

2001 Survey of Recipients of the Communication Arts Ph.D.

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Introduction

A survey of Ph.D. recipients was conducted as part of the self-study mandated by L&S policies. The focus was on perceptions of the quality of various aspects of the doctoral program. One challenge in developing the survey was to devise questions that were relevant to all members of the diverse experience of students. Thus, issues relevant to unique aspects of the four graduate tracks could not be dealt with in this project.

Design and Implementation

Procedures and Response Rate

The questionnaire was developed in collaboration with the Graduate Committee, two of whose members are former students in the Department, and Linda Henzl, Secretary to the Graduate Committee. This group endorsed the overall approach as well as the individual items that appear on the survey.

The targeted group was individuals who received a doctoral degree during the period 1989-2000. A list of email addresses for these individuals was compiled by asking faculty and students in each area to provide that information. Because some of those addresses proved to be out of date, the pool consisted of 45 addresses.

The survey was fielded via email in the Spring semester of the 2000-01 academic year. Twenty six graduates provided data for a response rate of 59% (two of these came in after data analysis was complete and, thus, are not represented in the results that follow). Thirty-nine percent of the respondents identified themselves as graduates in Communication Science, 35% in Film, 22% in Media & Cultural Studies, and 4% in Rhetoric. In part, the response rate in Rhetoric reflects the fact that admissions to that area of the program have been closed since 1989 thereby greatly reducing the number of potential respondents.

The Survey

The survey itself consisted of both closed- and open-ended items. The first portion of the instrument sought demographic information regarding the former students' area of study and placement. The second section was comprised of five items on general perceptions of the program. The third section intermingled close-ended items on specific aspects of the doctoral program with open-ended items that invited elaboration on each of those aspects. The final section consisted of four open-ended items designed to identify positive and negative aspects of the graduate experience.

The asymmetric response scale for the close-ended items consisted of five options: Excellent, Very Good, Good, Fair, and Poor. This scale was selected based on pretesting done by the UW Survey Research Center for their 1999 UW-Madison Graduate Student Satisfaction Survey (Sweet, Guzman, & Kelly, June 12, 2000, University of Wisconsin Survey Center).

Results

Demographics

When asked "What is the title of your current position?" 48% indicated that they were Assistant Professors and 30% that they were Associate Professors. The remaining 22% reported job titles that included Consultant, Senior Lecturer, and Senior Research Analyst. Responses to the item that asked about primary source of income (#3) revealed that 87% of the sample was employed at a university or four-year college. Nine percent indicated that they were self-employed and 4% were affiliated with private industry. Overall, these results show that the vast majority of Ph.D. graduates in Communication Arts pursue a career in the academy.

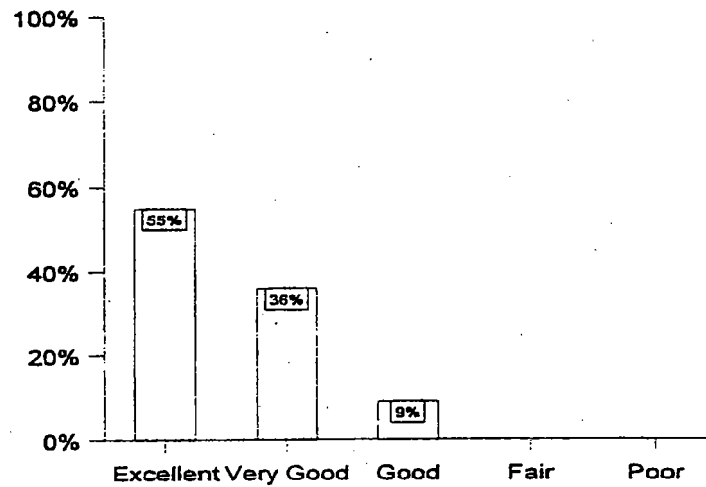
Responses to the item that asked for the year in which the Ph.D. was received were distributed as follows:

Year	Frequency	Percent
1989	2	9.1
1990	2	9.1
1991	1	4.5
1993	2	9.1
1994	1	4.5
1995	2	9.1
1996	1	4.5
1997	1	4.5
1998	4	18.2
2000	2	9.1

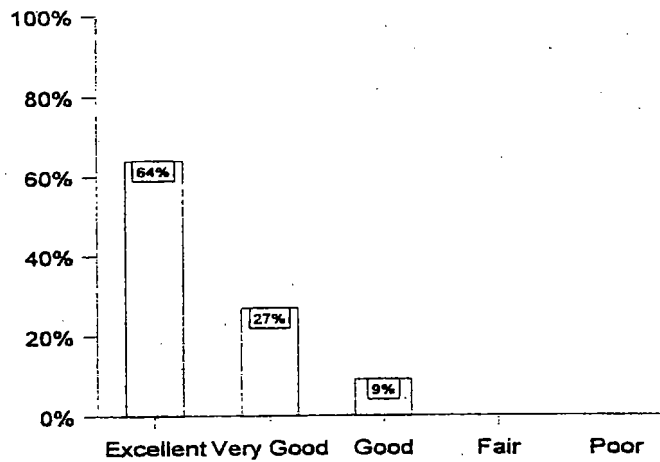
General Perceptions of the Department

Participants provided data to five general opinion questions (numbered 5 through 9). For each item, graduates were instructed to focus on the Department during the time that they were enrolled in the program. The questions are presented below verbatim, then followed by a graphic that summarizes the responses. A verbal summary of the results follows the data for question #9.

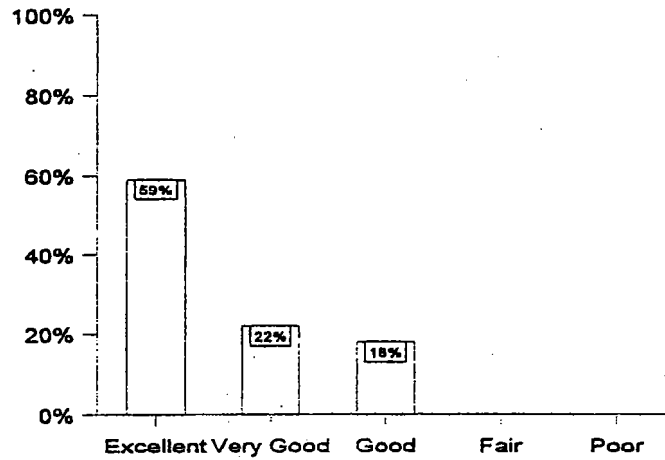
Item #5: Overall, how would you evaluate the Department's graduate program in your area of study (i.e., Comm Science, Film, Media & Cultural Studies, Rhetoric)?



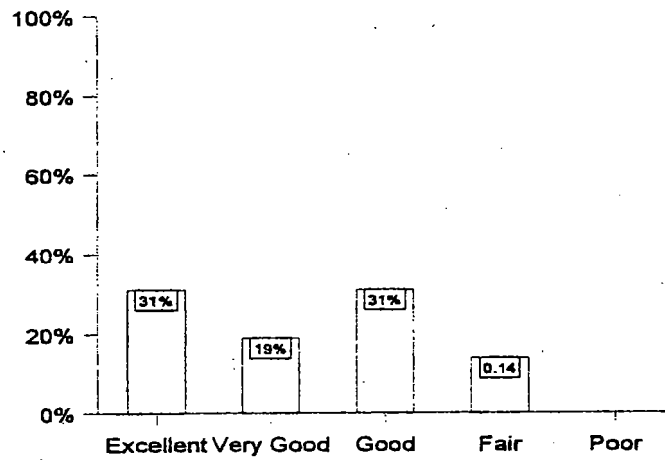
Item #6. Overall, how effective was the program at training you to conduct research?



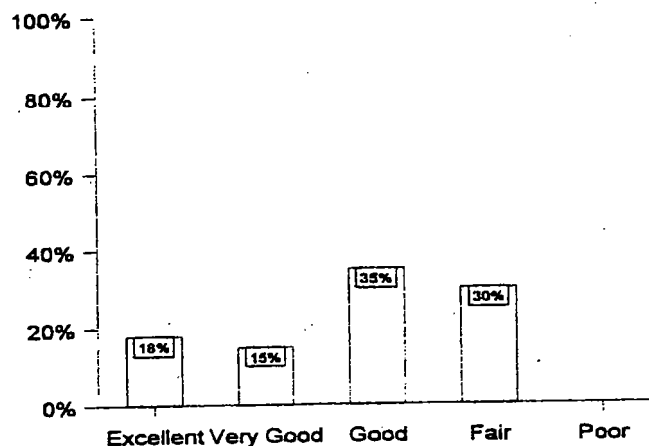
Item #7. Overall, how effective was the program at training you to write in your area of study?



Item #8. Overall, how effective was the program at training you to teach?



Item #9. How would you evaluate the orientation and training that the Department provided to you as a teaching assistant (regardless of area)?



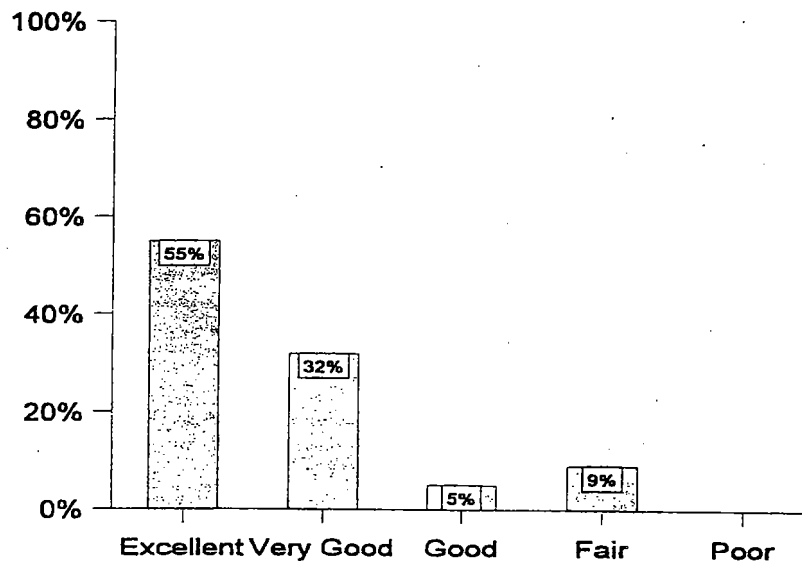
Section Summary. The overall picture presented by responses to the five questions above is quite favorable. For the items on overall evaluation (#5), training in the conduct of research (#6), and training in writing (#7), all of the responses are positive with the majority falling into the "Excellent category." This indicates a very high level of satisfaction in these areas.

Though still quite good, the numbers for the two teaching items (#8 and #9) are less strong. For these questions, a small but nonetheless substantial number of graduates viewed their teaching training as only "Fair." However, there is evidence that satisfaction with teaching is improving. Bivariate correlations were computed between year of graduation and all the close-ended items (i.e., #8 through #15). This analysis produced only one significant result. Item #8 ("Overall, how effective was the program at training you to teach?") showed an association of .45 ($n = 22$, $p < .05$) with the year in which the Ph.D. was conferred. In other words, perceptions of the effectiveness of the program at imparting teaching skills has improved over the period surveyed. No doubt this result reflects the Department's efforts to provide better teacher training and suggests that those efforts have been successful in changing perceptions.

Specific Perceptions of the Department

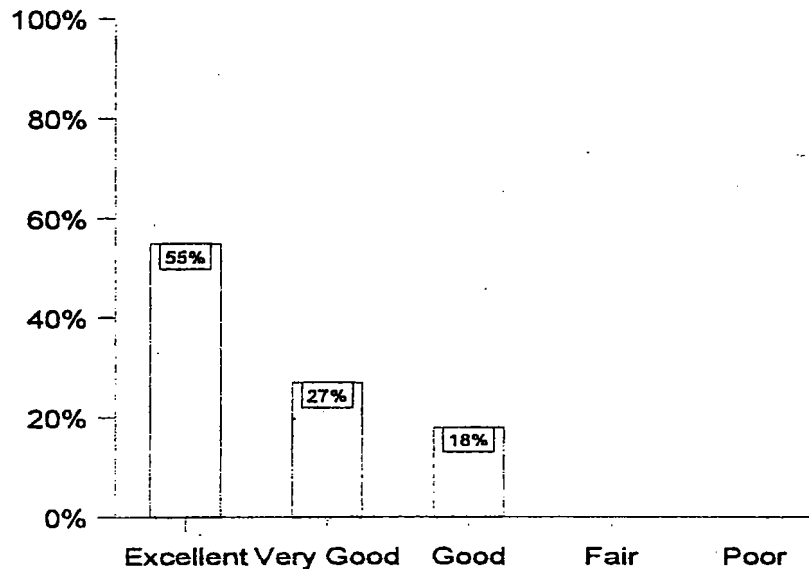
The data for items 10 through 15 appear next. As before, respondents were instructed to provide their opinions for the time during which they were students in the program. A discussion of the findings follows each item.

Item #10. How would you evaluate the advising that you received from your major professor?



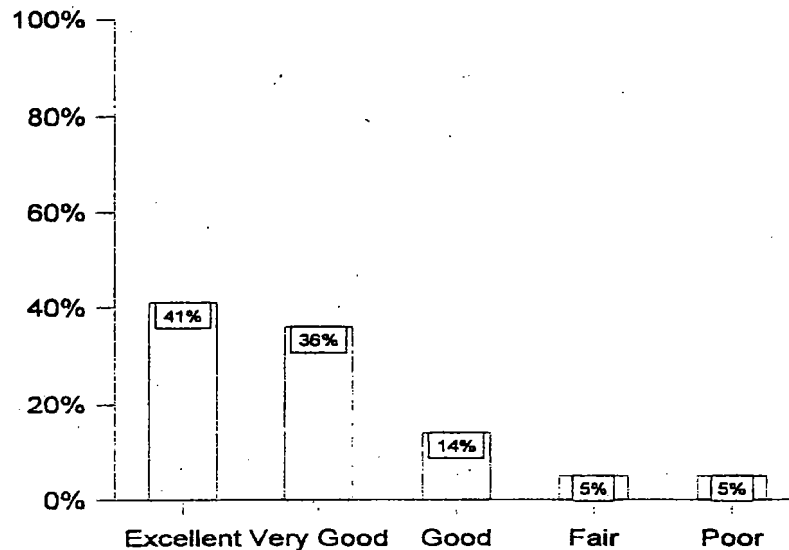
Respondents' judgments of their relationship with faculty were positive overall. Eighty-seven percent evaluated the quality of the advising they received as either "Excellent" or "Very Good". Respondent #19 commented that "My advisor was always supportive and gave me excellent feedback on my dissertation. I'm immensely grateful for the time he spent shaping my research." One less satisfied respondent (#24) has this to say: "Aside from making me take the required courses (which at the time I occasionally resented, but in retrospect was a good idea), my advisor did little or nothing. Evaluation: ineffective." Despite the range of opinion represented by these two comments, the quantitative data indicate that the bulk of students are quite satisfied with the advising they receive.

Item #11. How would you evaluate the accessibility of the faculty in your area of the Department?



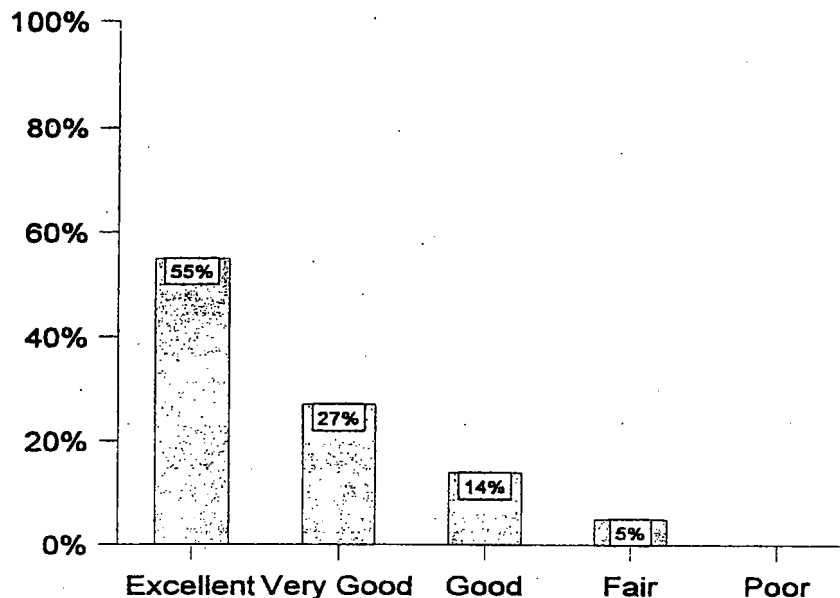
Eighty-two percent of the respondents viewed faculty accessibility as either "Excellent" or "Very Good". Respondent #20 remarked that "In general they were always there and were far more available than in most graduate schools." Although most other comments echoed these sentiments, one respondent (#11) characterized faculty accessibility as "Mixed. One faculty member that I worked with was highly accessible and extremely helpful and supportive; another member that I worked with was not always accessible and neither supportive of my work, or helpful in helping me learn what I wanted and needed to learn." However, as the graph above makes clear, even this respondent judges the accessibility of the faculty as "Good".

Item #12. How would you assess the rapport between faculty and students in your area of the Department?



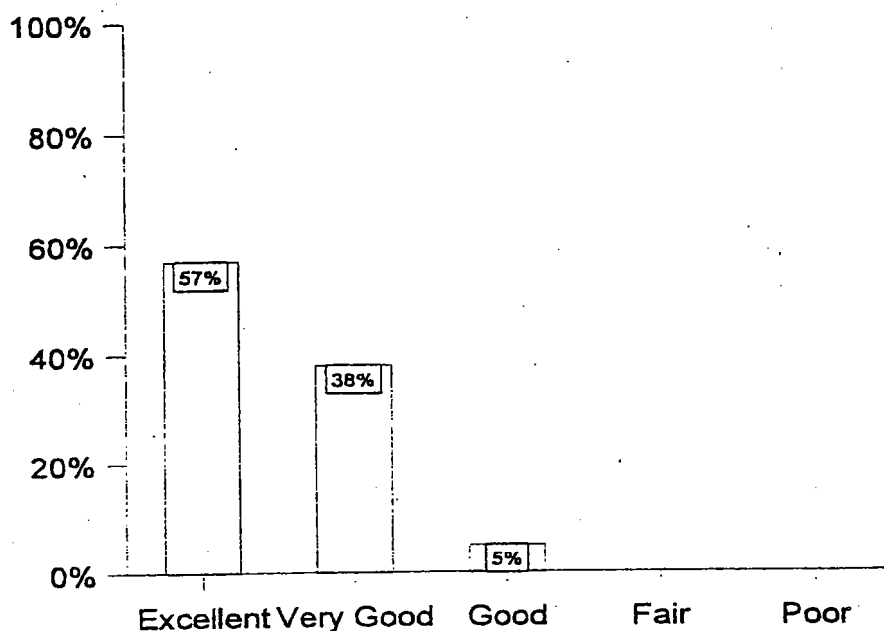
Seventy-seven percent of the sample judged faculty-student rapport to be either "Excellent" or "Very Good". Fourteen percent chose the "Good" response while 5% chose "Fair" and another 5% "Poor." In line with the quantitative data, most of the comments were quite favorable. Respondent #6 was especially appreciative of the interplay between work and play: "One of my fondest memories from UW center around the colloquium and especially the after colloquium bull sessions between faculty and students. To have that experience week in and week out was amazing. I am struggling right now to create that same degree of accessibility and rapport with our faculty and it is a lot harder than it looks. I really respect, in hindsight, the amount of commitment all of the UW faculty made to spending those Thursday evenings with their students." In light of the inherent power differences between faculty and students and the inevitability of one or more nonharmonious relationships in groups of this size, we see the data on faculty-student rapport as positive overall.

Item #13. How would you assess the rapport among students in your area of the Department?



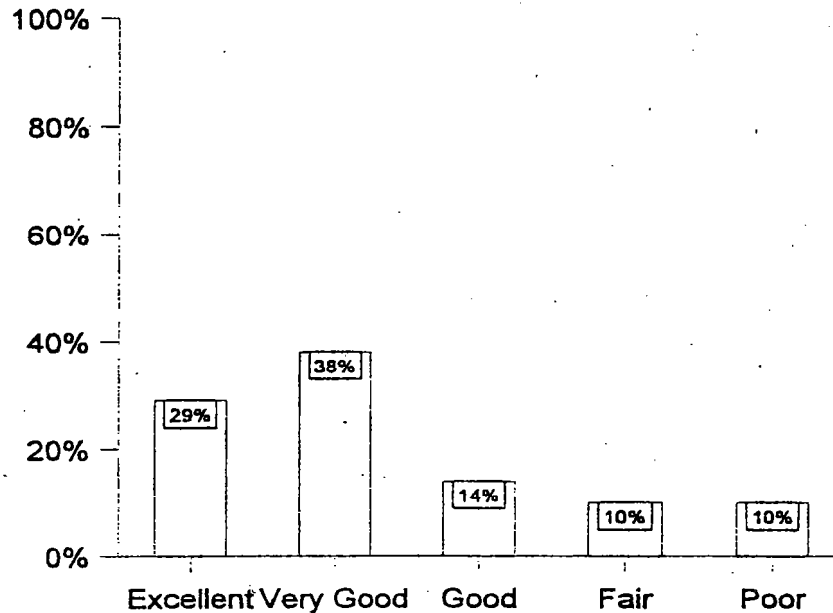
Rapport among students was also very solid with 82% of respondents selecting the “Excellent” or “Very Good” response options. The one respondent (#20) who marked “Fair” viewed student-student relationships as follows: “It degenerated while I was there...I think that the poor job market had something to do with it.” More typical were comments such as (respondent #6) “My first impression of UW was that students felt a part of a community, that they respected each others’ work, that they thought of themselves as a cohort of the best and the brightest. This made my time at UW so much more rewarding and inspirational than my time at XXXX and I made friendships there for life with many of my fellow students.”

Item #14. How would you assess the quality of instruction that you received in courses in your area of the Department?



As indexed by item #14, satisfaction with quality of instruction was overwhelmingly positive. Ninety five percent of respondents rated quality of instruction as "Excellent" or "Very Good." with one individual (5%) choosing the "Good" option. Respondent #12 commented that "With few exceptions, the courses were rigorous and well organized." Respondent #26 put it more succinctly: "The teaching was the strength of the program."

Item #15. How would you assess the opportunities that you had to teach courses pertinent to your scholarly interests?



When asked about opportunities to teach courses pertinent to their area of scholarly interest, opinion was slightly more divided. Though 80% gave a favorable response (“Excellent,” “Very Good,” or “Good”), 20% judged the opportunities as only “Fair” or “Poor.” One graduate looked back on his or her breath of pedagogical experience (respondent #9): “I was able to teach many different courses during my years there ranging from XX to XX...It gave me great confidence later in my academic career and was no doubt instrumental in my securing my current academic post.” Another respondent (#14) complained of the lack of opportunity: “As a XX student, I never got to teach XX. Even allowing for the paucity of classes, this is pretty abysmal...If the courses are in short-supply, it would make sense to let all Ph.D.s have a chance to teach for at least one semester.”

Resources, Positive and Negative Aspects of the Program

The first two items in final section of the survey asked former students to list the resources that were available to them as well as those that were not. The last two items requested information on the positive aspects of the program as well as what could be improved. A listing responses order by frequency (most to least) is presented after each question. Only resources/aspects that generated two or more mentions are included.

Item #16. What were the two or three departmental or campus resources that were most important to you as a graduate student (e.g., State Historical Society, Film Archives)?

Memorial Library
 State Historical Society
 Film Archives
 Center for Communication Research
 Faculty in allied areas (in and out of the Department)

Item #17. What resources, if any, were lacking?

Studio equipment/Technical support
 Computer facilities

Item #18. What are the two or three most positive aspects of your Ph.D. training?

Quality of instruction/Training
 Community/Collegiality
 Opportunity for research

Item #19. What are the two or three things that you think would be most important for the Department to improve?

Better mentoring
 Relations between faculty and graduate students
 Provide grant-writing training
 Better integration between areas of the Department

Conclusions

The overall pattern of results shows strong endorsement of the graduate program in Communication Arts by persons who received a Ph.D. between 1989 and 2000. Both quantitative and qualitative measures point to high levels of satisfaction among graduates with virtually all aspects of Departmental functioning. Though still strong overall, the numbers and comments regarding teacher training showed room for improvement.