

# Understanding and Developing Programmatic Support for Doctoral Students

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**Abstract** In the field of rhetoric, composition, and technical communication, explicit guidance on selecting a well-fitting doctoral program is limited (Eaton, 2009), especially in technical and professional communication (TPC) programs. This study surveyed directors of 29 doctoral programs in TPC and related disciplines to identify structures and practices that convey student support, such as orientation, mentoring, funding, interdisciplinary opportunities, and community-building initiatives. Quantitative and qualitative analyses revealed that TPC-focused programs more often implement formal mentorship networks, interdisciplinary collaboration, and non-academic career preparation, whereas rhetoric/composition programs frequently rely on informal advising and emphasize academic career paths. Consistent with Lovitts (2001), transparency, strong community, and advising emerged as crucial to counter attrition risks, yet inadequate funding remains a widespread concern. The study highlights how clearer program communication and proactive inclusive practices can improve recruitment and “fit” for diverse doctoral applicants. In response to Romberger’s (2025) call to enhance graduate program support, we offer recommendations for program directors to strengthen mentorship, resource allocation, and program visibility in TPC and beyond.

**Keywords** program fit, institutional support, graduate student mentoring, survey research, recruitment, technical and professional communication

## Introduction

The process of professionalizing in academia is both complex and specific. Our field boasts a number of excellent works on professionalizing after a person is enrolled in a PhD program (Baliff, Davis, & Mountford, 2008; Ball, 2008; Brooks-Gillies et al. , 2020; Eble & Gaillet, 2004; Henschel and Melonçon, 2014; Pennell,

Frost, & Getto, 2018), and we find many spaces in our field to be particularly attentive and responsive to the needs of graduate students (for example, the Computers and Writing Graduate Research Network is colloquially articulated as a “home” for many, the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing continues to make its conference registration free for graduate students, the Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition offers a variety of mentoring and practice spaces for graduate students, etc.). However, we have not seen as much explicit discussion of how to arrive at a PhD program that fits, particularly in Technical and Professional Communication (TPC), where program structures and job market demands can differ from rhetoric and composition. As we (Mina and Erin) both from East Carolina University, talked about these questions in our first-year professional development seminar in spring 2024, we began to ask ourselves: What structures and practices do PhD programs in TPC (and related fields) use to signal student support? This led us to other questions. What practices do programs and their faculty engage in that are aimed at being helpful to prospective students in finding the right program? What practices do programs engage in that send the most effective signals to prospective students that current students are valued and supported, and how do these differ from rhetoric and composition programs? In Erin’s experiences, a lot of this process is ad hoc; finding the right program is something that a student does on their own research, or this happens in faculty offices and hallways through recommendations and advising networks. We began to ask ourselves how we might reach students who are considering PhD programs and help them figure out ways to make data-driven decisions *in addition to* employing existing relationships as a way to “find the right fit.” We also hope this article can be useful to TPC program administrators in thinking about what sorts of infrastructure are most important.

In short, we are writing primarily to program directors and faculty in TPC, with hopes that these readers will share what we’ve found with their master’s-level students who are considering further graduate school. Our discussion is particularly relevant for TPC administrators who seek to improve program visibility and support structures for prospective doctoral students, many of whom come from rhetoric, composition, and writing studies backgrounds but (as our data shows) ultimately take faculty or industry positions in TPC. Students may be most interested in Appendix B, which offers specific questions to ask in order to make determinations about program fit. Program directors and advisors will likely also be interested in the discussion section of this piece; though, we hope the following brief review of literature as well as our methods section will also prove useful. We begin with a brief overview of existing work, noting that doctoral-level research on TPC programs remains a growing area. We then move into our methods for adding to the knowledge of the field, which include the development and delivery of a survey of program directors (approved by our local Institutional Review Board as an

exempt study: UMCIRB 24-000221). Finally, we overview our survey results, and we end with a synthesized discussion and recommendations.

## **Existing Work**

Beyond TPC, broader studies on doctoral education provide insights into the structural and institutional factors influencing student experiences. Barbara Lovitts (2001) notes several prominent reasons that “non-completers” give for leaving their doctoral programs: lack of information, the absence of community, disappointment with the learning experience, and poor quality in the adviser-advisee relationship. Each of these reasons provides us a way to counterbalance attrition: transparency, community, rich and inclusive learning contexts, and strong advising relationships. All of this, though, must occur in the larger context of the modern academy. More recently, the Australian-based Alison Lee and Susan Danby (2012) track the evolution of doctoral education over recent decades, noting enrollment pressures as well as shifts to more apprentice-style teaching (particularly with laboratory-based work). They also surface an emphasis on the local context, which likely runs through many doctoral programs including their own discipline of education as well as ours in rhetoric/composition/technical communication. That is, every doctoral program is shaped not only by its home field but also by pressures and opportunities that are unique to local institutions.

Yet, even within TPC programs, there is ongoing tension between academic and industry pathways. Rachell Hayes (2023) argues that professional and technical writing programs often struggle to balance rhetorical theory with workplace preparation, leading to gaps in graduate preparedness. She writes, “While I continued to teach, I also worked for several prominent employers...who would make demands on me as a professional and technical writer, documentation specialist, or business systems analyst which completely exceeded my education” (p. 16). This disconnect between curriculum and professional demands underscores the need for greater institutional transparency about career outcomes for doctoral students. Also, she mentions one of the most persistent issues in TPC doctoral education is the disconnect between academia and industry. Hayes (2023) critiques the lack of practical preparation in graduate education, stating that “none of the teachers currently working in the graduate program have ever worked as technical writers” (p. 16). The recruitment of PhD students in TPC remains a challenge, partly due to the disciplinary identity of the field. Carolyn Rude and Kelli Cargile Cook’s (2004) analysis of the academic job market in TPC reveals that only 29% of the jobs listing technical or professional communication as a primary specialization were actually filled by graduates of doctoral programs in the field. The authors warn that this “significant gap between the demand for faculty

prepared as specialists in technical and professional communication and the available PhDs in the field” creates instability (p. 70).

Additionally, institutions hiring for TPC positions sometimes prioritize candidates with generalist backgrounds in English studies, rather than those with specialized technical communication expertise (Rude & Cargile Cook, 2004). Those candidates, once in their positions, can then be tapped for multiple needs within a department. This contributes to a cycle where doctoral programs in TPC struggle to grow, as prospective students may (erroneously) perceive limited academic job prospects. Meanwhile, the field’s ties to industry-oriented careers create further complications, as doctoral students must decide whether to pursue academic or industry paths, each of which requires different skill sets and professional networks.

Inadequate program visibility is another critical issue in doctoral recruitment. Angela Eaton (2009) highlights the lack of clarity in how TPC PhD programs define their missions, stating that “applicants don’t realize just how much emphasis is placed on acquiring research methods and producing research studies in the PhD” (p. 4). She notes that many PhD students enter programs expecting a balance between research and teaching but soon discover that tenure-track positions require a significant focus on traditional scholarly production (p. 4). This lack of clear communication contributes to misaligned expectations, which can lead to attrition.

Furthermore, recruitment strategies often fail to reach diverse applicant pools. The Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication (CPTSC) conference proceedings from 2007 discuss the need for programs to develop stronger web presences and better digital recruitment strategies to attract students from varied backgrounds. Given that TPC is an interdisciplinary field with connections to engineering, computer science, and business, improving program visibility and outreach is crucial for attracting students who may not traditionally consider PhDs in writing studies. While existing resources provide foundational insights into TPC doctoral programs, there is a clear need for more studies focusing on how prospective students navigate program selection and how institutions can enhance transparency and support throughout the admissions process. By addressing these areas, TPC programs can improve recruitment, retention, and the overall success of their doctoral candidates.

However, scholarly conversations about how prospective doctoral students, especially in TPC, navigate program selection and how institutions can improve transparency in admissions are still limited. At the same time, many graduates from rhetoric, composition, and writing studies programs go on to become full-time faculty in TPC, which makes it even more important for programs to communicate

their structures, expectations, and career pathways clearly. Instead of leaving students to figure things out on their own, programs can take a more intentional approach to recruitment and outreach. By doing so, they can help prospective students, many of whom may not have originally trained in TPC, understand how these programs align with their academic and professional goals. Strengthening this conversation can lead to more transparency, better support for students, and a stronger pipeline of scholars and practitioners in the field.

Jim Ridolfo's (2024) RhetMap project, available at [rhetmap.org](http://rhetmap.org), provides a survey of information for program-seekers (as well as job-seekers at the end of their programs), and Lisa Melonçon's (2014, 2019) articles on technical communication programs are useful for understanding longer-term strengths of particular locations (e.g., identifying places where these mentoring cultures exist even if that location does not have an in-field doctoral program). Michelle F. Eble's (2020) findings on mentoring models highlights the need to focus on inclusion and transdisciplinary work. And Julia Romberger's recent work in her 2025 Programmatic Perspectives piece focuses on the perspectives of students in Old Dominion University's largely online PhD program and provides a new way of looking at the issue of fit after a student has matriculated. Her article, which also draws on a survey of student perspectives, advances the PARS model, asking program directors to be Personal, Accessible, Responsive, and Strategic. Romberger argues that we need to "create better transitions through mentoring and robust documentation and better professionalization at the national level" (p. 47) and that our professional organizations and journals play a pivotal role in sponsoring this conversation. We aim here to respond to and support her call.

## **Methods: Survey Structure, Setup, Distribution**

We developed a survey in Qualtrics that was designed to help us understand what practices PhD programs in TPC and adjacent fields such as rhetoric, writing and composition are currently using to support their students (both prospective and current). We targeted PhD program administrators as the intended recipients/respondents of this survey since they are most likely to have the big-picture view we were looking for that would include a sense of all/most of the existing infrastructure in PhD programs; although, we also made space for other interested faculty to respond given the distributed networks that are sometimes that reality of program administration. To think systematically about this audience, we used the CCCC Doctoral Consortium in Rhetoric and Composition's members list. We initially sent the survey to this list February 20, 2024, with a March 4 follow-up after some messages bounced back, and we researched updated information for some program directors. While we received some responses to this initial set of

inquiries, RhetMap's listing of 94 doctoral programs with some rhetoric/composition component suggested that we would need additional responses in order to be able to extrapolate meaningfully. We then sent our survey to the CPTSC listserv on March 21, 2024, reasoning that this space included many people who are interested in programmatic-level thinking. We ultimately received 29 responses, with varying levels of completion/detail, representing at least eight discrete universities.<sup>1</sup> Of these, 11 were fully completed, while 18 were partially completed (i.e., some sections were left blank). We retained all responses in our analysis, ensuring that even partial responses contributed valuable insights to our findings. However, in cases where a respondent left key sections blank, those omissions were noted in our interpretations.

Since our primary focus is on TPC doctoral programs, we separated responses from TPC programs and those from rhetoric, writing, and composition programs to analyze how they compare. This distinction allows us to examine how TPC programs conceptualize student support in relation to professional development pathways, recruitment efforts, and doctoral student expectations, and whether their approaches align with or diverge from those in related fields. By making this comparison, we aim to identify discipline-specific practices and highlight areas where TPC programs might strengthen their support for prospective and current doctoral students.

The survey was designed to elicit both quantitative and qualitative results (Appendix A). Each question that focused on a particular characteristic or kind of support offered a variety of responses that participants could select. These potential responses were generated from our knowledge of existing infrastructures in PhD programs. Mina, having just researched and applied to many PhD programs in 2022-23, had a keen awareness of what programs are offering, and Erin, having served as PhD program coordinator for almost 4 years, had a sense of what the current research on professional development suggests programs should offer as well as what local students say they value (Blackmon, 2024). In addition to the suggested responses, each multiple-selection question also includes an "other" choice with text entry enabled. Additionally, after each of these multiple selection questions, an optional open-ended question provides a space to say more about that particular characteristic or kind of support. Thus, we aimed for and succeeded in obtaining, both quantitative and qualitative data to help us think through the existing ways programs support their students.

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<sup>1</sup> While we provided a space to identify the university, we did not require a response to this question and most people elected not to fill it out. Represented in our results are: East Carolina University, Michigan State University, the University of Houston, Old Dominion University, University of Central Florida, University of Cincinnati, University of Memphis, and University of Wisconsin-Madison, among others.

Our survey was born, of course, of our own experiences. The questions were inspired from Mina’s recent PhD application experience. Mina used the list of members on CCCC consortium to find the right fit in TPC starting the process in 2022. This process highlighted the difficulty of assessing program fit based on publicly available information. Specific concerns, such as the extent of faculty mentorship, the availability of interdisciplinary opportunities, and the predictability of funding, shaped how we structured our questions. By incorporating these insights, we aimed to capture the institutional practices that most impact student decision-making.

## **Survey Results**

This section organizes the survey findings based on key themes, reporting both quantitative and qualitative data. We address all responses for each question in order to put the responses into conversation with one another. It’s worth noting that our survey allowed, but did not require, qualitative responses associated with each question.

### **Quantitative Results**

This section presents the quantitative results of our survey. Here, we have provided the results of our survey’s content questions—organized into sub-sections on opportunities and activities, mentoring and advising; funding; interdisciplinary collaboration; professional development; community; alumni placement; accommodating research interests; quality of life; and diversity, equity, and inclusion—without associating this data with identifiers. The exact presentation of survey questions is available in Appendix A. Questions that presented participants with Likert-style responses are summarized in prose. Questions that asked participants to “choose all that apply” are represented with bar charts. Our quantitative results provide a useful overview of all survey responses. Each of the following sub-sections correlates directly with a section in the qualitative results section that follows.

### **Opportunities and Activities**

Figure 1 shows the results of a question asking participants to “choose all that apply” in terms of activities sponsored by the doctoral program they work with. Orientation and financial support for conference travel were the most common. “Other” responses included co-authoring publications, summer funding, works in progress groups, dissertation writing class, formal job market prep class for academic and non-academic jobs, research colloquium during which students present their work, editorial positions, administrative experience in the writing program, first-year review and second-year conference.



**Figure 1. Activities reported across all programs.**

In terms of research opportunities for students, most programs (five) indicated moderate support, with four indicated limited support and two indicating extensive support.

***Mentoring and Advising***

In terms of the kind of mentorship and advisory support the PhD students receive in the programs, seven programs indicated that they have robust mentorship and advisory systems. three programs mentioned there is adequate support with room for improvement with one indicating there is limited mentorship and advisory structure.

***Funding***

In terms of the funding opportunities, scholarships, or grants that are available to support PhD students in the programs, four programs mentioned diverse funding options and competitive scholarships with four programs indicating some funding opportunities and scholarships and three programs indicating limited financial support.

***Interdisciplinary Collaboration***

In terms of the available opportunities on interdisciplinary collaboration for students, five programs indicated there is strong emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration with four programs indicating moderate support for interdisciplinary

projects and two mentioned there are limited opportunities for interdisciplinary work.

### ***Professional Development***

In terms of the professional development programs or workshops offered to students to enhance their skills, six indicated comprehensive professional development programs; four mentioned there are some professional development opportunities, and one program indicated limited professional development support.

### ***Community***

In terms of the sense of community among students within the programs, five indicated there is strong and supportive community; five indicated Moderate sense of community with one program indicating limited community engagement.

### ***Alumni Placement***

In terms of the success rate of their alumni, nine indicated high success in securing academic positions or industry roles, and two indicated moderate success in post-PhD placements. No respondents chose "limited success" or "not applicable."

### ***Accommodating Research Interests***

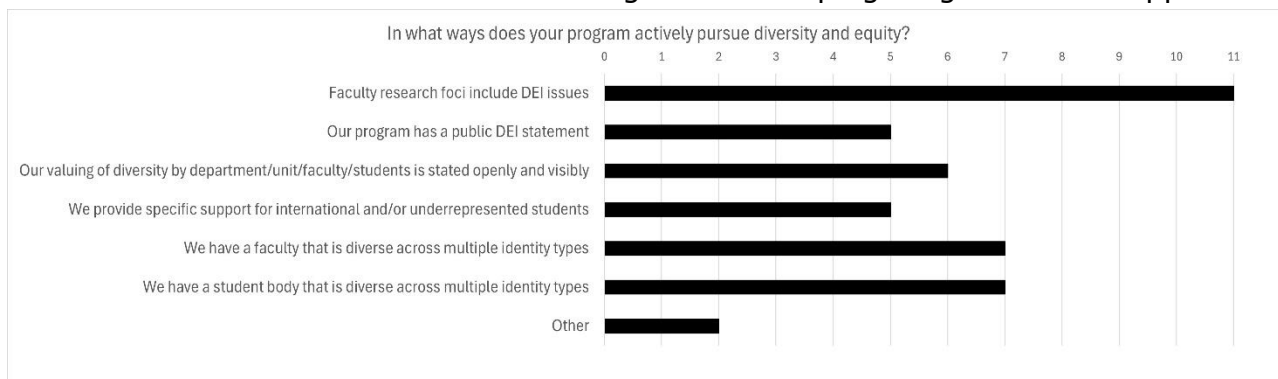
In terms of how flexible the programs function in accommodating the diverse research interests of students, nine respondents indicated high flexibility, with tailored options for individual research goals. Two respondents indicated limited flexibility in accommodating diverse research interests. No one selected the moderate category.

### ***Quality of Life***

In terms of the alignment of the provided stipend with the living expenses in the region, zero programs indicated the stipend is more than sufficient to cover living expenses; six indicated stipend covers basic living expenses with some room for improvement, and four indicated the stipend may not adequately cover essential living expenses.

### ***Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion***

Figure 2 shows how participants reported the ways their programs pursue diversity and equity. "Other" responses included statements that state legislatures do not allow these things to be visible as well as details about how well faculty represent, or do not represent, student populations.



**Figure 2. DEI support reported across all programs.**

## Qualitative Results

This section is organized directly around the questions we asked in our survey; as such, the following sub-sections correspond both to survey questions and to the organization of the quantitative results presented above.

To provide a more meaningful qualitative analysis, we sub-categorized responses into TPC and non-TPC programs. TPC programs, in this instance, include any responses where the participant selected “technical communication” in response to Question #2 (“With which fields is your program significantly aligned?”), even if they also checked other disciplines as important to their program. Non-TPC program responses, for our purposes, are those associated with a response set where the participant did not check “technical communication” in response to Question #2. It is important to note that our term “non-TPC programs” signifies that a respondent did not identify TPC as central to their program; it does not signify that TPC is wholly absent at all. In fact, based on the response sets when answers are correlated by participant, we would argue that almost all programs represented do have a TPC presence. The identification herein as “TPC” or “non-TPC” is a matter of the particular respondents’ perception of TPC as central, or not, to their program’s structure.

We aim to identify patterns associated with a significant/central TPC presence, even if a program includes other disciplines. This distinction allows for a more direct engagement with TPC doctoral programs while also incorporating relevant insights from adjacent disciplines and allowing those adjacent disciplines to act as an informal sort of control or comparison mechanism. Thus, the following sub-sections provide a synthesized understanding of the survey’s qualitative results and their relationships. As above, the sections that follow are opportunities and activities, mentoring and advising; funding; interdisciplinary collaboration; professional development; community; alumni placement; accommodating research interests; quality of life; and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

### ***Opportunities and Activities***

In terms of what activities a program sponsors, we found evidence of significant existing infrastructure. Most of the structures our survey anticipated in its response choices were indeed present in many programs. Among the four “other” responses, program directors reported co-authoring opportunities, research and summer funding, a works-in-progress group, a dissertation-writing class, a formal job market prep class for academic and non-academic jobs, a research colloquium during which students present their work, opportunities to take on various editorial positions, opportunities to gain administrative experience in the writing program and elsewhere, and multiple types of regular review and check-in processes.

TPC programs reported a strong emphasis on professional and research-based activities, often tied to editorial work, administrative experience, and applied research collaborations. One respondent detailed a multifaceted infrastructure designed to foster both academic and non-academic career paths: *“Students have opportunities to take on various editorial positions, gain administrative experience in the writing program, and participate in a research colloquium where they present their work.”* Another TPC respondent highlighted formalized job market preparation by saying, *“We have a dissertation-writing class and a formal job market prep course for both academic and non-academic jobs.”* This distinction is particularly relevant to TPC, as graduates often pursue careers in industry, government, and professional communication roles, in addition to tenure-track positions. Respondents also reported structured funding opportunities for research and conference participation: *“We provide research and summer funding, and there are matching funds for conducting research available from the College & Graduate School.”* This suggests that while funding is present, it is not likely enough to cover all the costs of

Non-TPC programs reported many of the same structural opportunities, though they tended to focus more on traditional academic pathways rather than applied professionalization experiences. One respondent described a strong internal review and mentorship process: *“We have multiple types of regular review and check-in processes, including works-in-progress groups and faculty-led mentoring sessions.”* While this structure provides consistent academic support, it does not emphasize external research collaborations or non-academic career pathways as frequently as TPC programs. Another respondent noted a greater reliance on informal networking rather than structured job market preparation: *“We encourage students to co-author with faculty, but there is no formal job market prep class.”*

Funding disparities also emerged, with some non-TPC respondents highlighting financial constraints that limit research opportunities: *“It's not enough money to*

*acclimate to expensive major conferences.*" This reinforces a broader issue within doctoral education—the availability of research support is uneven across institutions, and students often struggle to secure sufficient funding for conference travel and professional development.

### ***Mentoring and Advising***

Mentoring and advising structures differ between TPC and non-TPC doctoral programs, with varying levels of formalized mentorship, advising models, and professional development opportunities. While most programs reported some form of structured mentorship, the depth and scope of support varied significantly. Most TPC programs described a robust and multi-layered mentorship model, emphasizing both formal advising structures and peer/colleague mentorship opportunities. One respondent described a comprehensive, structured mentorship system and said, *"Each student is mentored by the Director their first year. After that, they have a chair and full committee. They also have mentors across their research projects and GAships."* Additionally, some TPC programs incorporate mentorship into professional development initiatives, offering structured programming such as: *"We have a multifaceted professional development support program called our 'CAP' (Collaborative Academic Professionalization). Cohorts of students progress through the program, which involves weekly meetings and workshops. Grad students can also apply to serve as assistant directors of our writing center and the first-year writing program."* Responses in this section showed that mentorship in TPC programs extends beyond traditional advising and into structured professionalization efforts, helping students gain administrative and leadership experience. Some TPC programs also focus on flexibility in mentorship, allowing students to transition between advisors or work with multiple faculty members based on evolving research interests: *"Each student is provided a faculty mentor who may continue as prelim advisor and then dissertation advisor. A faculty member serves as the academic advisor for all students in coursework."* A focus on consistent guidance and the ability to adapt mentorship experiences with evolving goals was apparent in these responses.

Non-TPC programs also reported mentorship and advising structures, though with some variations in depth and formalization. Some respondents highlighted traditional faculty advising models, where a single primary advisor plays the central role: *"Each student is assigned a faculty mentor at the start of the program, who typically becomes their dissertation chair."* In contrast to structured professionalization programs seen in TPC programs, non-TPC programs tended to offer less formalized mentorship opportunities outside traditional advising roles. One respondent noted: *"Our mentoring is primarily informal. Students connect with faculty based on research interests, but there is no formalized mentoring beyond*

*dissertation advising.*" This response and others suggested a less systematic approach.

Another respondent pointed out the uneven quality of mentorship across faculty members: *"Mentoring depends a lot on the faculty member. Some are very engaged, while others are hands-off."* This indicates that while mentorship is available, it may not be equally distributed or consistently structured across all faculty members.

### ***Funding***

TPC Programs offered funding through teaching assistantships, research assistantships, and conference travel support. One participant noted: *"Most of our students are self-funded because they are at a distance. We have 12 assistantships available to us for on-campus students."* This highlights potential disparities in funding for distance-learning students compared to their on-campus counterparts.

Non-TPC Programs had more structured funding but noted competition for resources. One respondent stated: *"We have regular funding available as part of a recurring budget allocation tied to cohort size, allowing us to distribute research enhancement funds over four to five years."* This suggests a planned funding strategy, though access to additional grants may be selective.

### ***Interdisciplinary Collaboration***

TPC programs actively engaged with interdisciplinary fields such as digital humanities, health communication, and experience architecture. One respondent shared: *"Our faculty regularly collaborate with the College of Engineering and the School of Public Health, allowing students to engage in interdisciplinary projects."* Responses in this section suggest that interdisciplinary engagement is common and well-supported.

While non-TPC programs largely seemed to encourage coursework outside the primary discipline, respondents also noted challenges. A participant mentioned: *"Students are required to complete coursework outside their department, but collaboration across disciplines is not always institutionally supported."* Responses showed that while interdisciplinary study is promoted across all programs represented in this sample, more pronounced institutional barriers may exist in programs that already have a broader focus.

### ***Professional Development***

TPC programs emphasized structured professionalization through workshops, mentorship groups, and research initiatives. One respondent described: *"We have a*

*professional development support program called our 'CAP' (Collaborative Academic Professionalization), which involves weekly meetings and workshops."* Other responses also suggested a strong focus on long-term academic and career growth.

Non-TPC programs prioritized teaching development but offered fewer built-in, research-focused mentorship programs. One respondent explained: *"We have a yearly teaching conference where graduate TAs are invited to present and share insights."* While teaching preparation is emphasized, structured research mentorship appears less prominent in this response set.

### **Community**

Many TPC programs reported strong, structured efforts to build a supportive graduate student community, often through formalized events, networking opportunities, and ongoing social gatherings. One respondent noted: *"We typically hold a get-together to welcome new PhD students and encourage them to meet existing PhD students. Also, we have a graduate student organization that holds events."* Intentional onboarding and networking opportunities in these responses were identified as helping students integrate into program cultures. Some programs also emphasize professional and academic community-building, ensuring that students engage with faculty, peers, and broader research networks: *"We hold a research colloquium in Fall for faculty and PhD candidates to share their work, ignite talks in the Spring, and monthly events for students to work on projects in a shared space with faculty available as needed."* Another key theme in TPC programs was the effort to integrate both in-person and distance-learning students into a cohesive community: *"Our program hosts virtual events for distance students so they can engage with faculty and peers. We also pair incoming students with peer mentors to help them adjust."* This recognition of the different needs of on-campus and remote students reflects a proactive approach to fostering inclusivity in program culture.

However, some TPC programs also highlighted challenges in faculty-student engagement, particularly regarding maintaining consistent faculty involvement in social and academic community-building: *"Community among students is strong, but the community between students and faculty is weaker."* While student engagement appears robust across this response set, data indicates that faculty participation in program-wide social and professionalization events may vary.

In contrast, community-building efforts in non-TPC programs varied more widely, with some programs actively fostering engagement while others reported more passive or inconsistent efforts. Some non-TPC programs described initiatives similar to those in TPC programs, such as informal networking events and academic gatherings: *"We have a graduate student association that organizes social and academic events throughout the year."* However, other programs reported weaker

engagement structures or challenges in creating a sense of belonging, particularly among students from underrepresented backgrounds: *"The climate in the workplace prohibits some from wanting to attend these events. At the beginning of the semester and end of the semester is not enough."* Responses showed how external factors—such as institutional culture and faculty-student dynamics—can affect students' willingness to participate in community-building activities.

Some non-TPC programs also noted that COVID-19 had lasting effects on their ability to rebuild in-person engagement, leading to an increased reliance on virtual platforms: *"Student Discord chat has helped mitigate lack of face-to-face interactions since COVID, but this is something students have struggled with."* Responses showed adaptation but also that students may still feel disconnected from their peers and faculty in hybrid or remote settings. Despite occasional tensions, another respondent observed that *"over the last twenty years, [community] has been mostly strong. Occasionally there are tensions among groups, but in general the students are there for one another and the atmosphere among the majority of folks is very positive."* Various programs also emphasized regular informal and formal social events. One respondent mentioned *"weekly or monthly meet-ups; lectures or other academic events specifically for the program."* Other activities mentioned included group advising and various kinds of regular social events.

### ***Alumni Placement***

Placement information and examples of successful outcomes from PhD programs reveal a mix of positive achievements and critical perspectives on institutional pressures. TPC programs had a mix of academic and industry placements. One respondent highlighted: *"Many of our graduates are in leadership roles in the field now, and others have gone into usability consulting and technical communication roles in industry."* This demonstrates the breadth of career pathways for TPC graduates, which we mentioned in our introduction as well. Non-TPC programs reported high academic placement rates but fewer industry transitions. One participant stated: *"The majority of our graduates secure tenure-track positions at research institutions or community colleges."* Overall results show strong academic placement but less emphasis on non-academic careers.

### ***Accommodating Research Interests***

TPC Programs generally provided high flexibility, allowing students to tailor their coursework and research approaches to fit their professional and academic goals. One respondent shared: *"We have updated our graduate curriculum to give PhD students more choices in their coursework."* Intentional efforts to accommodate a range of research interests by expanding curricular options were apparent in several responses. Additionally, some TPC programs encouraged alternative forms of research outputs beyond traditional dissertations. A participant explained:

*"We've had students produce films, digital/interactive sites/apps, installations, and various other outcomes. We encourage our students to innovate and reward them for doing so."* Some programs also allowed students to create custom concentrations that aligned with their unique research trajectories. One respondent stated: *"Students can propose a custom concentration to suit their research interests in the PhD program."*

Non-TPC Programs also accommodated diverse research interests but often through preset disciplinary pathways rather than individually tailored concentrations. One participant noted: *"We have multiple disciplinary pathways that students can choose from, but they are predefined."* Some non-TPC programs reported a strong emphasis on traditional dissertation formats rather than alternative research outputs. One respondent observed: *"While digital work is allowed, most students complete standard dissertation projects."* This suggests that non-TPC programs may be slower to adopt multimodal research approaches compared to TPC programs, which actively encourage diverse scholarly outputs.

### **Quality of Life**

The financial realities of doctoral programs, particularly stipends and cost-of-living alignment, play a significant role in the quality of life for students. Across both TPC and non-TPC programs, respondents highlighted financial challenges, with many indicating that stipends were insufficient to fully cover living expenses. However, some differences emerged in how programs addressed these challenges.

Many TPC programs reported institutional awareness of financial struggles and efforts to improve funding structures. One respondent explained: *"Our students have their own union and they are currently in bargaining. They received substantial raises in the past, but in this economy, it's difficult for everyone. We are looking into other ways to support our students during their time with us."* This response highlights an apparent thread of ongoing advocacy efforts within TPC programs to improve funding conditions for graduate students. Additionally, some TPC programs mentioned structured funding models that provide financial support beyond assistantships: *"We have seen some improvement of late, but we are always trying to keep up with rising costs of housing, in particular, as well as to keep things equitable for students who are coming to the program with dependents to care for."* This response set shows that TPC programs are proactively working on equity-based financial support, but stipends remain a major concern across programs. One TPC respondent noted: *"Our stipend is high nationally, but so is our cost of living."* This reflects a common struggle in TPC programs—even when stipends are comparatively competitive, they do not always keep pace with local economic conditions.

Non-TPC programs reported similar financial constraints, though there was less mention of structured advocacy efforts to improve funding conditions. One respondent stated: *"This is a fight every [graduate program director] at our university is having with upper admin and has been for quite some time."* Some non-TPC respondents also described graduate students needing additional jobs to make ends meet: *"Students are poor and often hold other jobs."* This response, while blunt, captures a common financial reality for doctoral students across fields. Additionally, administrative challenges were noted more frequently in non-TPC programs. One respondent described their efforts to increase stipends as an *"uphill battle with administration,"* implying institutional resistance to increasing financial support.

### ***Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion***

These responses indicate the status of explicit DEI initiatives at the time of our survey in early 2024. As we continued work on the article in early 2025, our own university has been scrubbing mention of DEI from external documents (including course catalogs), and it's likely that other institutions are also seeing major shifts in the wake of various presidential executive orders and the uncertainty surrounding their implementation.

TPC programs demonstrated a commitment to integrating DEI into research, curriculum, and structural support initiatives. One respondent emphasized faculty involvement: *"We have a diverse faculty, but we do not have enough Black faculty for me to feel comfortable saying that. While we have representatives from the LGBTQ, Indigenous, Jewish, and Latino communities, we lack representation that mirrors our student population."* Several TPC programs also foregrounded inclusive pedagogical practices and research initiatives: *"We are now foregrounding translanguaging writing in our classes."* Institutional policies and external constraints also played a role in shaping DEI efforts. Some TPC respondents noted the impact of state policies on public DEI statements and funding: *"We are in [a state where] our ability to publicly state support for DEI or spend funds on it has to be framed very carefully; recent state-level hostility to DEI has negatively affected our efforts to recruit marginalized students and faculty."* Moreover, TPC programs often linked DEI to structural programmatic changes, including financial support and recruitment strategies: *"We have actively sought to transform the field by providing opportunities and pathways for members of underrepresented groups to succeed in our program. This work will never be finished as it is a multi-generational transformation."* Other responses also suggested long-term commitment to systemic change rather than temporary, performative DEI efforts.

Non-TPC programs expressed similar commitments to DEI, though their efforts often appeared more institutional than programmatic. One respondent noted: *"Creating more structures within the department including committees that*

*specifically support DEI work.*” While this highlights departmental engagement with DEI, it suggests that some non-TPC programs rely more on committee-driven approaches rather than curriculum-wide or faculty-driven initiatives. Another respondent discussed the challenges of accessibility in learning environments: *“Accessibility in our learning spaces is probably our biggest initiative university-wide just now with multiple trainings happening at dept and university level.”* Other responses also demonstrated broad institutional commitments to accessibility, diversity, and equity, though it is unclear how much autonomy individual programs have in shaping these initiatives.

Many programs mentioned financial and recruitment-based DEI strategies. One non-TPC respondent noted: *“We leverage funds to enhance stipends for underrepresented students.”* State and institutional policies were also a major challenge for programs across the board: *“State legislature does not allow us to state visibly [that we support DEI].”*

## **Discussion and Recommendations**

In this discussion that follows, we highlight notable elements of the results offered above and we offer some specific recommendations that we see as most exigent. Perhaps the most notable element of the data discussed above is the general feeling that programs in our field are doing well. In almost every area, we see a range of responses from program directors, all contextualized with local variables in the qualitative data. For example, in opportunities and activities, we see that qualitative responses suggested an integration of research, administration, and publication experience, which aligns with the applied and interdisciplinary nature of the fields represented here. Some responses in this area also suggested that many programs, perhaps especially those *without* a strong TPC focus, rely on organic mentorship rather than structured planning to prepare students for post-graduate careers. This pattern suggests that programs with less of a TPC focus might look to those with more central TPC tenets for ideas on creating additional formal mentoring structures.

Similarities across programs showed up in the area of mentoring and advising, with evidence of a lot of structured approaches that ensure continuity of support across different academic and research stages. As shown in the qualitative results above, some TPC programs have structures that ensure students receive guidance not just from one advisor but from multiple faculty members and peers. Meanwhile non-TPC programs tended toward structures that are both less formalized and also more reliant on a single mentor. While effective in ensuring one-on-one mentorship, this model may lack the breadth of collaborative mentoring structures found in TPC programs and may lend itself to replication models of mentorship (Eble, 2020; Eble

& Gaillet, 2019). Less systematic approaches may work well for self-directed students but could leave others seeking more structured support.

Our results related to community building suggest an understanding that hybrid models of social and academic engagement mirror the way students build both scholarly networks and personal connections, strengthening their overall experience. Many programs provided results showing their infrastructures seek to emulate professional networking practices. Notably, we could see trends in how faculty involvement may vary depending on program focus and size, potentially limiting mentorship and collaborative opportunities outside of formal advising structures.

Those mentoring structures likely have connections to career outcomes, and our data shows a clear difference in how programs with a central TPC focus think more broadly about career pathways for their graduates. TPC-oriented programs tend to encourage and support multimodal and alternative approaches to dissertation work, which aligns with the evolving nature of TPC as a field that integrates digital and technical communication. Non-TPC program responses showed that, while alternative approaches tend to be accommodated, they may not receive as much support and students may have less agency in designing their own academic trajectory. This seems likely appropriate to the slight differences in program goals but is worth noting in a rapidly changing academic landscape.

The one outlier area that doesn't demonstrate confidence in the strength and health of programs represented in this data set—and thus an area that we want to spend some time with—is the stipend provided to students on assistantship. Not a single program indicated that the stipend would do more than cover living expenses. Based on our personal experiences, we were actually surprised to see six people responding that stipends cover living expenses. The possible mismatch between faculty perception and student experience here represents a need for more primary research on student perspectives on the issue of funding.

Regardless of the degree to which official funding is not sufficient, students in our field do not have the financial support to attend conferences or procure other professional development unless support is provided directly or they have outside support. But, more than that, this financial reality may contribute to a sense of "putting life on hold" while in graduate school. Research on TPC programmatic structures supports these concerns, as faculty in the field have consistently reported difficulties in securing sufficient funding and administrative resources for graduate programs (Maylath, Grabill, & Gurak, 2010). From a humanist perspective, asking prospective students to "put life on hold" is not a great thing to do to people, and from a more utilitarian perspective, it will mean some people do not pursue this path and our field thus misses out on their contributions. It is also notable that graduate assistantships in other fields (especially the sciences) tend to

have higher salaries, which means we may lose students to fields they see as more lucrative. In viewing our survey results, we noted that programs do not seem to have a fixed approach in terms of funding packages offered to applicants. We also know that it is possible for an applicant with multiple offers to negotiate at some (but likely not all) institutions. Colloquially, we mostly hear about students having a hard time navigating their expenses with the stipend offered. Perhaps one of the most effective strategies for program directors to advocate to upper administration for higher stipends is by using tools that offer comparisons to peer institutions, like Will Cheshier and Logan Clem’s (2024) [CompRhet Money Map](#). Table 1 offers a breakdown of our key takeaways as we worked to differentiate the approaches of programs with strong TPC foci.

| Category                        | TPC Programs   | Non-TPC Programs   | Key Takeaways  |
|---------------------------------|--|--|--|
| <b>Funding &amp; Stipends</b>   | Often underfunded, limited travel and research funding                           | Generally underfunded but slightly more varied in external grant support | Need for more competitive funding to retain students and attract diverse applicants  |
| <b>Administrative Structure</b> | Increasingly independent from English departments                                | More entrenched in traditional humanities structures                     | Structural autonomy seems to facilitate program growth and adaptability  |
| <b>Professionalization</b>      | Strong emphasis on workplace connections, industry partnerships, internships     | More focused on academic career paths, with limited industry engagement  | TPC programs excel in preparing students for diverse careers, while non-TPC programs often lack robust non-academic career preparation |
| <b>Curricular Flexibility</b>   | More adaptable to industry trends, including digital media and UX                | More focused on traditional coursework and academic research             | TPC programs benefit from interdisciplinary approaches, whereas non-TPC programs may struggle with curricular rigidity                 |
| <b>Research Priorities</b>      | Focused on digital literacies, UX, writing technologies, workplace communication | Primarily focused on rhetorical theory, pedagogy, and literary analysis  | Bridging the gap between research priorities could enhance interdisciplinary collaboration   |

|   |  |  |   |
|---|--|--|---|
| <b>Social Integration &amp; Retention</b> | Strong emphasis on mentorship and networking | Mixed—some programs cultivate strong communities, while others lack structured support | Social and academic integration are key to retention across all disciplines |
|---|--|--|---|

**Table 1. Key takeaways in a comparison of responses between programs with an identified/significant TPC focus and those without.**

One element that was uniform across all types of responses was that external political climates constrain DEI initiatives and, similarly, employment prospects. Multiple states have recently experienced legislative restrictions on how they can talk about and enact diversity and inclusivity oriented programs. For programs whose content explicitly includes DEI work, this is especially tricky. This could be the subject of an entire article and falls beyond the scope of our work here, except to say that programs should be having conversations about how to proactively manage such initiatives and restrictions in a constantly changing national landscape of surveillance.

One program had two different respondents: the program director and an associate dean from the graduate school. Their responses were remarkably aligned both qualitatively and quantitatively, suggesting (we hope) that faculty in our fields are in tune with one another about what their programs offer and how they stack up. The only two quantitative differences were on *community* and *research support*, with the dean saying they have a strong and supportive community and moderate support for research initiatives, and the current program director saying they have a moderate sense of community and extensive research funding and resources. The program director’s qualitative response focused on recent years, while the dean discussed a span of two decades and acknowledged, “*Occasionally there are tensions among groups, but in general the students are there for one another and the atmosphere among the majority of folks is very positive.*” The research responses were remarkably similar in their qualitative discussion of research opportunities; the dean (who rated research opportunities lower) additionally mentioned matching funds from the college and graduate school. This perhaps highlights that our questions were purposely a bit vague, aimed at gauging faculty’s sense of relative strengths. We suspect that the program director was weighing their research opportunities against those of other programs, while the dean was weighing them against what he wished existed. Altogether, we found this set of responses especially instructive because it shows that faculty have a strongly triangulated sense of what currently exists in our programs, but we may be well served by having more discussions about programmatic planning.

This research could be expanded by asking students what they want and need. Some studies suggest misalignment in what is offered and students’ expectations

and needs (Blackmon, 2024), a related parallel to demonstrate misalignments between the work faculty value and what is valued by tenure committees (Fritzsche, Hart-Davidson & Long, 2022). Happily, this research has already begun. At the time we were gathering our data, Julia Romberger reached out to us about a similar project, approached from the opposite direction: She had been surveying students about many of the same questions we were interested in.

Romberger also pointed us toward Barbara Lovitt's *Leaving the Ivory Tower* (2001), which investigates why students leave PhD programs. This text, though dated, points to some patterns that almost certainly remain true over decades. Importantly, academic and social integration are the largest factors in student success and retention. Lovitt argues: "Departments are not just social structural units in which graduate education takes place; they are cultures that are independent of the parent discipline and that shape the structures, process, and interactions that take place within them" (p. 260). While we would argue that local units are not wholly independent of parent disciplines—see Chris M. Golde's (2005) work for more on the complicated interplay between departments and disciplines—we agree with Lovitt's assessment that social integration is an important factor in doctoral student success. Higher education in rhetoric, composition, and technical communication is necessarily a dialogic enterprise; some level of social labor is required for success in our fields. Thus, successful programs will sponsor a variety of opportunities for students of varying backgrounds and levels to make strong connections with one another and with faculty.

Relatedly, Lovitt shows that "fit" is vital, and that it is not always something that students are well prepared to evaluate. "More students used the university's general reputation than information about the department or program" (p. 51). In Lovitt's survey, of the criteria students reported using in making their selections about PhD programs, the only criterion with a greater than 10% difference between "completers" and "non-completers" was "visited graduate schools." Students who were able to visit prospective schools and speak with program faculty fared 14% better in terms of ultimate completion. Thus, successful programs should create opportunities for admitted students to visit with their faculty before making decisions about matriculation. This does not necessarily mean funding a "campus visit" but could be accomplished through virtual means.

This research also supports the notion that our field might pursue additional inquiry into contra-professionalization. Research on TPC programs (Pennell, Frost, & Ghetto, 2018), like some mentoring research (Carliner, 2012), has previously found that creating infrastructure and formalized processes can at times hinder the development of successful professionalization. Rather, creating a culture that can create space for more organic connections seems to better serve students in the long term. As mentioned above, social integration is key, and students will require different elements to make social connections based on local contexts. Thus,

programs should consider offering a variety of opportunities. Carter's (2013) showcase of Texas Tech's program offers a number of fantastic ideas that are workable for both online and face-to-face programs, to make connections *with the explicit understanding* that students also are responsible for the development and maintenance of healthy socio-academic relationships, that this is an important and basic responsibility for members of our disciplines. Part of the job of faculty is to teach students to engage in the discipline on their own; they cannot practice that if we're always in the room. Scaffolded professional development opportunities that include pathways into less structured interactions, like peer mentoring groups as one example, can lead students to becoming leaders themselves.

In sum, we offer the following recommendations for programs in rhetoric, composition, and technical communication fields:

For programs:

- Actively recruit in a variety of ways to reach a lot of different kinds of students
- Be responsive to prospective students and answer their questions honestly.
- Reflexively investigate and address misalignments in student expectations and program offerings; Michigan State's recent admissions pause offers a responsible example of this (Michigan State University, 2024)
- Reflect on what language is jargon and always explain. Better to explain when it's not needed than vice versa. For example, some incoming students do not know what assistantship funding means or what an assistantship is.
- Create mentoring networks and ensure that multiple people are checking in regularly with all students; sustain conversations among faculty (especially newer faculty) and students about the different ways academic mentoring can look (Goings, 2024).
- Foster both academic and social integration with a variety of entry points.
- Focus on fit in recruitment contexts. (This especially includes redirecting students who might be focused on prestige.)
- Enable and create space for contra-professionalization practices.
- Hold synchronous events that include many faculty, not just the program director, to help students get a sense of the program.
- Be aware of the job market and be able/willing to talk to students about their prospects after graduation.

- After acceptance, assign faculty to help onboard accepted students to avoid communication drop-off after admittance. This practice also widens student perspectives of the program and helps faculty understand incoming cohorts. And, it can lead to fruitful mentor/advisor assignments.

As a community of scholars and program directors in rhetoric, composition, and technical communication, we might consider building on our existing cross-institutional coalitions to share resources, strategies, and data pertaining to program support and fit. For example, creating a shared repository of admissions materials, assistantship details, mentoring models, and alumni career paths could help us better communicate our value to prospective students and set realistic expectations. Such bodies of work can also provide a corpus from which to generate peer-reviewed research. While much of the existing work on choosing and understanding doctoral programs in rhetoric, composition, and technical communication is available on an ad hoc basis rather than in peer-reviewed scholarship (for example, in our most recent admitted cohorts, most students applied because a professor recommended the program), it is still valuable and would benefit from added apparency and support. National organizations like CPTSC or the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW) might facilitate working groups to track trends and use this data to encourage coordinated advocacy for funding and structural reform. Just as we call on students to collaborate and network, we hope administrators and faculty can draw on these findings to iteratively work to model a more connected, transparent, and mutually supportive field-wide approach to graduate education.

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## Appendix A

### Full Survey Text

Understanding Student Support Needed and Provided by PhD Programs in Rhet, Comp, and TPC

Start of Block: Block 1

Q0.1

We invite you to participate in our research study on PhD programs in Rhetoric, Composition, and Technical Communication. Completing this survey should take you between 5 and 15 minutes (depending on how many open-ended questions you skip/answer). By participating in the survey, you can reflect on your program's strengths, unique features, and supportive environments. You also contribute to knowledge that will help attract students to our field and ensure prospective students find supportive programs that are a good fit. By taking part in this survey, you will:

1. Shape the Future: Your insights will contribute to shaping the future of PhD programs, helping improve existing structures and attract prospective students.
2. Inform Best Practices: Your experiences will inform best practices in program coordination, mentorship, and support for PhD students.
3. Enhance Community: Participation fosters a sense of community among program coordinators, connecting you with peers who share similar responsibilities.
4. Stay Informed: Access the latest research findings and contribute to a growing body of knowledge in our field.
5. Support Prospective Students: Your input will assist prospective students in finding programs that align with their goals and values.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to reach out to the principal investigator, Erin Clark, Associate Professor & PhD Program Coordinator, Department of English, East Carolina University at [froste@ecu.edu](mailto:froste@ecu.edu) or 252-328-5561 or to the East Carolina or to the East Carolina University Institutional Review Board Office at 252-744-2914. . This study is certified exempt by the ECU IRB (UMCIRB 24-000221). Continuing with the survey indicates your informed consent as a participant. Thank you for being a part of this important study!

End of Block: Block 1

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q0 What is the name of your college/university (that is, the college/university whose PhD program you will be responding about)?

Q1: Which statement best describes your role?

- I am currently coordinating/directing a PhD program (1)
- I have previously coordinated/directed a PhD program (2)
- I am a faculty member in a PhD program (3)
- Other: (4) \_\_\_\_\_

Q2: With which fields is your program significantly aligned? (Choose all that apply)

- Rhetoric (1)
- Composition/Writing Studies (2)
- Technical Communication (3)
- Other: (4) \_\_\_\_\_

Q3: Approximately how many students are enrolled in your program at any given time?

- Fewer than 8 (1)
- 8-20 (2)
- 20-30 (3)
- 30+ (4)

Q4: Which activities does your program sponsor, in any format (online or face-to-face):

- Orientation (1)
- Meet and greets for prospective students (2)
- Teacher training (3)
- Regular, required professional development (4)
- Optional professional development (5)
- A jobs group (6)
- Book/article reading group (16)
- Writing groups (7)
- Formal mentorship pairings/groups (8)
- Centralized advising (9)
- De-centralized advising (all faculty serve as advisors) (10)

- Peer-to-peer mentoring (11)
  - Conference preparation support (12)
  - Financial support for conference travel (13)
  - Financial support for visits for prospective students (14)
  - Other: (15)
- 

Q5: How does your program facilitate and support research opportunities for PhD students?

- Extensive research funding and resources (1)
- Moderate support for research initiatives (2)
- Limited opportunities for research (3)
- Not applicable / I don't know (4)

Q6: Please provide additional details or examples regarding research opportunities:

---

Q7: What kind of mentorship and advisory support do PhD students receive in your program?

- Robust mentorship and advisory system (1)
- Adequate support with room for improvement (2)
- Limited mentorship and advisory structure (3)
- Not applicable / I don't know (4)

Q8: Please elaborate on your program's mentorship structure:

---

Q9: What funding opportunities, scholarships, or grants are available to support PhD students in your program?

- Diverse funding options and competitive scholarships (1)
- Some funding opportunities and scholarships (2)
- Limited financial support (3)
- Not applicable / I don't know (4)

Q10: If applicable, please describe available funding sources:

---

Q11: To what extent does your program encourage interdisciplinary collaboration for PhD students?

- Strong emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration (1)
- Moderate support for interdisciplinary projects (2)
- Limited opportunities for interdisciplinary work (3)
- Not applicable / I don't know (4)

Q12: Share any examples or initiatives supporting interdisciplinary collaboration:

---

Q13: What professional development programs or workshops are offered to PhD students to enhance their skills?

- Comprehensive professional development programs (1)
- Some professional development opportunities (2)
- Limited professional development support (3)
- Not applicable / I don't know (4)

Q14: Provide details on specific professional development offerings:

---

Q15: How would you describe the sense of community among PhD students within your program?

- Strong and supportive community (1)
- Moderate sense of community (2)
- Limited community engagement (3)
- Not applicable / I don't know (4)

Q16: Share any events or initiatives for fostering a sense of community:

---

Q17: Which of the following best describes the alumni of your PhD program?

- High success in securing academic positions or industry roles (1)
- Moderate success in post-PhD placements (2)
- Limited success in securing relevant positions (3)
- Not applicable / I don't know (4)

Q18: If applicable, please share additional placement information and/or examples of successful outcomes:

---

Q19: How flexible is the program in accommodating the diverse research interests of PhD students?

- Highly flexible, with tailored options for individual research goals (1)
- Moderately flexible, with some options for customization (2)
- Limited flexibility in accommodating diverse research interests (3)
- Not applicable / I don't know (4)

Q20: Please offer any specific examples of program flexibility for individual research interests:

---

Q21: For programs offering fully funded positions, how would you rate the alignment of the provided stipend with the living expenses in the region?

- Stipend is more than sufficient to cover living expenses (1)
- Stipend covers basic living expenses with some room for improvement (2)
- Stipend may not adequately cover essential living expenses (3)
- Not applicable / I don't know (4)

Q22: If you have any additional comments or insights regarding stipends, please provide them here:

---

Q23: In what ways does your program actively pursue diversity and equity?

- Faculty research foci include DEI issues (1)
  - Our program has a public DEI statement (2)
  - Our valuing of diversity by department/unit/faculty/students is stated openly and visibly (7)
  - We provide specific support for international and/or underrepresented students (3)
  - We have a faculty that is diverse across multiple identity types (4)
  - We have a student body that is diverse across multiple identity types (5)
  - Other: (6)
-

Q24: In what ways is your program actively discussing/changing how you are approaching equity and inclusion issues? To what level is your program engaging your larger university/college, DEI offices, university lawyers, outside organizations, etc. in these endeavors?

---

Q25: What other information should we be thinking about as we consider the ways to make our PhD programs successful and supportive? You also may use this field to enter your name and email if you're willing to let us follow up with you.

---

End of Block: Default Question Block

## Appendix B

Suggested questions to ask faculty when considering programs

- What kind of research support does your program offer? What are some specific research opportunities I should be aware of?
- What is the mentorship and advisory structure like in your program?
- What funding opportunities, scholarships, or grants are available? If I will be on an assistantship,<sup>2</sup> what does that look like?
- How does student governance work? Do faculty/department committees have student representation?
- Does the program sponsor professional development opportunities? How so? What kind of travel funding is provided for conference attendance?
- What is the community like here?
- Where can I find information about job placement rates for this program? What do graduates tend to go on to do?

Ask about your specific interests: “What sort of interdisciplinary possibilities are available in your program?”

### Author Information

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<sup>2</sup> An assistantship is a job assigned by the program. Typically an assistantship offers tuition remission as well as a modest stipend.