also identified two additional short-term changes that could help ease current space constrictions. First, they suggest the University help them gain space in nearby buildings, such as the new Electrical Engineering building. In particular, it would be beneficial if CS&E graduate students could reserve conference rooms and possibly utilize TA offices in other buildings.

Secondly, additional space could be freed up if the Instructional Programming Lab were moved to Mary Gates Hall. The Instructional Programming Lab currently occupies a substantial part of the third floor in Sieg Hall.

Problem Resolution

Graduate students feel that the quality of the Ph.D. programs at this department is one of the best available worldwide, due to the exceptional quality of faculty and students here. One aspect that many students feel distinguishes this department from some of the other top-ten CS departments is the close relationship between faculty and students that encourages creative solutions and responsible behavior. Quite exceptional has also been the department's ability to address graduate student concerns through such means as "lunches with Ed", an anonymous feedback website, lab-issue meetings, quarterly gripe sessions, and contact persons within the faculty (the Graduate Program Coordinator), student (Graduate Student Coordinator), and staff body (Graduate Advisor). For example, the fruits of a recent gripe session resulted in graduate students gaining accurate access to the faculty recruiting calendar, receiving timely updates of recruiting invitations and offers, and obtaining an update on plans for the new building.

Miscellaneous & Student Comments

Students who have interests in interdisciplinary work expressed their satisfaction with the collaboration that exists between CS&E and other departments (like biology, molecular biotechnology, and mathematics).

Graduate students also noted that the Graduate Advisor (Frankye Jones) does an excellent job of keeping students informed of their progression towards degree and taking care of student needs.

“The three biggest problems I see in the department right now are: lack of space, shortage of faculty (we cannot seem to fill spaces as fast as we commit to them), and faculty time committed to industry start-ups and consulting to the detriment of their academic commitments.”

“The department is magnificent about listening and acting on student's concerns. There is a wonderful relationship between the corporate industry and our department. And best of all, the overwhelming atmosphere of the department is one of cooperation and collaboration (never competitiveness). I think this is the main contributor to the department's success and to the happiness of individuals within the department.”

“I think a great strength of the department is that professors really do seem to work together -- I chose UW largely because of the friendly, cooperative environment. I think the students take a lot of initiative in planning things and helping to maintain morale in the department. The department should be careful to maintain these qualities as it grows and seeks to improve.”