

NDFS MS/PhD Program Annual Report

Fall 2024 to Summer 2025

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Program Year in Review

Enrollment Fall 2024-Summer 2025			
MS	PhD48	PhD70	Total
20	12	4	36

Graduation Fall 2024-Summer 2025			
MS	PhD48	PhD70	Total
6		1	7

26 of 36 students have completed mentorship agreements.
13 of 36 students completed their annual review in 2024-2025.

Program Assessment Activity and Data

Exit Survey

We have continued our practice of surveying graduating students. This feedback is essential to enhance our programs and provides an indirect measure of student achievement of program learning outcomes. We used the same 10 questions as previous years, on program satisfaction, perception of career preparation, and student self-evaluation of their achievement of the learning objectives. The anonymous survey was distributed via email to all MS and PhD graduates from Fall 2024- Summer 2025, and students who completed it received an aggie ice-cream voucher. This year seven students graduated and four completed the exit survey. An additional student who completed their degree in 2023-2024 is included in this assessment because they were the only student who completed an exit survey last year. To try to maintain the anonymity of the data, quantitative results will be presented as a rolling five-year average.

Response Rate

From Fall 2024 to Summer 2025, 4 out of 7 graduates completed the exit survey, for a 57% response rate.

Quantitative Results

Over the five years that we've been conducting this survey, 83% (25/30) of respondents have rated their experience as somewhat or extremely positive. Two participants have rated their experience as somewhat negative. Three participants have reported their experience as extremely negative.

Students have also self-evaluated their progress on program learning outcomes. Not all students provided answers for all questions. The percentages reported reflect percent of student who provided answers for the following questions. 30 participants completed one or more questions. Over the past five years, 100% (24/24) of students rated their mastery of subject material as comparable to peers with similar degrees from other institutions. Ninety three percent (28/30) felt that our MS/PhD program prepared them well for their future career. All students (24/24) agreed that after completing our program they are prepared to conduct scholarly activities in an ethical manner. Finally, all students (24/24) agreed that they had conducted, presented, and defended a body of knowledge (for MS) or significant contribution to knowledge (PhD) during their program.

[Annual review meeting](#)

For the past 7 years, the program has required an annual meeting of each MS/PhD students' graduate committee to evaluate student progress. The committees are instructed to complete an annual review form to track progress and document the meeting, any areas of concern, and corrective actions prescribed by the committee. Although rate of compliance with this rule has typically been low, we are pleased to report that we have maintained an average rate over the past three years that is substantially higher than the average rate from 2017 – 2022 (46% vs. 25%, respectively). This improvement may be the result of emphasizing the purpose and use of the annual review form at our annual graduate student orientation, and efforts of previous years. Further, this year we had much less missing data in the committee's ratings on student progress towards program learning objectives, after discussion of its importance and use at a graduate faculty meeting.

Annual Review Form Submission Rates MS/PhD Students	
2017-2018	30%
2018-2019	23%
2019-2020	17%
2020-2021	29%
2021-2022	25%
2022-2023	42%
2023-2024	48%
2024-2025	47%

The annual review form tracks important milestones, research progress, and documents if any corrective action is required. All students were rated as "meets expectations" or "Exceeds expectations" on all learning objectives. Additionally, in 5 instances students were also given suggestions on how to improve on that learning objective, for example "Needs to improve scientific writing. Seek feedback through library." and "Increase knowledge on dairy and rumen microbial metabolism."

Please see the appendix for full annual review form data.

[Dissertation rubric forms](#)

Starting in Spring 2021, the NDFS faculty adopted a rubric for PhD dissertation and MS thesis defenses. In Fall 2024-Summer 2025 we had 1 PhD Dissertation defense and 6 MS Thesis defenses. All students met or exceeded expectations.

See appendix for full rubric data.

Program Assessment Data Summary Fall 2024-Summer 2025

PhD Program Assessment Summary Fall 2024-Summer 2025

PhD Learning Objective: 1. Demonstrate mastery of subject material in their field of study, broadly defined.	
Direct Evidence	Indirect Evidence
<p>Annual Review Form <i>Progress on Program Learning Objectives</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% met or exceeded expectations on “Demonstrate mastery of subject material . . .” (n=9, exceeds=4, meets=5) 	<p>Over the past four years, students rated their mastery of subject material to peers from other institutions as comparable (30%) or somewhat above (43%) or far above the average (29%). (n=21, this data combines MS and PhD students, not all survey respondents have provided data on which program they completed.)</p>
<p>Defense rubrics <i>Quality of Scholarly Work</i> section:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% exceeded expectations on “Mastery of fundamental knowledge in the field” (n=1) 100% exceeded expectations on “Ability to access and integrate information . . .” (n=1) 	<p>All students pass comprehensive exam, or complete conditions needed for pass</p>
<p>Defense Rubric <i>Breadth and Depth of Knowledge</i> section:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% exceeded expectations on “Defends, clarifies, and expands upon written dissertation with further evidence and argument” (n=1) 100% exceeded expectations on “Demonstrates knowledge of dissertation subject, primary sources, and background scholarship . . .” (n=1) 	<p>All students design and complete their plan of study, approved by their committee, earning grades of C or better</p>

PhD Learning Objective: 2. Produce an original body of research conducted during their program.

Direct Evidence	Indirect Evidence
<p>Annual Review Form <i>Progress on Program Learning Objectives</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% met or exceeded expectations on “Produce an original body of research . . .” (n=9, exceeds=5, meets=3, missing=1) 	<p>Exit survey: Over the past four years, 100% of students agreed that they have done this as part of their degree program. (n=18, this data combines MS and PhD students, not all survey respondents have provided data on which program they completed.)</p>
<p>Defense rubric <i>Contribution to Discipline</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% met expectations on “Impact of research on the field” (n=1) 100% exceeded expectations on “Publication potential” (n=1) 	

PhD Learning Objective: 3. Write in a clear, convincing, and organized manner.

Direct Evidence	Indirect Evidence
<p>Annual Review Form <i>Progress on Program Learning Objectives</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% met or exceeded expectations on “Write in a clear . . .” (n=9, exceeds=1, meets=7, missing=1) 	<p>All students write a research proposal, evaluated by committee without a rubric.</p> <p>All students complete a written portion of the comprehensive exam, evaluated by the committee without a rubric.</p>
<p>Defense Rubric <i>Quality of Writing</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% exceeded expectations on “Skilled at scientific/technical writing” (n=1) 100% exceeded expectations on “Organization, sentence structure, grammar, mechanics, and spelling.” (n=1) 	

PhD Learning objective: 4. Present in a confident, organized, and engaging manner.	
Direct Evidence	Indirect Evidence
Annual Review Form <i>Progress on Program Learning Objectives</i> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% met or exceeded expectations on “Present in a confident . . .” (n=9, exceeds=2, meets=7) 	All students present a research proposal, evaluated by committee without a rubric. All students complete an oral portion of the comprehensive exam, evaluated by the committee without a rubric.
Defense rubric <i>Quality of Presentation</i> section: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% exceeded expectations on “Presentation design” (n=1) 100% exceeded expectations on “Content and organization” (n=1) 100% exceeded expectations on “Presenter skills” (n=1) 	

PhD Learning Objective: 5. Defend decisions and conclusions by providing accurate, clear, and insightful evidence and answers to questions.	
Direct Evidence	Indirect Evidence
Annual Review Form <i>Progress on Program Learning Objectives</i> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% met or exceeded expectations on “Defend decisions . . .” (n=9, exceeds=2, meets=7) 	All students defend a research proposal, evaluated by committee without a rubric. All students defend their work on the comprehensive exam, evaluated by the committee without a rubric.
Defense rubric <i>Response to Questions</i> section: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% exceeded expectations on “Directly and correctly answers the examiner’s questions” (n=1) 100% exceeded expectations on “Shows evidence of critical thinking and an awareness of the limits of his or her knowledge” (n=1) 	
Defense Rubric <i>Breadth and Depth of Knowledge</i> section: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% exceeded expectations on “Defends . . . written dissertation with further evidence and argument” (n=1) 	

PhD Learning objective: 6. Conduct scholarly activities in an ethical manner.

Direct Evidence	Indirect Evidence
<p>Annual Review Forms <i>Ethics Training</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">60% or 3 out of 5 students have completed an ethics training (CITI or similar) by year 2	<p>Exit survey: 100% of students agree that they can conduct scholarly activities in an ethical manner (n=1, definitely yes=1)</p>
<p>Annual Review Form <i>Progress on Program Learning Objectives:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">100% met or exceeded expectations on “Conduct scholarly activities in an ethical manner.” (n=9, exceeds=4, meets=5)	

MS Learning Objective: 1. Demonstrate mastery of subject material in their field of study, broadly defined (see thesis/dissertation rubric data)	
Direct Evidence	Indirect Evidence
Annual Review Form <i>Progress on Program Learning Objectives</i> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% met or exceeded expectations on “Demonstrate mastery of subject material . . .” (n=4, exceeds=1, meets=3, missing=2) 	Over the past four years, students rated their mastery of subject material to peers from other institutions as comparable (30%) or somewhat above (43%) or far above the average (29%). (n=21, this data combines MS and PhD students, not all survey respondents have provided data on which program they completed.) All students design and complete their plan of study, approved by their committee, earning grades of C or better
Defense rubrics <i>Quality of Scholarly Work</i> section: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% met or exceeded expectations (n = 7). 	
Defense Rubric <i>Breadth and Depth of Knowledge</i> section: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% met or exceeded expectations (n = 7). 	

MS Learning Objective: 2. Produce an original significant contribution to knowledge during their program.	
Direct Evidence	Indirect Evidence
Annual Review Form <i>Progress on Program Learning Objectives</i> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% met or exceeded expectations on “Produce an original significant contribution . . .” (n=4, exceeds=1, meets=3) 	Exit survey: Over the past four years, 100% of students agreed that they have done this as part of their degree program. (n=18, this data combines MS and PhD students, not all survey respondents have provided data on which program they completed.) All students design their research proposal, evaluated by committee without a rubric
Defense Rubric <i>Contribution to Discipline</i> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% met or exceeded expectations (n=7) 	

MS Learning Objective: 3. Write in a clear, convincing, and organized manner.	
Direct Evidence	Indirect Evidence
Annual Review Form <i>Progress on Program Learning Objectives</i> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% met or exceeded expectations on “Write in a clear . . .” (n=4, exceeds=1, meets=3) 	
Defense Rubric <i>Quality of Writing</i> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% met or exceeded expectations (n=7). 	All students write their research proposal, evaluated by committee without a rubric

MS Learning Objective: 4. Present in a confident, organized, and engaging manner.	
Direct Evidence	Indirect Evidence
Annual Review Form <i>Progress on Program Learning Objectives</i> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% met or exceeded expectations on “Present in a confident . . .” (n=4, exceeds=1, meets=3) 	All students present their research proposal, it is evaluated by committee without a rubric
Defense rubric <i>Quality of Presentation</i> section: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% met or exceeded expectations (n=7). 	

MS Learning Objective: 5. Defend decisions and conclusions by providing accurate, clear, and insightful evidence and answers to questions.	
Direct Evidence	Indirect Evidence
Annual Review Form <i>Progress on Program Learning Objectives</i> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% met expectations on “Defend decisions . . .” (n=4, meets=4) 	All students defend their research proposal, evaluated by committee without a rubric
Defense rubric <i>Response to Questions</i> section: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% met or exceeded expectations (n=7). 	

Defense Rubric *Breadth and Depth of Knowledge* section:

- 100% met or exceeded expectations (n=7).

MS Learning Objective: 6. Conduct scholarly activities in an ethical manner.

Direct Evidence	Indirect Evidence
•	Exit survey: Over the past four years, 100% of students agreed that they feel confident in their ability to conduct scholarly activities in an ethical manner. (n=21, this data combines MS and PhD students, not all survey respondents have provided data on which program they completed.)
Annual Review Form <i>Progress on Program Learning Objectives</i> : <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 100% met or exceeded expectations on “Conduct scholarly activities . . .” (n=4, exceeds=1, meets=3)	

Faculty Response to Assessment Data

In the year of Fall 2024-Summer 2025 our main program goal was to continue our efforts to improve our program in response to assessment data. This primarily included continued work to improve the communication of program and university requirements and student and advisor expectations. The full graduate faculty met one time during this time period, with numerous smaller meetings of working groups and teams.

Program Communication

This year we continued to improve program communication using several different mechanisms: we continued improving and using our canvas page and new graduate student mentorship agreements. In addition, we updated the handbook and conducted a yearly orientation required for all newly enrolled students and open to continuing students and faculty.

Canvas Page

The program canvas page is a repository of program resources such as the program handbook, required forms, and others as identified. The GPC uses announcements and canvas email to communicate with graduate students. Future work could include the use of ungraded “assignments” for required departmental forms. We have started gathering examples of excellent MS and PhD project proposals, and examples of comprehensive exam prompts and written responses. A past GPD and Business Manager created a faculty-only resource that details the steps of how to accept a graduate student.

Graduate Student Mentorship Agreements

Starting in 2023, a new mentorship agreement was required by our college. A draft agreement template was provided by the college. We encouraged our faculty to expand on the minimal draft, potentially considering the draft list of Mentor/Mentee Expectations and Responsibilities drafted by a sub-set of the graduate faculty in 2022, but not formerly finalized or adopted, given the work at the college and graduate school level to address similar concerns. For example, the graduate school is working on new resources that will outline student rights and responsibilities. We will track the rate of signed mentorship agreements in the future.

Program Assessment

The revised program assessment plan was approved via faculty vote in Fall 2022. We have continued to implement that plan, using our departmental annual review form, designed to evaluate student progress on important milestones and program learning objectives, with built in suggestions for improvement if needed. We have continued to use the PhD Dissertation Defense Rubric and MS Thesis Defense Rubric (adapted from forms created by Abby Benninghoff, our previous Associate Dean for Graduate Studies) to gather data on achievement of program learning objectives. Our exit survey has continued to be a source of important qualitative data on program strengths and areas for improvement.

Dissertation/Thesis Exam Rubric

In 2023-2024 we had one student score *does not meet expectations* on “ability to draw reasoned conclusions from a body of knowledge” and another scored *does not meet expectations* on “potential for research dissemination via publication or presentation.” The faculty discussed this during our meeting in the 2023-2024 year. The faculty agreed that students should in general meet expectations on all criteria, but that they should be able to pass if the committee agrees that they have met expectations on larger criteria and overall for the document and defense. This clarification should be incorporated in any future protocol developed for use of the rubrics. All students met or exceeded expectations in all criteria in 2024-2025.

Comprehensive Exam Rubric

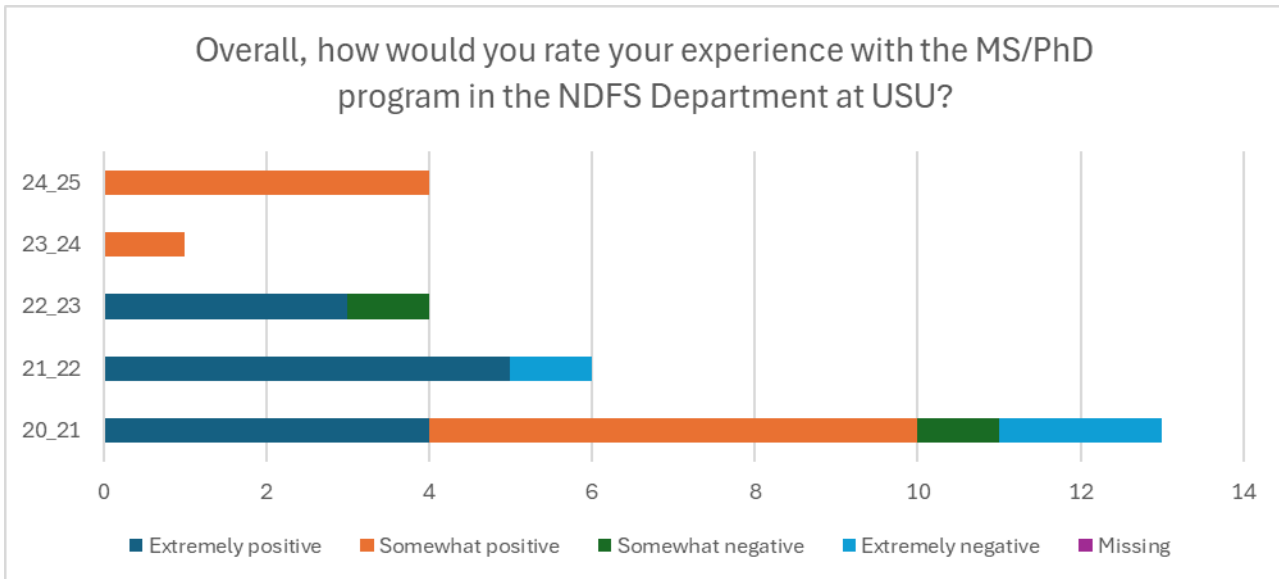
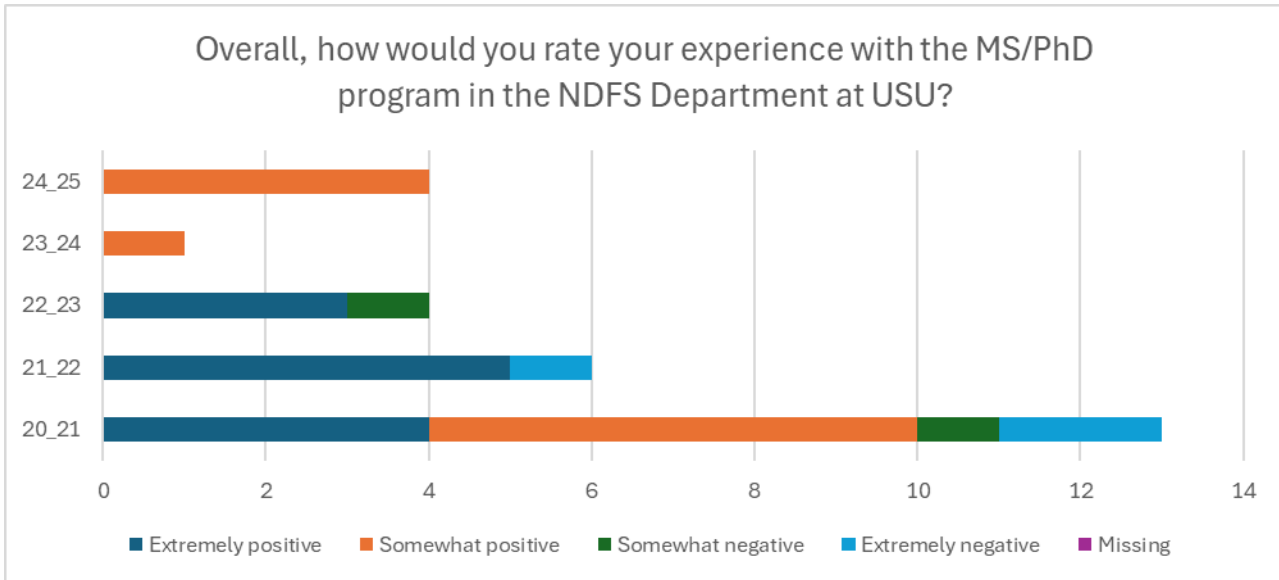
We have plans to develop, finalize, and adopt a rubric and protocol for our comprehensive exams. The purpose of these documents will be to standardize exam evaluation and collect direct evidence of student learning for program assessment. Previously, a first draft of the document was drafted by a sub-committee with representation from both food science (Dr. Taylor Oberg and Dr. Prateek Sharma) and nutrition science (Dr. Carrie Durward and Dr. Heidi Wengreen). Work on this rubric was put on hold due to time constraints. In the coming year the committee plans to present the draft to the faculty, revise as needed, and vote to adopt.

Curriculum

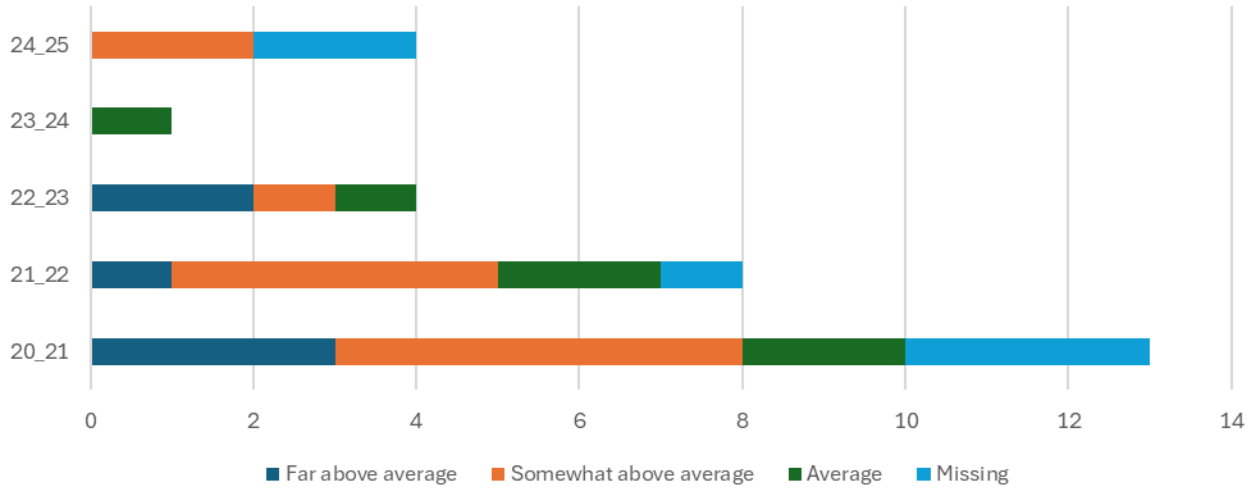
The primary work of the curriculum committee in 2024 was to identify potential courses of concern in response to an announced change from the graduate school that MS/PhD students would no longer be allowed to count 5000-level courses towards degree requirements. The MS/PhD Graduate faculty identified potential courses of concern and discussed alternative courses to meet requirements. In 2025 the graduate school ruled that up to 12 credits of 5000-level course work could continue to be used in graduate programs. We also examined the need for a certain number of in-person courses for international graduate students, given that many of our graduate courses are being taught asynchronously online to fit the needs of our MPH program. However, we later learned that the graduate school would not be changing the requirement, so we didn't need to make any of the anticipated changes to our course offerings or degree requirements. This year we are addressing the possibility of graduate students completing some or all of a MS or PhD degree at a distance by utilizing online courses and conducting research and mentoring from a distance.

Appendices

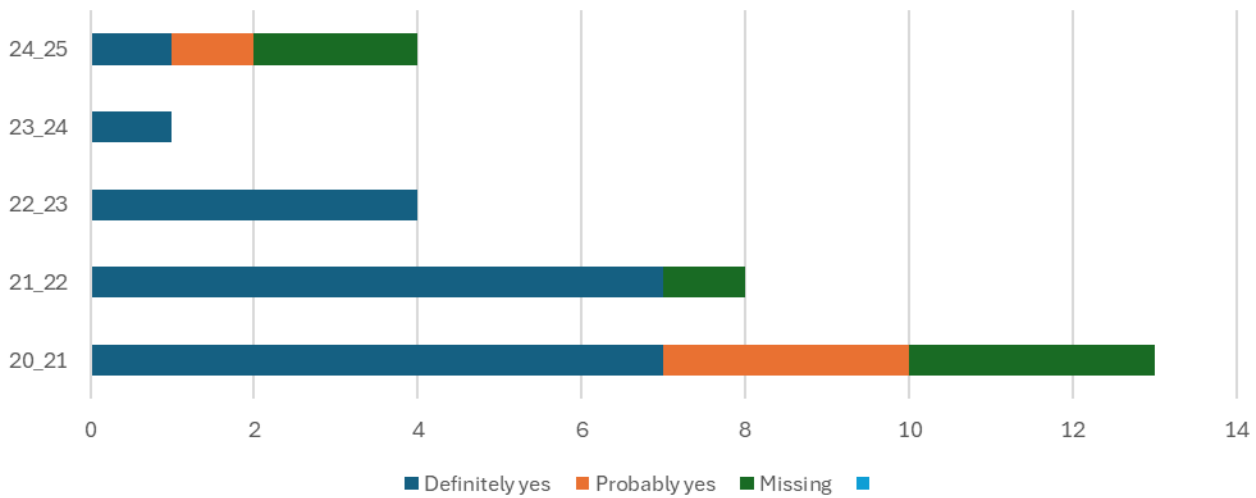
Spring 2024-2025 Exit Survey Data



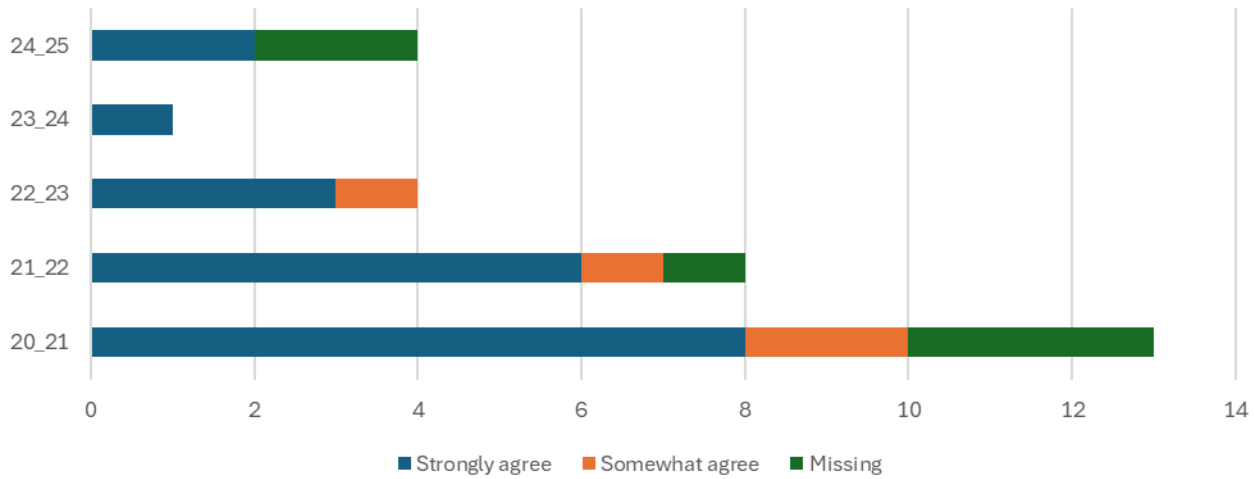
How would you rate your mastery of the subject material from your program of study compared to your peers with similar degrees from other institutions?



After completing the USU NDFS MS/PhD program do you feel that you are able to conduct scholarly activities in an ethical manner?



How much do you agree with the following statement? For PhD: I have produced, presented, and defended an original significant contribution to knowledge. For MS: I have conducted, presented, and defended a body of research.



Positives from 2024_2025 Graduate Student Exit Survey (Fall 2024-Summer 2025 Graduates, plus one response from Spring of 2024)

Responses to question: Please tell us about 3 things that had a positive impact on your experience in the MS/PhD program at USU.

Themes	Quality of faculty and staff	Major Professor	Graduate coursework	Funding (scholarship, assistantships, travel)	Other Students	Other

Student Responses	The professors seemed to care, some more than others	Good mentorship from advisor	Flexibility with coursework	Being a part of BUILD dairy		Small class size
	Friendly staff		The labs were great.		My fellow students.	Ability to do research, opportunities to share research
						Pre-clinical research experience

Areas for Improvement from 2023 Graduate Student Exit Survey (Fall 2024-Summer 2025 Graduates; plus one response from spring 2024)

Responses to question: Please tell us about 3 things that you think we should try to improve for future students.

Student Responses	Program Content	Communication/awareness	Faculty/Student Expectations	Support
	It was difficult to find courses that were a high level in other departments. It be nice to have 20 courses that were recommended for grad students to take. The list available was outdated and many courses weren't offered anymore.	It was like pulling teeth to get my advisor to read and edit anything. He would not communicate with me. The level of indifference was alarming and frustrating. Talking with other students I find that this is not uncommon. Apparently major advisors do not generally get back with their students in a timely fashion. They should be held accountable for their in action as much as a student who doesn't turn an assignment in on time is. I had no ill feelings towards academia until this experience. Now I loathe it and am excited to finally be free of it's suffocating grip on my life.	Get professors to have realistic and reasonable turn around times.	The teaching equipment for the program is old, dangerous, against code, and no one cares about it. Rooms likely have asbestos under the floors. Many professors clearly don't care about teaching courses as they are ridiculously easy with decade old

				lectures, and taught without obvious effort. All of which hinder students learning, future potential, and faith in their faculty.
	Bring in more industry experience. It is an extremely large detriment to our students to not have someone with a lot of industry experience. We graduate with virtually zero knowledge of the commercialization process which is about 90% of actual industry jobs.	Staff does not respond to student reports of title 9 like behaviors of professors.	Have a better system of accountability for the professors.	Graduate students here are paid some of the lowest wages in the school. The faculty have no incentive to put in any effort for the shared student areas. Donor money is mysterious and doesn't seem to be going into the right places.
				Actually support the food science program. It was felt very heavily how much dietetics were favored over the food science students. Their kitchen and funding

				opportunities were far nicer than the food sciences.
	More networking opportunities and visiting companies and labs for students to make meaningful connections for future employment and development.		Don't automatically approve everyone's proposal/theses/defenses. There are multiple people I can think of who did not deserve to graduate with as few edits as were required of them. It puts an extremely bad name to USU. On that note, be more aware of scientific malpractices that go on in the department.	
	It would be beneficial to do some graduate lab rotations/shadowing where students can go to a different lab within or outside of their department and learn more about a different discipline and what kind of instruments are used, how time is spent, etc.			

[Annual Review Form Data](#)

MS Student Progress On Program Learning Objectives, Fall 2024- Summer 2025 Annual Review Meetings MS (n=4)				
Program learning objectives.	Does not meet expectations	Meets expectations	Exceeds expectations	Missing
1. Demonstrate mastery of subject material in their field of study, broadly defined		67% (n=6)	33% (n=3)	

2. Produce an original significant contribution to knowledge during their program.		56% (n=5)	44% (n=4)	
3. Write in a clear, convincing, and organized manner.		67% (n=6)	33% (n=3)	
4. Present in a confident, organized, and engaging manner.		67% (n=6)	33% (n=3)	
5. Defend decisions and conclusions by providing accurate, clear, and insightful evidence and answers to questions.		89% (n=8)	11% (n=1)	
6. Conduct scholarly activities in an ethical manner.		56% (n=5)	44% (n=4)	

PhD Student Progress On Program Learning Objectives, Fall 2024 - Summer 2025 Annual Review Meetings				
PhD (combined PhD48 and PhD70 n=9)				
Program learning objectives.	Does not meet expectations	Meets expectations	Exceeds expectations	Missing
1. Demonstrate mastery of subject material in their field of study, broadly defined		62% (n=5)	38% (n=3)	
2. Produce an original body of research conducted during their program.		50% (n=5)	50% (n=5)	
3. Write in a clear, convincing, and organized manner.		75% (n=6)	25% (n=2)	
4. Present in a confident, organized, and engaging manner.		88% (n=7)	12% (n=1)	
5. Defend decisions and conclusions by providing accurate, clear, and insightful evidence and answers to questions.		63% (n=5)	37% (n=3)	
6. Conduct scholarly activities in an ethical manner.		50% (n=5)	50% (n=5)	

Dissertation/thesis Defense Rubric Data

Fall 2024-Summer 2025 Dissertation Documents: Percent and (number) of students rated at Exceeded, Met, and Did not meet Expectations*					
		Does not meet expectations	Meets expectations	Exceeds expectations	Missing
Quality of the Scholarly Work	Mastery of fundamental knowledge in the field		29% (n=2)	71%(n=5)	
	Ability to access and integrate information into a cohesive overview of current knowledge. Ability to critically evaluate the meaning, value and contribution of published literature in the field.		57% (n=4)	43% (n=3)	
	Ability to articulate clear research problem, objectives, and/or hypothesis		29% (n=2)	71% (n=5)	
	Ability to design and implement an appropriate collection and analysis of data.		57% (n=4)	43% (n=3)	
	Ability to draw reasoned conclusions from a body of knowledge		43% (n=3)	57% (n=4)	
Contribution to Discipline	Impact of research on the field		86% (n=6)	29% (n=1)	
	Publication potential		43% (n=3)	57% (n=4)	
Quality of Writing	Skilled at scientific/technical writing		29% (n=2)	71% (n=5)	
	Organization, sentence structure, grammar, mechanics and spelling		43% (n=3)	71% (n=)	
*This data is from 7 students (6 MS, 1 PhD)					

Fall 2024-Summer 2025 Dissertation/thesis Rubric Defense Presentations: Number that Exceeded, Met, and Did not meet Expectations*

		Does not meet expectations	Meets expectations	Exceeds expectations	Missing
Quality of Presentation	Presentation design		29% (n=2)	71% (n=5)	
	Content and organization		43% (n=3)	57% (m=4)	
	Presenter skills		57% (n=4)	43% (n=3)	
Breadth and Depth of Knowledge	Defends, clarifies, and expands upon written dissertation with further evidence and argument		43% (n=3)	57% (n=4)	
	Demonstrates knowledge of dissertation subject, primary sources, and background scholarship; demonstrates ability to synthesize dissertation topic with broader topics in the discipline (criteria appears on PhD dissertation rubric and not MS)		14% (n=1)		86% (n=6)
Quality of Responses to Questions	Directly and correctly answers the examiner's questions		57% (n=4)	43% (n=3)	
	Shows evidence of critical thinking and an awareness of the limits of his or her knowledge		43% (n=3)	43% (n=3)	14% (n=1)

*This data is from 6 students (6 MS, 1 PhD)