

Graduate Student Experiences & Perceptions of the Title IX Office at the UC

Using data from the Survivors + Allies' 2021 survey of the UC community

Written by: Chloe Tran

May 2025



Background & Purpose

Graduate students uphold a variety of responsibilities across university campuses, including mentoring, teaching, and research. However, these unique responsibilities within the educational structure of graduate programs raise concerns surrounding imbalanced power dynamics with faculty and advisors¹. As students like graduate student researchers tend to work directly with the faculty members that fund their cost of tuition, speaking out about sexual violence and sexual harassment (SVSH) could jeopardize their career prospects and potentially sever relationships with colleagues and others in their field. Being a graduate student also entails participating in a multitude of spaces including office hours, research conferences, and social events. Non-formal spaces like these tend to have unclear boundaries where there is a blurry distinction between professional and personal life, increasing the risk of SVSH². These factors may influence decisions to report personal experiences of SVSH to university systems such as Title IX^{1,3}. Furthermore, a lack of accountability or removal of perpetrators after making an official report may be difficult for survivors to trust support services in the future, given the mental burdens of seeing minimal change after a traumatic event.

Resources like the Title IX office are non-confidential resources where survivors must go through an extensive legal process after making an official report. This office exists under Title IX federal law and requires Responsible Employees to report sexual harassment, sexual violence, and discrimination internally to the university's Title IX office. Per UC Policy on SVSH, any UC employee whose role is not designated as confidential are considered Responsible Employees⁴. This includes faculty, teaching assistants (TAs), research assistants, resident assistants, and managers/supervisors. As a majority of graduate students are Responsible Employees, disclosing incidents of SVSH may be challenging as many colleagues, faculty, and mentors also hold the same role. This creates a barrier as graduate student survivors may feel uncomfortable if the people around them are obligated to report their personal experience to Title IX. Especially considering graduate students who may have experienced an incident of SVSH from a faculty member, power dynamics may be amplified, making students less inclined to seek support.

This unique graduate student experience may not be the same for undergraduate students as they may not work under a faculty member as part of their requirements to complete a degree. While confidential resources such as the Campus Advocacy, Resources, and Education (CARE) office offer trauma-informed and survivor-centered support, graduate students are also significantly less aware of SVSH prevention and education resources on campus^{1,5}. In general, college campuses have a larger undergraduate population, thus student outreach events and research efforts tend to be tailored towards the undergraduate population^{6,7}. However, this leaves graduate students with fewer resources and fewer community members to turn to for support. Thus, it is imperative to address these challenges and pressure universities to prioritize the mental wellbeing of graduate student survivors. With their unique responsibilities, understanding graduate student experiences and imbalanced power dynamics is essential to provide adequate trauma-informed support.

Term	Definition
Non-Confidential Resources	Services obligated to report incidents of sexual harassment, sexual violence, and discrimination to authorities, including Title IX offices and university police.
Confidential Resources	Services that are not required to report incidents to authorities and can offer privacy and support to survivors, such as CARE.
Responsible Employee	Designated under Title IX federal law to report sexual harassment, sexual violence, and discrimination to the university's Title IX office.

Methods

In 2021, UCLA student organization Survivors + Allies (S+A) conducted a research study surveying students across all 10 UC campuses to evaluate students' awareness, utilization, and evaluation of on- and off-campus resources for survivors of SVSH, including the Title IX office, Campus Assault Resources & Education (CARE), Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), and UC Police Departments (UCPD). You can read the resulting report and associated academic publications on [our website](#).

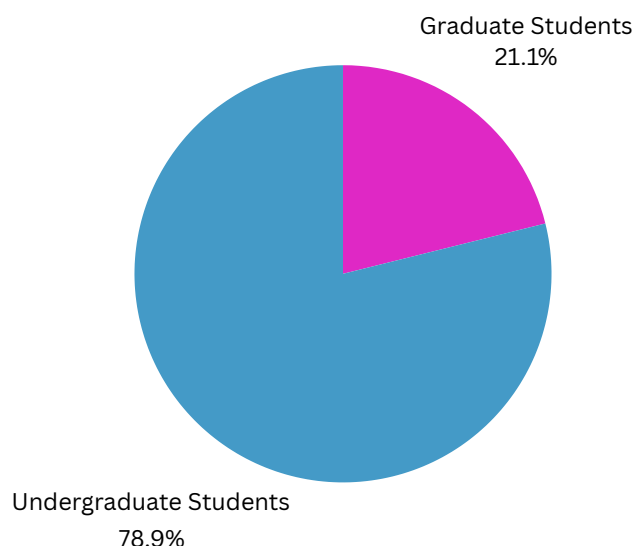
The resulting sample consisted of:

- 1,223 total students (52% undergraduate and 48% graduate)
- 62% cisgender women, 21% cisgender men, 2% transgender people, 18% nonbinary and people of other gender identities
- 42% of students identified as LGBTQA+
- 59% as students of color
- 17% as international students
- 41% identified as survivors of SVSH

Overall Demographics

Across the University of California system, graduate students make up 21.1% of the student population and undergraduate students make up 78.8% of the student population.¹ In our study, 38.1% of participants were graduate students and 40.5% were undergraduate students.

Across the UC System



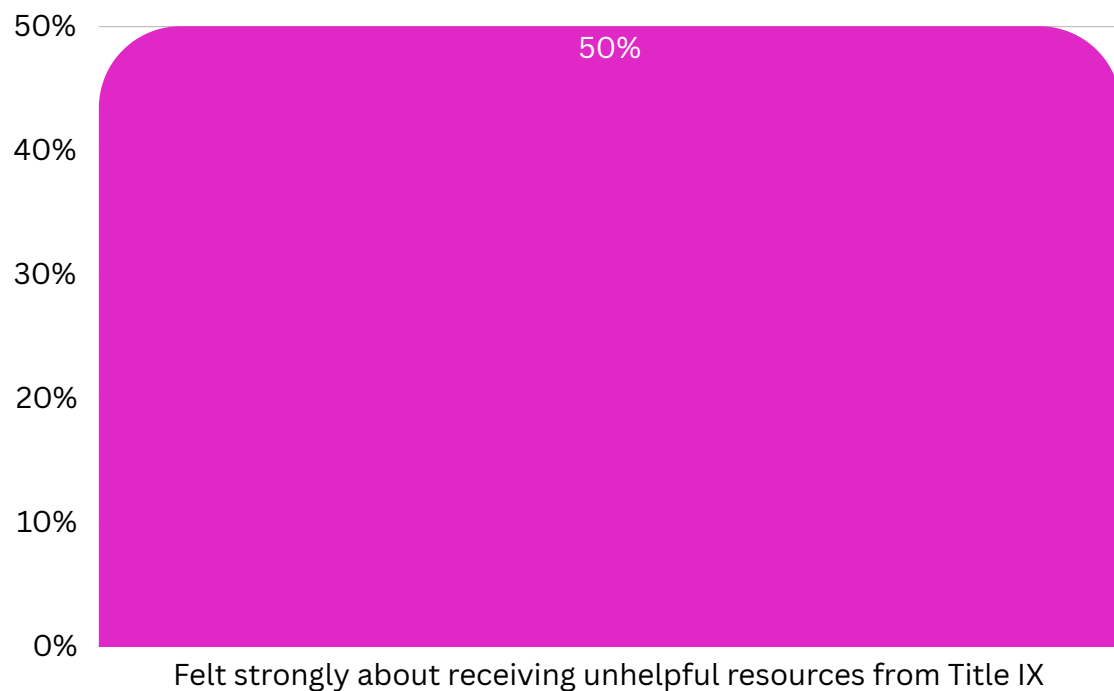
1. Retrieved from: <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/university-california-announces-record-breaking-enrollment>

Findings

UC Graduate Satisfaction with Title IX Resources

Graduate students were less likely to feel comfortable reporting an incident of gender discrimination or sexual violence to UCPD or the Title IX office compared to undergraduate students.

- 50% of graduate student participants strongly felt they did not receive useful resources from the Title IX staff:

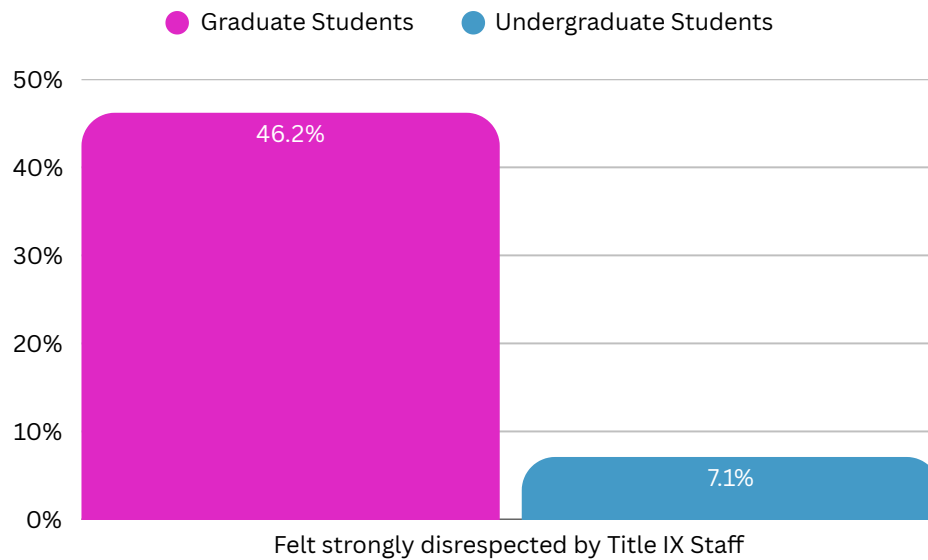


“I guess because they need to accept the limitations of the bureaucratic means to seek support, justice and feel safe that are offered on campus; some people aren't ever going to want to speak to the police, or title IX, but violence still happens on campus, in part because of [the UCs] failings to create a safer campus environment, and people still need places to heal and process. It's also about community building and all of the above programs are ways to build community for survivors on campus.” - **LGBTQIA+, White, graduate**

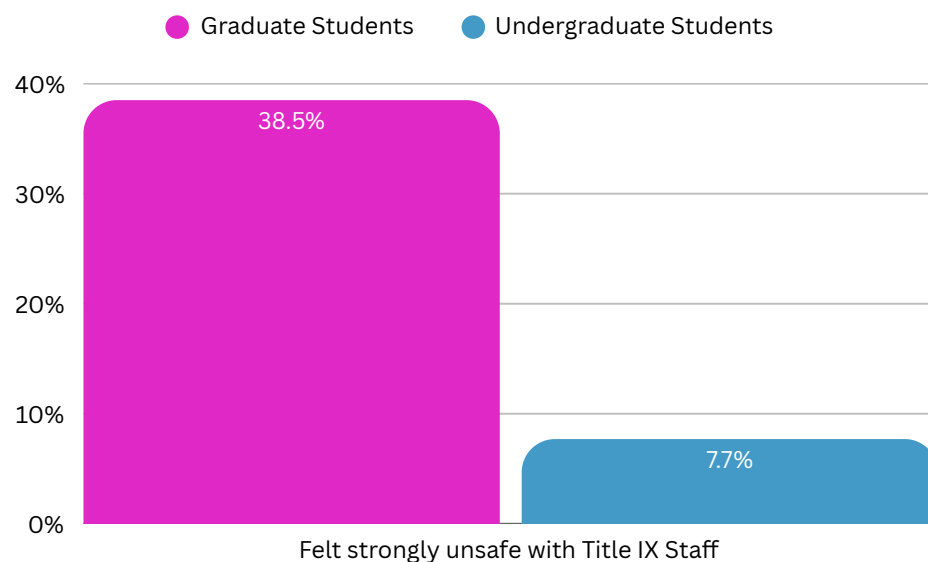
“Title IX at [the UC] were least helpful. They made me feel re-victimized, they did not help with anything, only made me feel there was nothing they could do. It was like a dead end in my process. I hurt psychologically almost as when I suffered sexual violence.” - **graduate student**

UC Graduate Experiences with the Title IX Office

- Graduate students were less likely to feel respected, safe, or validated when interacting with the Title IX office after an experience of SVSH compared to undergraduate students.
- 46.2% of graduate student participants felt strongly disrespected by the Title IX staff. In comparison, only 7.1% of undergraduate student participants felt strongly disrespected by Title IX staff:



- 38.5% of graduate student participants felt strongly unsafe when interacting with a Title IX staff. In comparison, 7.7% of undergraduate students felt strongly unsafe when interacting with Title IX staff:



“They have failed multiple times and put other women at more risk” - *LGBTQIA+, multi racial, graduate*

“I didn't think it was serious enough [to report to Title IX] and I wasn't sure if it qualified because I was confused about what level of consent I had given.” - *cis-woman, LGBTQIA+, White, graduate*

“They failed me” - *cis woman, LGBTQIA+, White, graduate*

“The Title IX office seeks to protect the university and its faculty and not the students -- making it an ineffective resource for students who need its help. It will uphold the narratives provided by professors and seek to discredit the students who report an issue adding abuse to an already abusive experience.”- ***other gender, LGBTQIA+, White, graduate student***

“Title IX office [was least helpful] - in my case, most of my personal harassment, assault & stalking happened while abroad (both while enrolled and before being enrolled, but not on campus or under U.S. legal jurisdiction) which made my path different. However, I was a witness to multiple Title IX cases and the union and Title IX processes for these cases was immensely frustrating, drawn out, unhelpful, and did not end in any sort of resolution for the victims.” - ***cis woman, straight, White, graduate***

“I don't trust them, and I didn't want to make a report. Title IX made it harder for me to receive help, because I did not want to be forced to make a report against my will, but I wanted to be able to talk about my trauma and share my experiences freely with professors or administrators or even my doctors at the SHC to receive support.” - ***cis woman, straight, Asian, graduate***

Policy Recommendations

Improve Title IX staff trainings through partnership with CARE

- The Title IX office should collaborate with CARE to develop trauma-informed trainings that raises awareness of confidential resources (like CARE) for student referrals and equips staff to better support graduate students.
- Training should utilize a positive approach. UCs should add positive elements such as: switching the language to focus on graduate student empowerment rather than staff obligation. By changing trainings, Title IX can help students feel safe and heard while navigating graduate spaces.

Title IX is required to extend their services by continuing to connect students with a CARE advocate after the initial meeting

- Title IX should be required and responsible for disclosing that they are not confidential to survivors. They should also be required to inform the survivor of the option to seek confidential support from a CARE advocate before the student disclosed an incident to them or legal investigation proceeds.
- After the initial meeting, Title IX should continue to connect students with a CARE advocate to ensure students receive confidential support resources.

UC staff members participate in SVSH trainings with a CARE advocate

- Training with CARE advocates can provide UC staff members with trauma-informed practices to help respond appropriately to graduate student survivors, promoting empowerment.
- Training should include topics such as: fostering peer support, understanding confidentiality boundaries and addressing graduate student-specific dynamics to help survivors navigate power imbalances.

Increase promotion and outreach for graduate students

- In graduate spaces and department buildings, CARE should increase their visibility by promoting support resources and informing students of their role as a confidential resource.
- Outreach efforts should adopt a positive and empowering approach that demonstrates a comprehensive effort to establish trust among graduate students.

Conclusion

Graduate students experience many barriers to critical resources, impacting their professional and personal wellbeing. Furthermore, aligning with existing literature,^{1,8} we found that graduate

students are less likely to feel respected, safe, or validated when interacting with Title IX offices as there is a greater fear of retaliation from the perpetrator and distrust for the legal system. This distinct disparity in access to mental health and crisis services exemplifies the need for improvements within the UC system to bridge gaps in care.

It is imperative that the UCs provide graduate students with adequate resources, particularly better trained Title IX staff who are equipped with the skills to help support graduate students throughout their academic career. To maximize this effort, it is essential that Title IX offices work closely with CARE advocates, and that there are increased campus efforts to raise graduate student awareness of confidential resources. With this in mind, the UCs should consider implementing more Title IX and CARE prevention training to address the power dynamics that persist due to the hierarchical nature of graduate school. Increased emphasis on trauma-informed support and greater promotion of campus resources ensures that all graduate students have greater access to highly trained advocates and mental health providers, fostering a safe space to continue their studies.

References

1. [Bloom BE, Sorin CR, Wagman JA, Oaks L. Employees, Advisees, and Emerging Scholars: A Qualitative Analysis of Graduate Students' Roles and Experiences of Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment on College Campuses. *Sex Cult.* 2021;25\(5\):1653-1672. doi:10.1007/s12119-021-09841-w](#)
2. [Jackson, L. The smiling philosopher: Emotional labor, gender, and harassment in conference spaces. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 51, no. 7 \(2019\): 693-701. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1343112>](#)
3. [Gialopsos, B. M. Sexual Violence in Academia: Policy, Theory, and Prevention Considerations. *Journal of School Violence.* 2017; 16\(2\): 141-147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2017.1284467>](#)
4. [The University of California. Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment. August 2024. <https://policy.ucop.edu/doc/4000385/SVSH>](#)
5. [Mitra, A., Swendeman, D., Sumstine, S., Sorin, C. R., Bloom, B. E., & Wagman, J. A. \(2022\). Structural Barriers to Accessing the Campus Assault Resources and Education \(CARE\) Offices at the University of California \(UC\) Campuses. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 37\(21-22\), NP19468–NP19490. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605211042813>](#)
6. [Hirsch, J.S. and Khan, S. Sexual citizens: A landmark study of sex, power, and assault on campus. 2020. WW Norton & Company. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.13596>](#)
7. [McMahon, S., Steiner, J. J., Snyder, S., & Banyard, V. L. Comprehensive Prevention of Campus Sexual Violence: Expanding Who Is Invited to the Table. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse.* 2019; 22\(4\): 843-855. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838019883275>](#)
8. [Rosenthal, M. N., Smidt, A. M., & Freyd, J. J. \(2016\). Still second class: Sexual harassment of graduate students. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 40\(3\), 364-377. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684316644838>](#)

Acknowledgments

Survivors + Allies would like to acknowledge and thank our generous funders: UCLA Center for the Study of Women|Barbra Streisand Center, the UCLA Bruin Advocacy Grant Award, the UCLA Franklin D. Gilliam Jr. Social Justice Award, and the Luskin D3 Initiative.

We are especially grateful for the constant support and encouragement from the brilliant CSW|Streisand Center team, Professor Grace Hong, Rosa Chung, Rosemary Grant, Katja Antoine, and Eva Amarillas Diaz. We are also grateful for the centers of research and research communities that have supported this research, including: the UC Global Health Institute, the UC Speaks Up study, and Professor Jennifer Wagman.

We also acknowledge all the Survivors + Allies members who contributed to this research brief, including (in alphabetical order): Appoorva Gunti, Ariana Schieferle, Ava Calbreath, Chloe Tran, Eliana

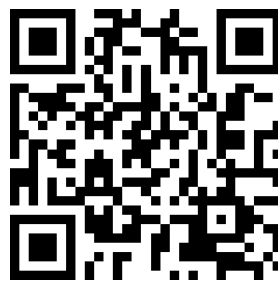
Galan, Emma Tolliver, Georgia Lavery Van Parijs, Kalani Kieu-Diem Phillips, Leila Chiddick, Margaret Garcia, Nohely Hernandez Pineda, Rina Rossi, Sara Wilf, Selene Betancourt, Shreyashi Sharma, Siri Suvvari, and Stephanie Cartney.

Recommended Citation

Tran, Chloe. *Graduate student experiences and perceptions of survivor resources at the UC. California: Survivors + Allies; 2025.* Available at: <https://sites.google.com/view/survivors-and-allies/home>.

Connect with Us

Please feel free to connect with us by searching for our Instagram handle [@survivorsandalliesucla](https://www.instagram.com/survivorsandalliesucla) or by scanning the QR code below.



For more information, please also view our website and comprehensive report below:

<https://csw.ucla.edu/research/sexual-violence-and-intersectionality/survivors-allies/>

https://csw.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Survivors-and-Allies-Report_From-Surviving-to-Healing.pdf

