2013 CS Town Hall

How can we make the prelim breadth requirement more effective?

Introduction:
The current CS degree requirement dictates that students take one course in each of the following areas: Systems, Theory, and Systems + Theory. In recent surveys, students have pointed to the limited selection and availability of courses that satisfy this requirement.

In response to these surveys the faculty have voted to expanded the range of courses which satisfy the prelim breadth requirement. This is an ongoing process and this discussion is an opportunity to give feedback to the faculty on how to update the requirement.

Prompts:

- What do you think the role of a breadth requirement should be in our department?
- Should undergraduate courses have a role in the prelim breadth requirement?
- Are there courses that do not currently fulfill an aspect of the breadth requirement, that you think should? Which courses, and which aspect?

Flip page for background information
Background Information:

Current Course Selection:
- Systems: cs250, 252, 262A, or 262B;
- Theory: cs270, 271, 273, 274, 276, or 278
How can we Improve the Graduate Student Instruction Experience?

Introduction:
As part of the CS PhD requirement all students must complete at least 30 hours of GSI appointments. This is usually accomplished as one 20 hour and one 10 hour appointment.

Recent surveys have raised the following issues:
- Many students are unhappy with the 30 hour requirement, and feel it should be 20
- Some students feel 10 hour appointments are treated similarly to 20 hour appointments by some faculty, or that 10 hour appointments are not feasible for some courses
- Workload between courses can be wildly inconsistent
- Culturally, there is an attitude of “just get it over with” surrounding teaching; this culture is sometimes reinforced by the faculty.

Prompts:
- What is the role of graduate student instruction in our/your graduate education?
  - How should a graduate student decide which courses to teach and when to capitalize on the benefits and learning experience?
- What should a graduate student’s expectations of a 10 hour appointment be, relative to a 20 hour appointment?
- Can we normalize the amount of work between courses? How?
- Some faculty members have expressed that they prefer UGSIs (UnderGraduate Student Instructors) to GSIs. Why is this, and how can the graduate students address the lack of faculty satisfaction?

Background Information:

When prompted:
- “On a scale of 1 to 5, how much do you feel that you learned from CS301?”
  - Mean 2.5 (n=26)
- “On a scale of 1 to 5, how much did CS301 help your teaching as a GSI?”
  - Mean 2.2 (n=26)

Flip for more background information
Responses to the question “What are your experiences with the 30-hour GSI requirement? Do you have particular comments on the 10-hour or 20-hour component?”:

- “I ended up doing two 20-hour GSIs because a 10-hour GSI would have been useless for the courses I taught--there's a fixed cost of at least 5 hours a week just to follow along with the course material.”
- “Rarely are 10-hour appointments actually 10-hours including my own. It'd be worth reinforcing the 10-hour limitations and expectation with professors or removing the position entirely.”
- “I would be my strong preference that the 30-hour requirement be reduced to 20 hours [...]. Being a GSI takes a huge amount of time and energy - it's a great experience, but it does impact research and graduation time.”
- “I took a $50 / hour salary hit to do research because I like it, so unsurprisingly I'm not happy with being made to teach. [...] I would prefer much more experimentation with different ways of letting the grad student population help the undergrads. I think we could find something better (tutoring, research mentoring, discussions).”
- “It is clear there is a wide disparity between the workload for various courses [...] It also seems like certain courses are effectively reserved to be taught by students of certain research groups or professors thus adding to the challenge of fulfilling the requirement.”
- “Have any studies been done on the actual effectiveness of the 3xx courses?”
- “[T]he culture around the GSI requirement is simply bizarre, discordant, and broken. When interacting with the students, I actually do find it enjoyable and rewarding; however, there are extremely strong pressures to not care about it and minimize effort. Nearly all the other students and faculty refer to it as something you just have to 'get out of the way' and should 'just get through' which isn't really motivating.”
How can we Improve Department Diversity and Educate the Community?

Introduction:
On recent surveys many students have raised questions relating to diversity in the department. Among these issues are:

- What is being done to recruit and retain diverse faculty?
- What is being done to improve diversity at the graduate student level?

Prompts:

- What can the graduate students do in order to help the department succeed in recruiting faculty from underrepresented groups?
- Last year, 19 female graduate students were offered admission, but only 6 chose to accept (compare with 78 admitted/43 accepted males). The yield rate for women has been lower than men for 8 of the last 12 years. What are factors that might contribute to this, and how can they be amended this year?
- How can we educate the community about the issues faced by underrepresented groups?

Background:

Graduate student recruiting outcomes by gender and year

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<th>Women Admitted</th>
<th>Women Accepted</th>
<th>Men Applicants</th>
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<th>Men Accepted</th>
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</table>
Responses to the question “Do you have any concerns as a minority with regard to race, gender, sexual orientation, etc?”:

- I would be interested to see if there were ways to educate those with non-minority identities about the issues minorities face, specifically in the CS world.”

- “I don't know what it's like for racial minorities, but as a woman I've found that many men in CS don't actually know what types of attitudes and behaviors women face.”

- “I haven't run across many people here who openly act in prejudiced ways, but I've met many, many people who don't consider themselves active allies, won't stand up for minorities. And some are willing to jump to the defense of sexist actions by others. I don't know if there's a healthy, productive way to carry out this conversation that wouldn't actually make things worse.”

- “Given the current pipeline of applicants, I think the department is reasonably balanced and open. However, I was appalled by the gender ratio in the upper-level CS class I'm GSI-ing this semester.”

- “I am curious whether the professors see the percentage of minority students in the department as a problem and, if so, how they are addressing this problem. I am particularly curious about whether professors are addressing this problem in a scientific way. Have they read the relevant research literature on the issue? [...] How do they decide whether and how to act on the data and available research?”

Also see the Diversity section in the accompanying FAQ
How can we Improve Faculty-Student Interaction?

Introduction:
In surveys students consistently express interest in engaging more with faculty beyond their adviser. The following avenues exist but are not well utilized:

- Annual department BBQ
- Bi-Monthly TGIF
- Office hours

Prompts:
- How would you characterize the current level of faculty-student interaction in the department (outside of student-advisor relationships)? Is this level ideal?
- In what ways can we increase student-faculty interaction in the department, without encroaching too much on time and energy?
- What can be done to make these interactions valuable?
- For the faculty: What kind of student/faculty social events are you likely to participate in?

Background Information:

Existing avenues and events for student/faculty interaction:

- TGIF (every other week)
- Department Barbeque (once a year)
- Social Hour (weekly)
- Office Hours

Flip for more background information
Responses to the question “Do you have any questions/concerns related to, or ideas for improving faculty/student interaction?":

- “More faculty should come to events! TGIF in particular”
- “TGIF is a great thing. Not sure how to make the faculty feel more welcome.”
- “Faculty do not seem to come to the theoretical mingling events (e.g., BBQ, TGIF)”
- “[Faculty] could spend more time socializing with the students they are advising, to promote a broader relationship of collaboration and sharing of knowledge. Some faculty do not spend much time with their students outside of very strict appointment times.”
- “[P]rovide more free lunches to faculty where you also invite graduate students. I saw the most faculty at the first year lunch where we invited the first year students to the weekly faculty lunch.”
- “I think last time, we have a lunch with all faculty as a new PhD student. That's really great and maybe we can arrange more such activities :))”
- “Foster more cross-department events. I'm less concerned about getting to know /my area's/ faculty, and more sad that I never get to say, see […] or […], both of whom are out of my area but whom I admire very much.”