2020 Summary Report on University Administrative Practices Survey

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Introduction

In 2013, the USFA Committee on University Administrative Practices first reported to USFA members on the results of discussions with engaged faculty in small group meetings about the ways administrative practices at the university help and hinder progress in their teaching, research and community engagement.

USFA reconstituted this committee during the 2019-2020 Academic year, but the pandemic struck just as the Committee was about to begin its process. At the time, meetings were not feasible, and the Committee chose instead to conduct a survey that included many opportunities for free-form comments.

Despite the heightened workload and the length of the survey, **more than 430 faculty** replied to the survey, indicating real concerns. Since a survey doesn't provide the same opportunities for exchange of ideas small group meetings do, the committee combined survey responses with other information sources to produce the full report.

Three major findings

First, the problems identified in 2013 have not gone away. They are listed below along with the percentage of current faculty who still see them as problems:

1. (75%) More time-consuming menial administrative tasks are given to faculty
2. (72%) The numbers in the para-presidential and -decanal ranks continue to grow
3. (70%) The university is operated in a top-down fashion
4. (53%) Department heads play a smaller leading role and do more administration
5. (38%) CGRP should be less centralized
6. (33%) Much research administrative support is borne by students paid by faculty
7. (26%) The new faculty mentorship program is cumbersome and not productive
8. (25%) Outreach and Engagement is managed by an administrative office rather than by faculty

Second, the university is experiencing a clash of cultures in both research and teaching. In teaching, the extremes are challenging students with the fundamentals of critical thinking versus teaching towards learning objectives and achieving student satisfaction. In research, the divide grows between basic curiosity driven research and quantifiable publication records, as well as securing money. (Here, we do recognize that faculty may choose different approaches but, faculty should enjoy successful careers regardless of their style of work.)

Third, the pandemic has made clear how extensive these problems are and how great the divisions between faculty and administration are. We have seen more top-down governance, more unilateral decision-making and less consultation with employees.

Executive Summary

Reading faculty responses, one senses an intensity and dedication to the goals of research and teaching, particularly as faculty responded to meeting student needs at the pandemic's onset. Yet in the responses, the reader also sees the increasing frustration as faculty interact with an ever growing top-down administrative[1] structure that has become increasingly opaque and aloof.

The proliferation of high-ranking administrative positions has not resulted in a meaningful decrease in the administrative work done by faculty. Instead, these processes, including software initiatives, are seen to have been designed to facilitate administration's goals, while being increasingly slow and frustrating for faculty.

The 2013 Report on University Administrative Practices appeared just after the re-emergence of Robert Dickeson's book, *Prioritizing Academic Programs and Services,* and just preceded the implementation of *TransformUS*, a strategic planning exercise here that collapsed in 2014.

In the summer of that year, the first lines of the Collective Agreement were strengthened as follows (new language italicized):

> "The parties recognize that the goal of the University is the attainment of the highest possible standards of academic excellence in the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge, to be achieved principally through teaching, scholarship, research and public service. *The parties have respect for and confidence in the collegial decision making processes described in this Agreement.*"

However, faculty appear to feel the old agenda did not change, but just became covert/systemic. Support staff for faculty have been cut several times, while senior administrative appointments have proliferated.

The pandemic has exacerbated conditions to the point where some believe that the pandemic is being exploited to erode collegial engagement and interfere in faculty processes. While faculty worked around the clock to move courses online in March 2020, the slow, uneven and unhelpful responses of administration to simple and obvious requests such as why the purchase of computers, high speed internet, printers and videoconferencing software were being denied because faculty might enjoy incidental benefit from them. This exasperated faculty, especially those in households with two people working from home while managing schooling and other the needs of young children. In the meantime, deans were reported to be micromanaging

[1] We use the term administrators to include the expanding numbers of para-presidential and para-decanal appointments, and not those co-workers whose job it is to assist faculty with administrative tasks in the unit.

assignment of duties (a process that should be owned by faculty) to such an extent that the leadership of one large departmentalized college approved no assignments of duties. The Association has been actively working with the Employer to improve the situation.

Below, we summarize[2] results to the survey questions, including commentary from the free-form questions, sometimes including observations gathered in other settings. The Committee intends to use the results of the survey as starting points for a series of small discussion groups in the near future.

Survey Results

Demographics

We received responses from **430 members (more than 40% of members)** of which 75% were tenured, 40% were from Professional Colleges, 35% from the sciences, and about 25% from the Humanities, Social Sciences and Fine Arts. 40% had more than 19 years of employment, 20% had 13-18 years of employment, 20% had 6-12 years of employment, and the remainder 0-5 years employment. About half were full professors, and about 25% were in the associate and assistant ranks respectively, with a small number of academic programming appointments, librarians, lecturers and instructors making up the rest.

129 respondents (30%) have no other dependents, 109 (25%) have one, 110 (26%) have two dependents, 52 (12%) have three, 18 (4%) had four dependents, 5 had five dependents, and one had six dependents. Respondents live in households with one (44%) income earner, or two (56%) income earners.

Discrimination

The Collective Agreement has a non-discrimination clause, and the University has recently made inclusiveness a formal part of the administration agenda. Yet while 65% indicated discrimination was not relevant to themselves or that they had never or rarely witnessed it, the remaining **35% mostly indicated that they had experienced or witnessed it *sometimes*, and some (5%) indicating *usually*, and 1-2% indicating *always***. Reports of *sometimes* or higher were reported at the highest rate in the Humanities, Social Sciences and Fine Arts, and the lowest in the Sciences.

Day-to-Day administrative support

Most had convenient access to office supplies and photocopiers and about half of faculty (across all groups) felt that they received sufficient support for day-to-day tasks. About 75% felt that more administrative tasks were being downloaded to faculty. 60% had been provided with comfortable, ergonomic workspaces. About 45% of Humanities, Fine Arts and Social Sciences, as well as Sciences felt that they had an up-to-date computer, compared to Professional Colleges at 65%. Of the half of faculty that had up to date computers, many had computers

[2] In the interest of readability, statistics are stated informally, for example, “111 were Full Professors” rather than “111 of the respondents indicated that they held the rank of Full Professor. Percentages are approximate, and some may have been rounded slightly.

and/or office chairs on their own, purchased from their APEF or from research grants, to make up shortcomings from the employer. A significant proportion stated they had inadequate office space (37% in Q10, 40% in Q14). About 58% stated their office space was not cleaned to an acceptable level, and only 42% were satisfied. About half of faculty judged that Facilities Management responded quickly to requests, a little less than half said Facilities management responded quickly sometimes, with the remainder answering *no*.

This part of the survey received 174 free-form responses. Many expressed frustrations about the inadequacy of centralised administration to address urgent or simple issues in a timely manner. About 25% of the free-form comments in this category related to maintenance of the office spaces: not enough cleaning, mice, problems with heating and ventilation. Some did not have sufficient accounting and administration support to manage grants.

Administrative processes

P-Card About half of faculty use a P-Card. Of those, the majority rarely encounter reconciliation difficulties, with 25% having P-Card issues 2-6 times per year or most months.

Concur About 65% of faculty have encountered difficulties with Concur (of which about 21% always have difficulties with the system). A large majority of respondents (75%) feel that Concur expenses should be handle by their unit's administrative person. **Many commented that Concur is unintuitive and slow.**

Connection Point Refunds take weeks (more than 70%) or sometimes months (more than 10%), even though the system was been put in place to reduce the refund time from two weeks in the time prior to Connection Point. 60% of respondents are satisfied with Connection Point but about 70% regularly need to make follow-up queries and corrections. 40% are not satisfied (with 10% very dissatisfied). Many reported that **Connection Point**, like Concur, **increases the administrative load of faculty members and is seen as too slow to answer queries**.

UnivRS About half of respondents encounter problems every year with this system, and about 30% have problems with every submission they make. Many commented that the system is slow, with an unfriendly and poorly documented user interface. Free-form responses indicated the CV system and the UNIVRS medium were problematic, to the point where one must ask if it actually works. Many suggested the software should be managed by dedicated staff, rather than requiring all faculty to master it.

CV The vast majority of respondents (more than 85%) find the University CV useless outside of the university. Half of them say it is difficult to maintain. Many comments are related to UnivRS. Many commented that the formatting is outdated and that they must maintain a variety of CV formats for different kinds of grants. Many do not see a need for two parallel systems, particularly as both are troublesome. The survey and the free-form responses lead to an obvious conclusion: the current CV system is a useless disaster.

Research Services About 65% of respondents interact with research services several times a year (10% of them monthly). Many commented that though the employees are well-intentioned, they are too disconnected from academic research to provide appropriate assistance for grant application and management.

IT services About 60% of respondents feel that IT control over their computers has resulted in an increased workload, sometimes to an intolerable level (15%). Faculty in the sciences in particular expressed strong concerns about IT's control over their computers. **60% of respondents had trouble accessing software and about half think IT services do not take into account their needs when implementing new services or updating old ones.** The kinds of comments received range widely: many praise IT's efficiency while a significant number expressed dissatisfaction. IT acquisitions received a lot of complaints. Many suggested that faculty members should be able to choose whether IT manages their computers.

Online teaching – Gwenna Moss Centre 65% of respondents are happy with the level of support they have for online courses and about 80% have participated in at least one GM program, of which most found it useful or very useful. Many respondents commented that the IT tools at their disposal for teaching are not optimal/adapted (for example, Webex, blackboard). There were quite a few comments about the lack of teaching assistants, and many complained that the recommended software tools keep changing, especially after the move online. The free-form comments (156 responses) range from favourable to very uncomplimentary.

Research

About 65% of respondents report administrative support for their research has not enhanced their competitive ability to secure tri-agency funds, or to run a competitive research program. About 65% say the proposed tuition increase for international graduate students will negatively affect their research program, with about 15% seriously considering not accepting international applicants.

36% of faculty reported hiring postdocs. Of these, 64% said the new agreement has reduced the number of postdocs they can afford, with 22% saying the agreement deteriorated their interactions, and 14% saying it improved interactions with postdocs.

About 85% of respondents think the university should direct research support more broadly instead of to a few individuals in particular signature areas.

Of the 185 free-form comments in this section, many mentioned the lack of support and leadership from research services, as well as the lack of consultation in defining signature areas. Many also observed that while the university provides encouraging words for interdisciplinary research, there are not significant supports for it, notably within the context of tenure, promotion, and merit. Overall, access to reliable information, timely turnover of submitted grants, inadequate interface with UNIVRS, lack of support for UNIVRS, and insufficient

accountability are ongoing and longstanding issues with Research Services. Few positive comments appeared in this section.

Start-up support

Within the Humanities, Social Sciences and Fine Arts, about 40% said that start-up support provided a reasonable start-up, but about 15% said it was insufficient to start a nationally competitive program. 10% said they were very well supported. In the Sciences, about 35% said the support was sufficient, and more than 40% said it was not sufficient to start up a nationally competitive program, with about 3% saying they were very well supported. Within the Professional Colleges, more than 30% said the start-up support was sufficient, nearly 40% said it was not enough for a nationally competitive program, and about 3% said they were very well funded.

In the Humanities, Social Sciences and Fine Arts, 33% of faculty indicated they received teaching load reductions during their first three years as an assistant professor. Within the Sciences, about 40% received such reductions, as did about 30% within the Professional Colleges.

Regarding lab preparation, more than 80% in the Humanities, Social Sciences and Fine Arts said the question was not applicable. Of the remainder, about 30% said the labs were ready in a timely manner, and 70% replied they were not. In the Sciences, about 20% said the question was not applicable, with 60% of those saying the labs were not prepared, and about 40% saying they were.

In the 138 free-form comments offered in this section, faculty expressed appreciation for the support received, but qualified this by noting that the process for negotiating start-up is not transparent. As a result, support levels vary widely. Moreover, as this process happens at point of hire, faculty members may not correctly anticipate costs, and subsequently experience difficulty getting adequate support from the institution In particular, starting faculty did not anticipate the kinds of costs charged by Facilities Management for routine work, which set back many research programs.

Many commented that while start-up support has improved as compared to 20 or 30 years ago, it remains a small fraction of the start-up packages at other U15 universities and comparable institutions, with only research chairs seeming to receive adequate start-up. Several stated that at a critical time in their career it took several years for their lab to be built or opened, and some did not recover from that. Start-up aside, others noted that remaining competitive means labs must upgrade their instruments regularly, but no mechanisms exist to engage the university for upgrading and maintenance.

The response to COVID-19

About 40% of faculty felt they had opportunities to provide input regarding the COVID-19 response of the University community to the pandemic. This varied from 30% among the sciences to 35% in the Humanities, Social Sciences and Fine Arts to nearly 50% in the

Professional Colleges. Of those who had opportunities to provide input, more than 85% provided input within their unit, 7% provided input to the President's Office and 9% provided input to the USFA. When asked if their concerns were addressed 40% answered *Yes*, about 15% answered *No* and 45% answered *Somewhat*.

The response regarding satisfaction with the University's response varied. About 50% of those in the Humanities, Social Sciences and Fine arts, answered *Yes,* as compared to 40% in the Sciences, and about 55% in the Professional Colleges. **About 80% were satisfied with the Memorandum of Understanding between the University and the Faculty Association**, and 60% felt the University of Saskatchewan played an important role in the local community's response to the pandemic.

There were 185 free-form comments to the pandemic response, which varied widely. Faculty expressed frustration about the complexities of working from home without access to university facilities, problems obtaining equipment, and the rapid conversion to online teaching. This was especially difficult for families with children. Faculty members found it time-consuming and difficult to obtain basic teaching materials. Others expressed frustrations at being unable to resume lab research long after colleagues at other universities were allowed to return under safe-rules, and when many faculty had returned to their offices in Canada. Some expressed the view that the University was more interested in saving money from the campus lock-down than addressing a health issue.

Survey methodology

The survey was constructed by the committee during the early days of the pandemic with the goal of eliciting talking points for downstream group discussions. The committee had wished to follow the style of the 2013 report by organizing small group discussions with engaged faculty, a style that permits deep discussion of problems and solutions.

Plans changed after the COVID lockdown. In the early days, the possibilities for group interactions were not understood, nor was it clear how long the shutdown would last. The committee believed it was time for another report and in the end chose to circulate a survey, which was deployed using SurveyMonkey, a popular web tool. In a short time, nearly half of our members replied to the survey, a strong outcome, given the workload, the point in the pandemic the survey was distributed, and the survey length.

Fortunately, all committee members were elected members of the USFA executive and had access to other tables where they could hear the concerns of members to further inform this report.

We have reported the results in informal language and rounded most numbers for ease of reading. The tone of the remarks provided in the survey is consistent with what we heard from the survey, and what we have seen and heard our members experience both before and during the pandemic.

Concluding thoughts, next steps

This preliminary report will give members an overview of the information collected though more analysis remains to be done. In addition to what has been stated in the preceding, we add the following comments.

We were surprised by the number of participants reporting discrimination (31% responding *sometimes* or *usually*), especially as the survey was distributed before recent public events challenged the University's treatment of certain faculty groups. The numbers reported in the survey (along with the number of faculty that have left the institution) are far too high to ignore. The USFA must engage faculty about why one in three experience (directly by receiving it or indirectly by seeing it) discrimination in the workplace. The USFA must also ask whether this is a case of those causing it not seeing it.

For decades, universities world-wide have struggled against increasingly bloated administrations taking control of academic decision-making away from faculty. Taken overall, the reported comments of faculty reflect a clash of cultures regarding the role of the university in society. Faculty plainly stated they did not wish to make unfavourable comments about those employees of the university that have been tasked with facilitating teaching and research. For instance, comments on the Teaching and Learning Centre ranged very widely from favourable to uncomplimentary, some calling it a waste of money. Many faculty reported positively regarding the usefulness of the offerings provided by the TLC. Others see the style of teaching to learning objectives and administering multiple choice exams to massive classes as sacrificing the quality of learning, and eroding the university's role in society as a centre for critical discussion to credentialization concerns.

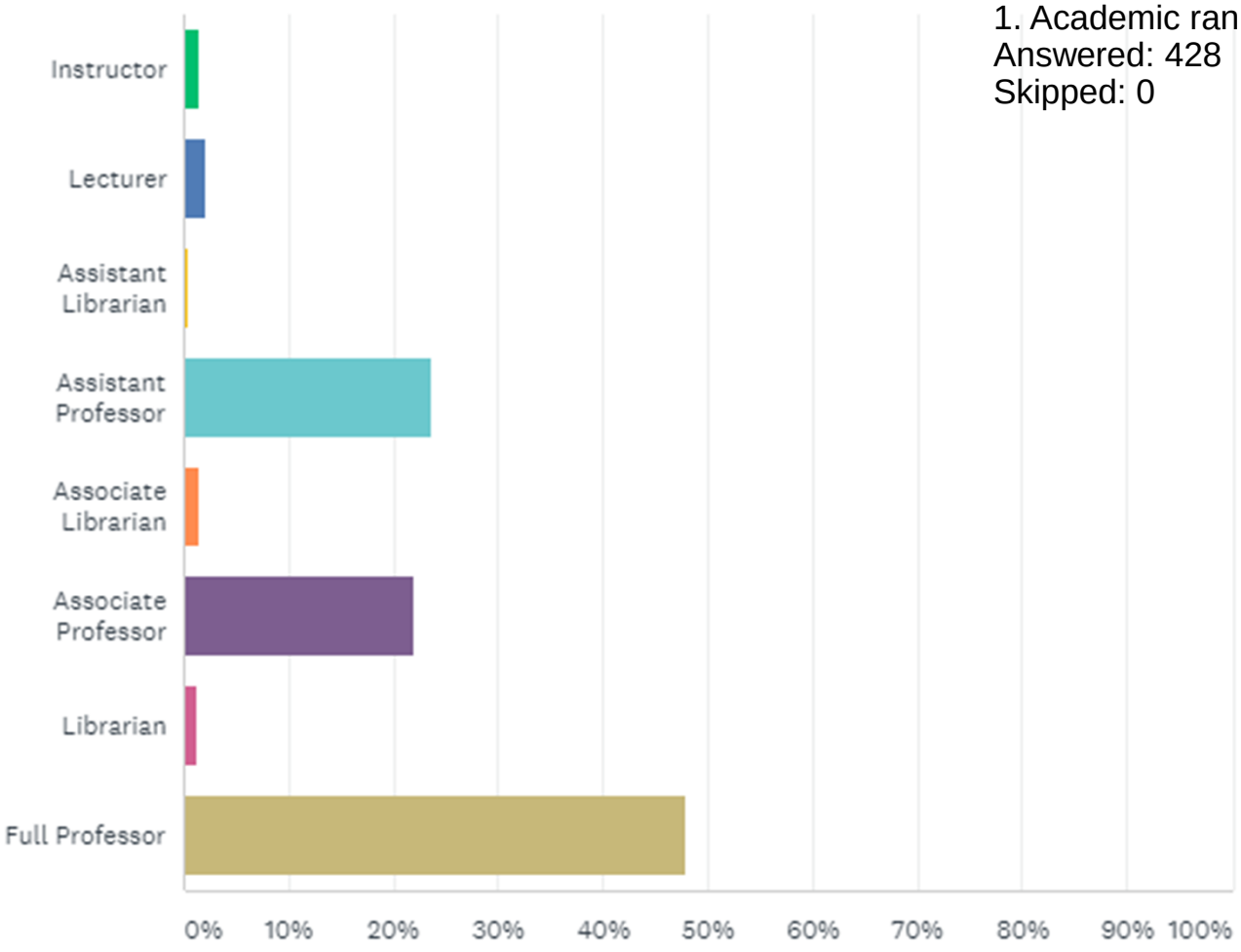
This report was not conducted to decide questions like this, but rather address how to work together as a collegium to support a variety of approaches.

A parallel argument applies to research. Before the expansion of the national granting agencies and long before local industry had the means or inclination to participate in joint ventures with the university, research here was conducted by tireless scholars, many of whom pursued solitary basic research programs off the side of their desks with few rewards apart from the joy of discovery. As the modern research programme developed an enterprise character, we notice a parallel with teaching. Senior administration favours research with measurables – large numbers of peer-reviewed publications, and ever-increasingly, money – over academic merit, and quality.

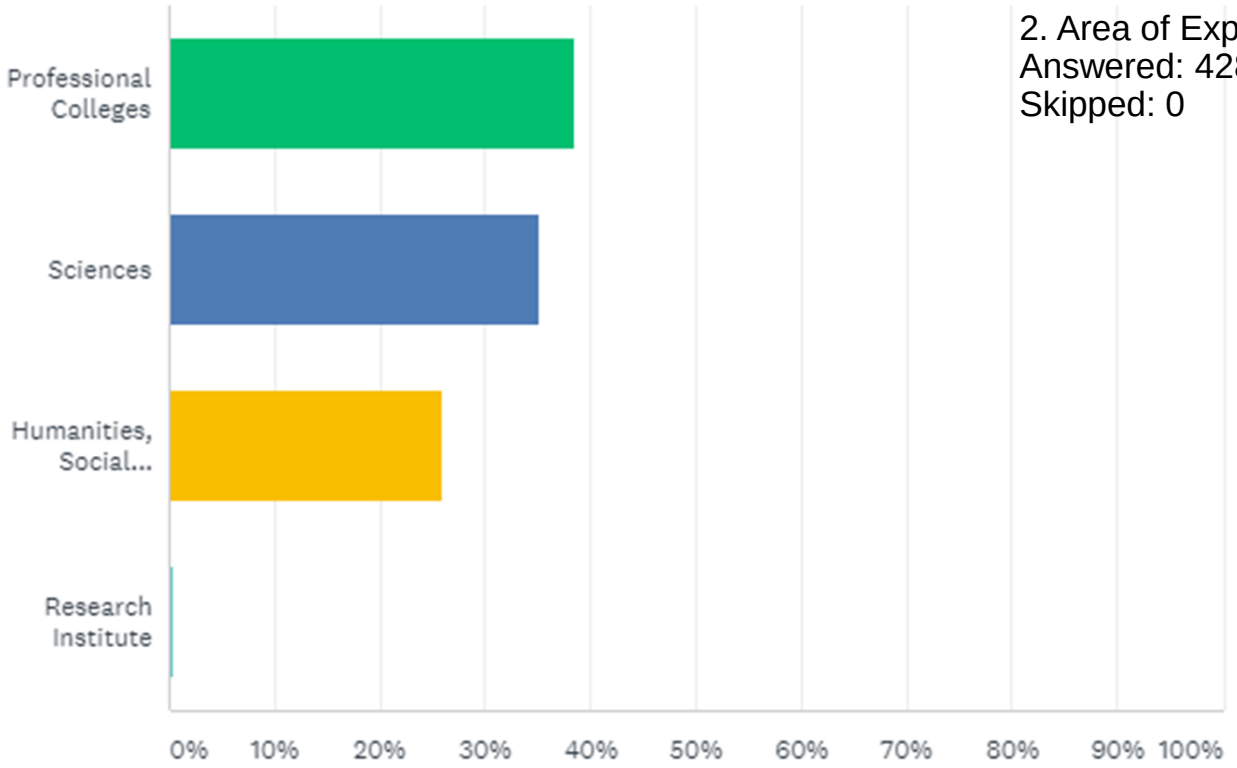
Again, this is an issue we do not intend to decide. A visible and unnecessary tug of war between curiosity-driven research and targeted research has existed for decades despite the importance of both in the advancement of knowledge. The issue, especially as we struggle already to properly accommodate interdisciplinary research and community-based research is how to ensure recognition through collegial processes of all approaches.

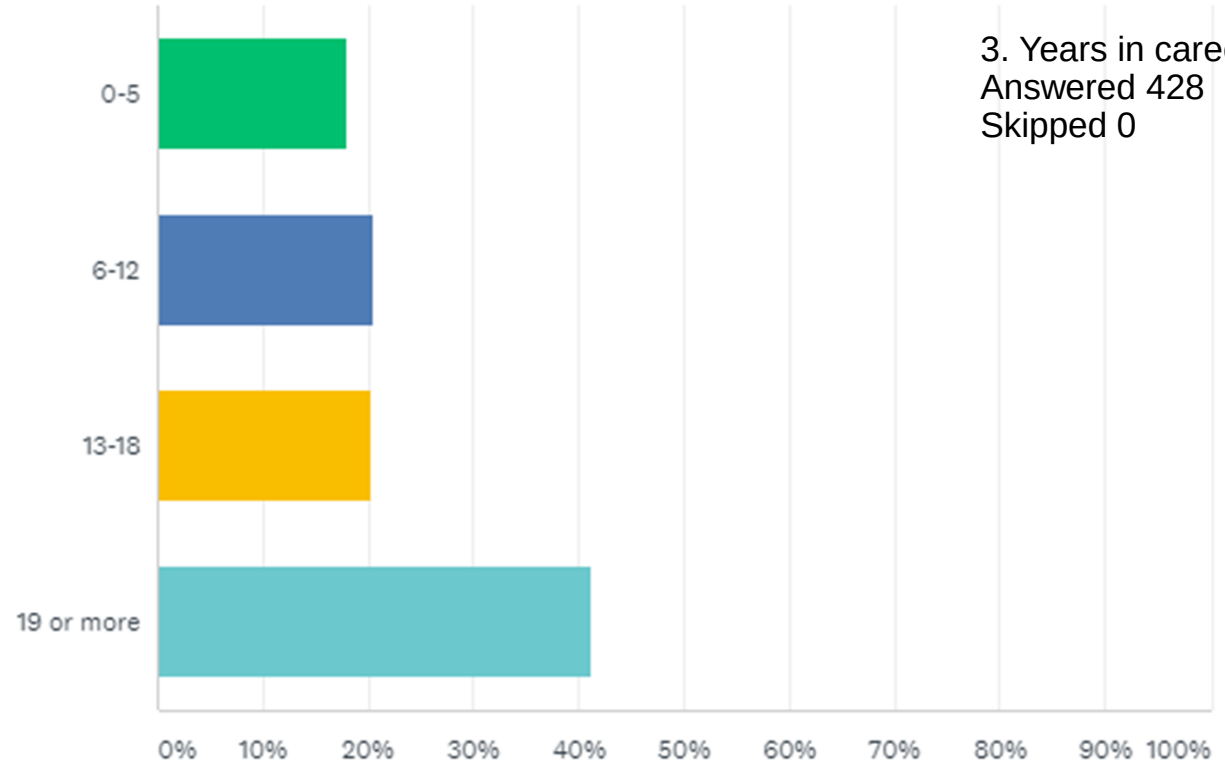
These are among the issues USFA hopes to address in the small group meetings. Let us know if you are interested in participating in these discussions.

1. Academic rank
Answered: 428
Skipped: 0

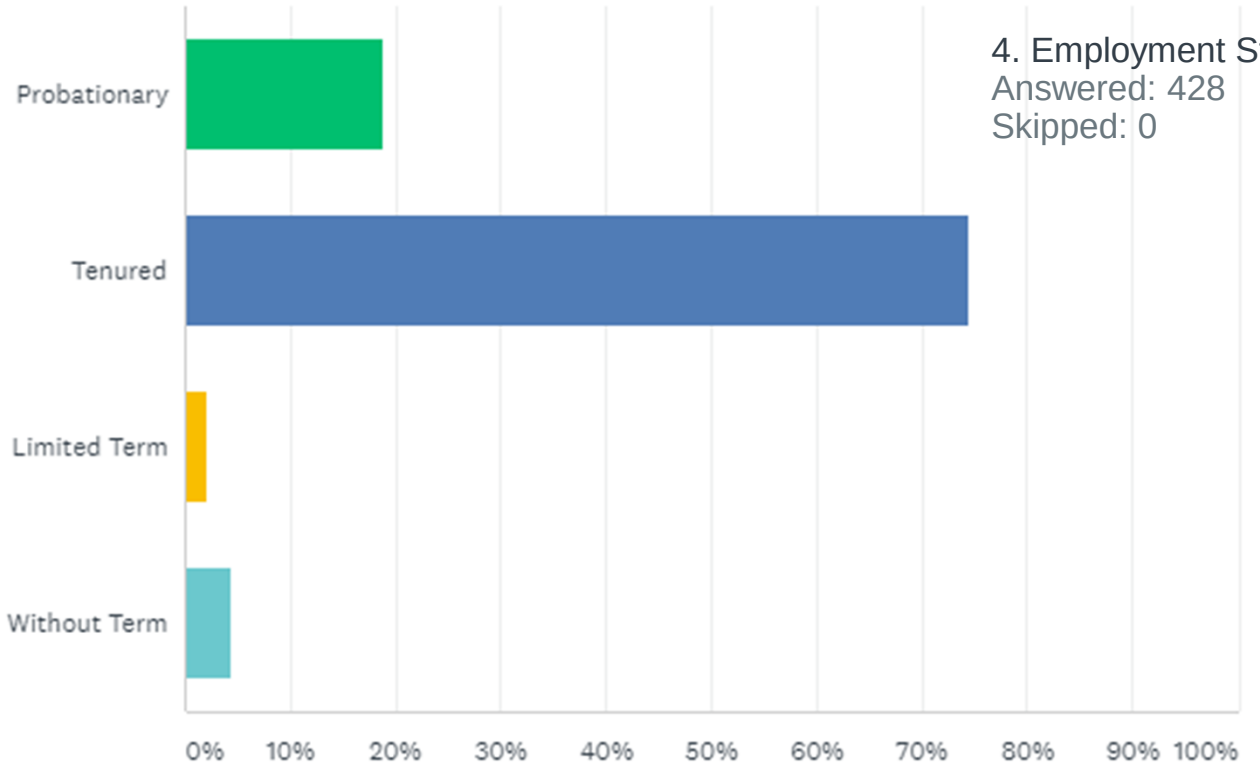


2. Area of Expertise
Answered: 428
Skipped: 0

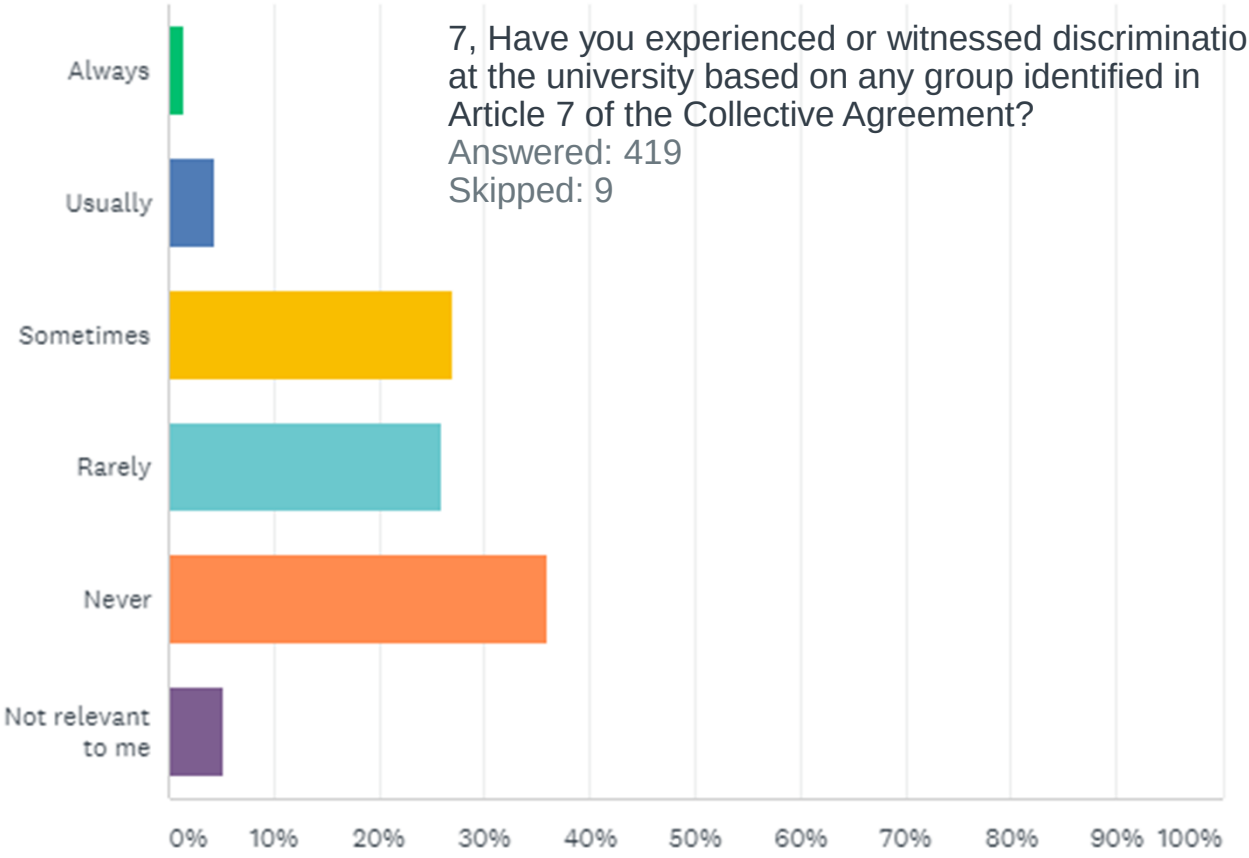




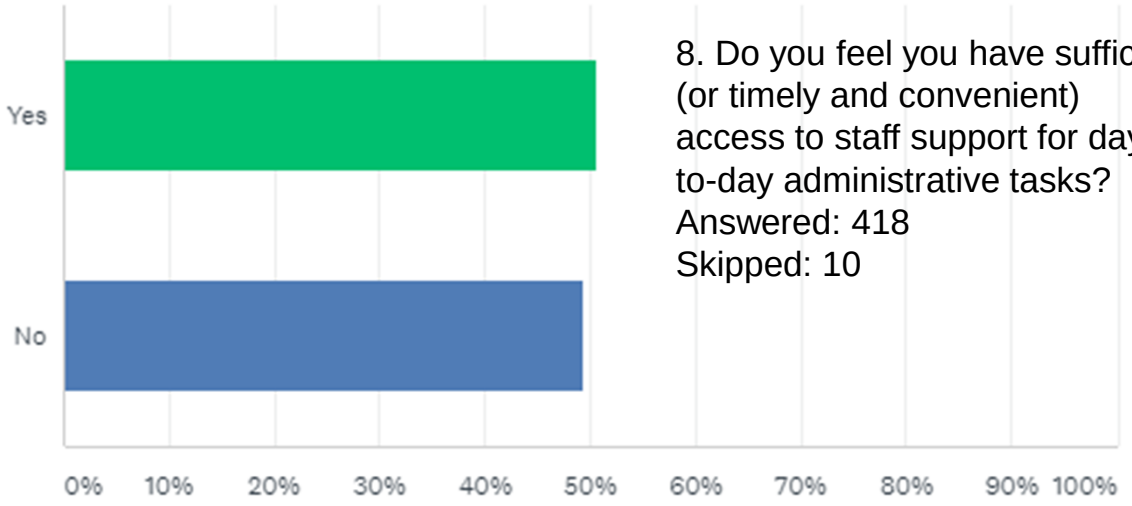
3. Years in career
Answered 428
Skipped 0



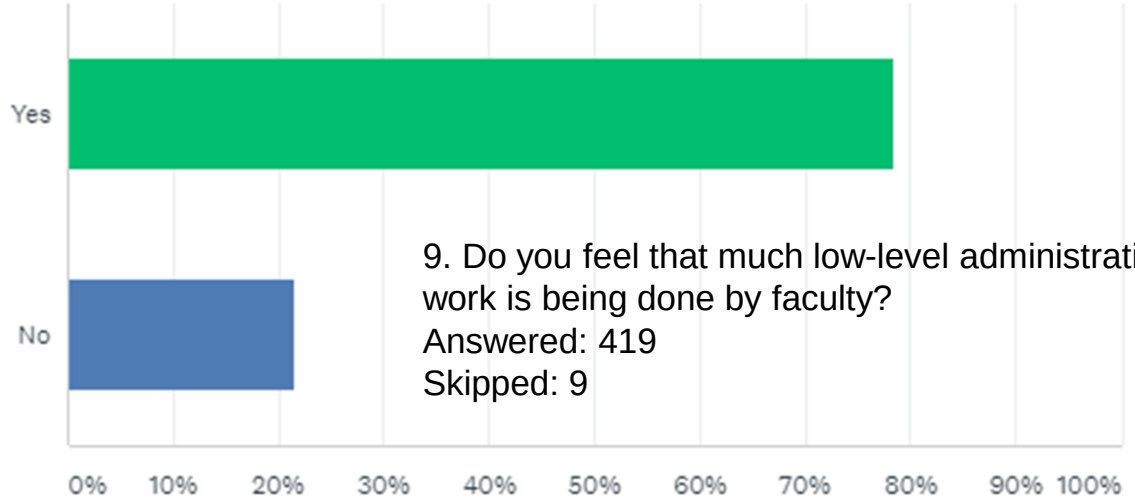
4. Employment Status
Answered: 428
Skipped: 0



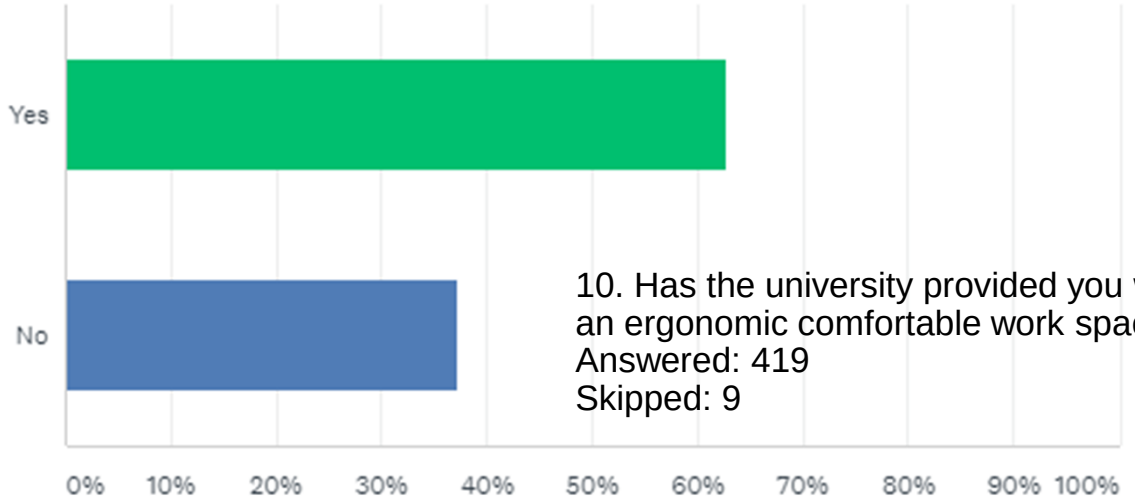
7, Have you experienced or witnessed discrimination at the university based on any group identified in Article 7 of the Collective Agreement?
Answered: 419
Skipped: 9



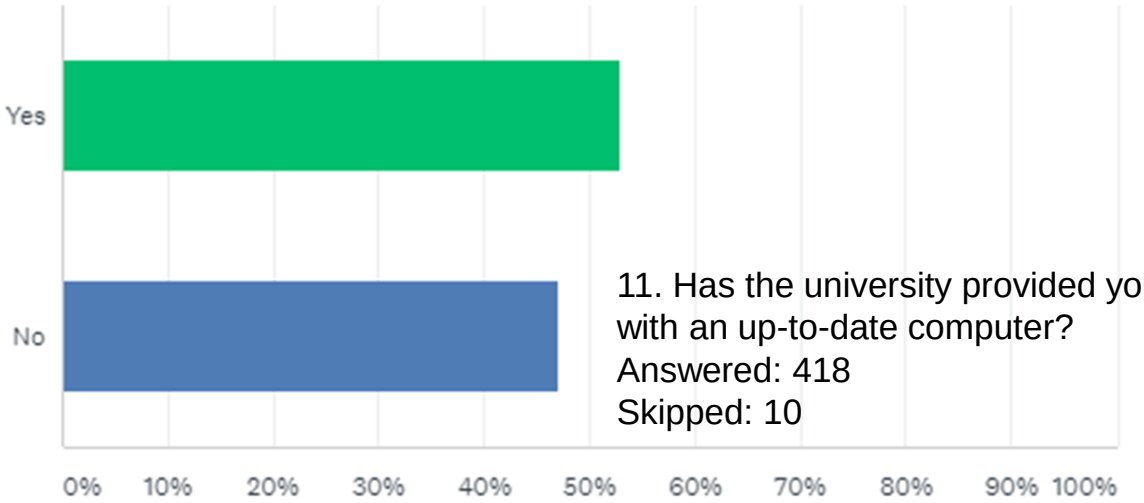
8. Do you feel you have sufficient (or timely and convenient) access to staff support for day-to-day administrative tasks?
Answered: 418
Skipped: 10



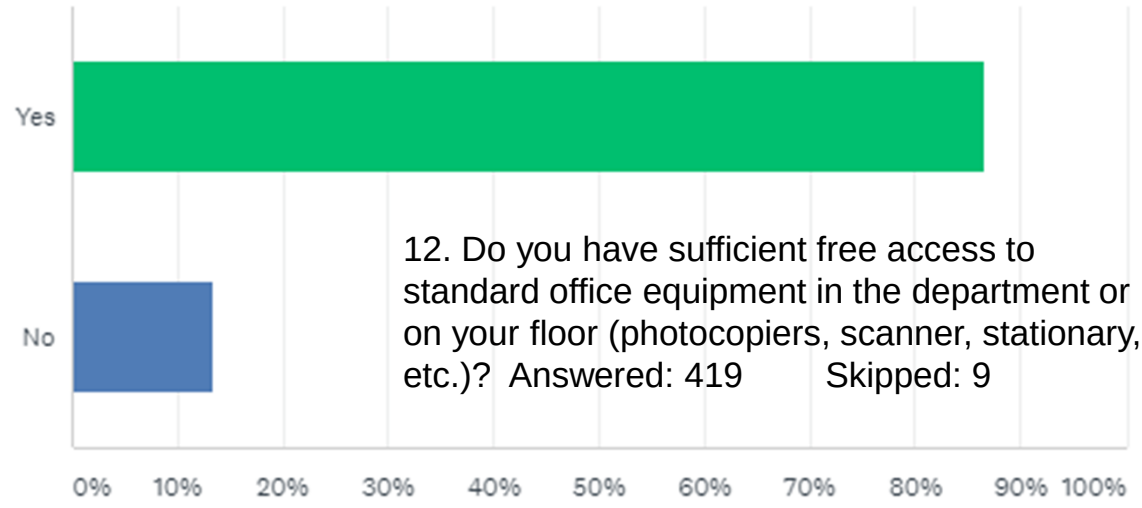
9. Do you feel that much low-level administrative work is being done by faculty?
Answered: 419
Skipped: 9



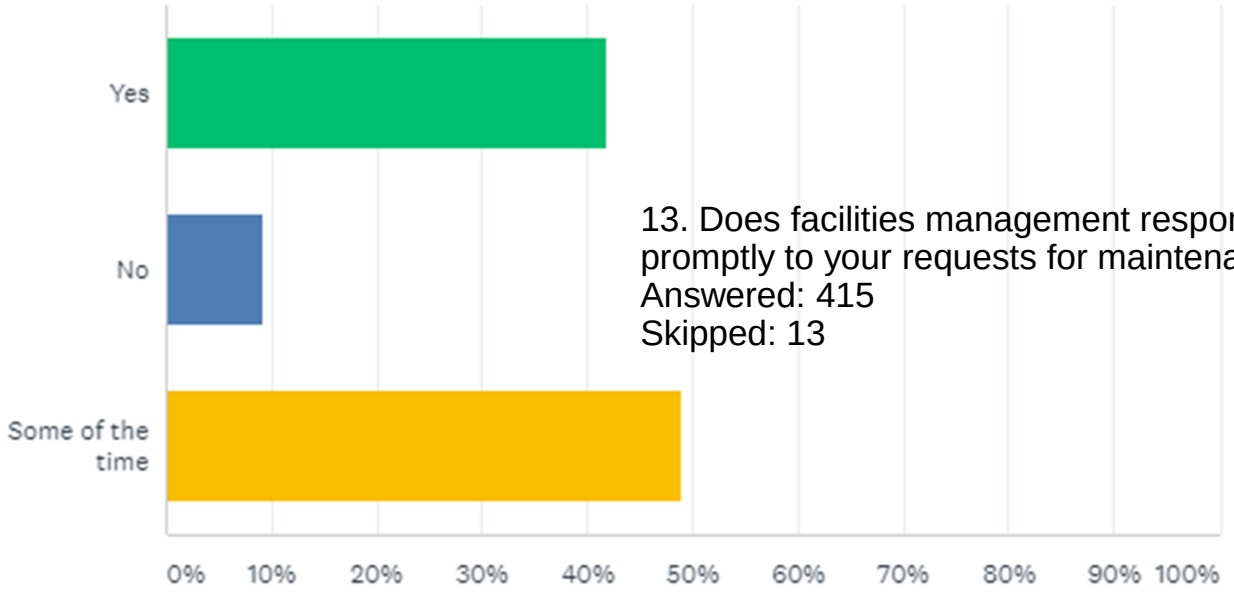
10. Has the university provided you with an ergonomic comfortable work space?
Answered: 419
Skipped: 9



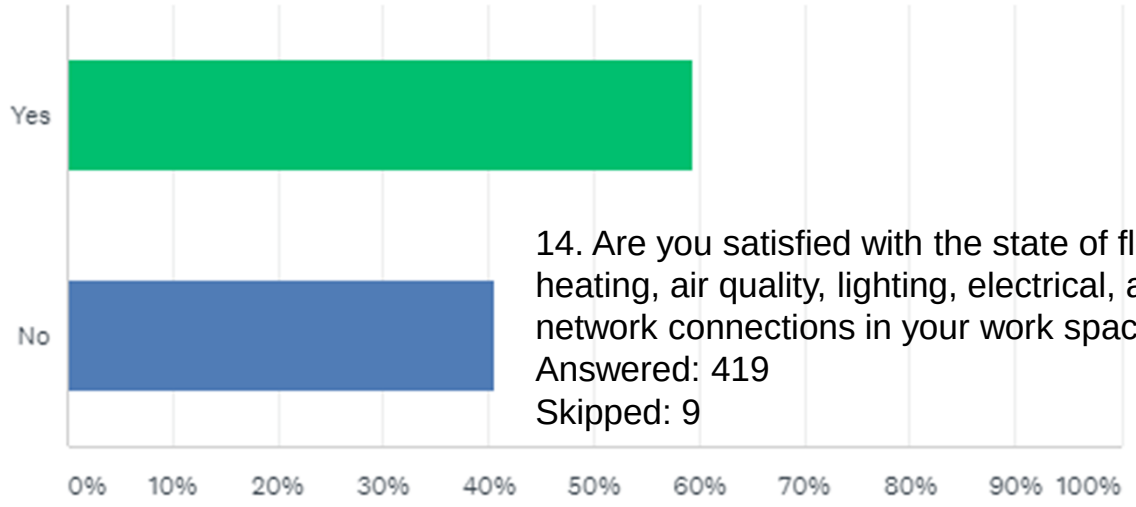
11. Has the university provided you with an up-to-date computer?
Answered: 418
Skipped: 10



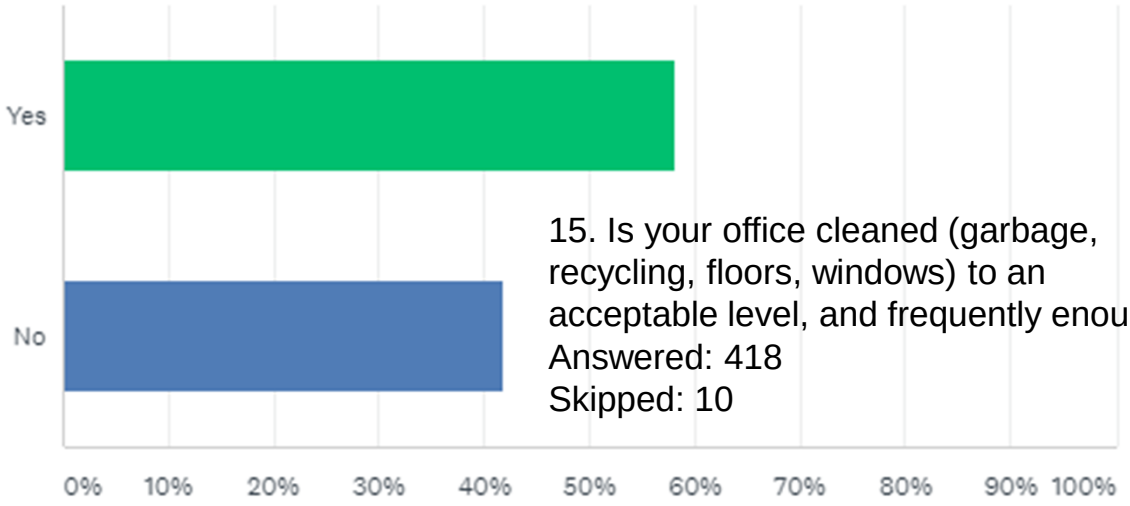
12. Do you have sufficient free access to standard office equipment in the department or on your floor (photocopiers, scanner, stationary, etc.)? Answered: 419 Skipped: 9



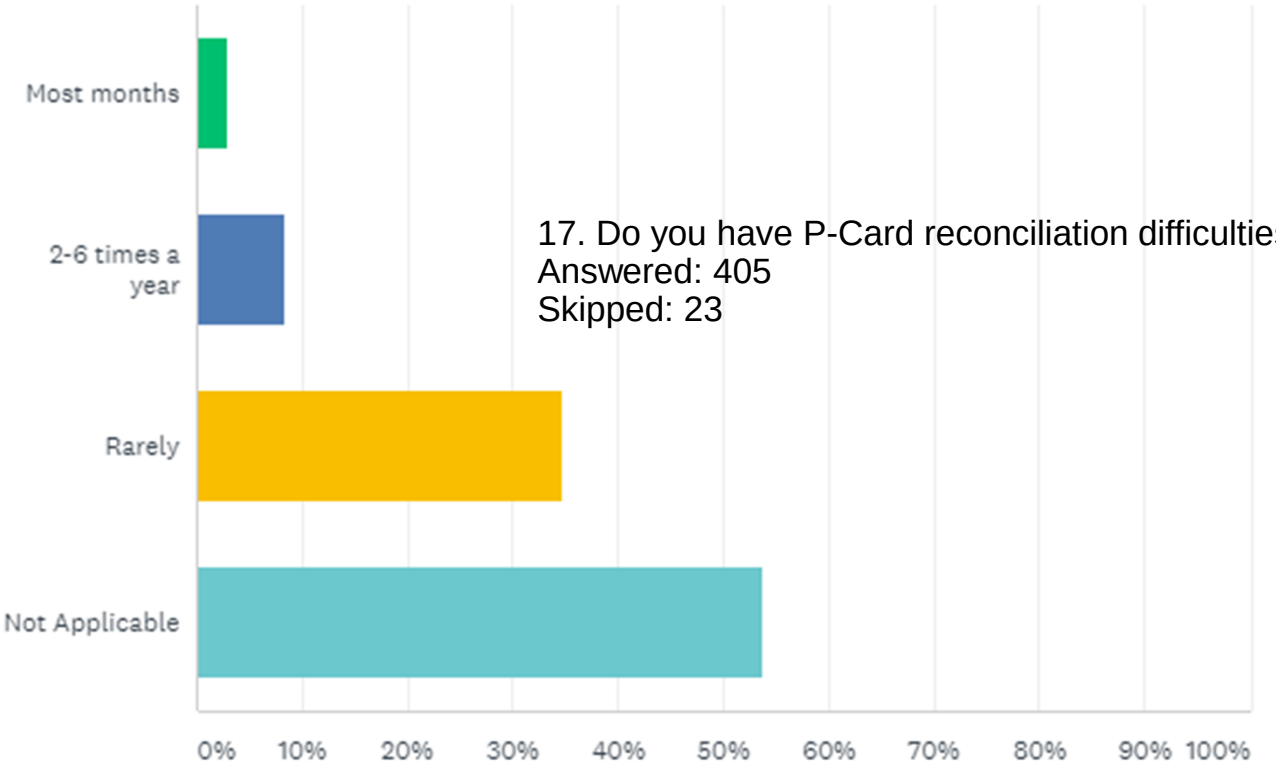
13. Does facilities management respond promptly to your requests for maintenance?
Answered: 415
Skipped: 13



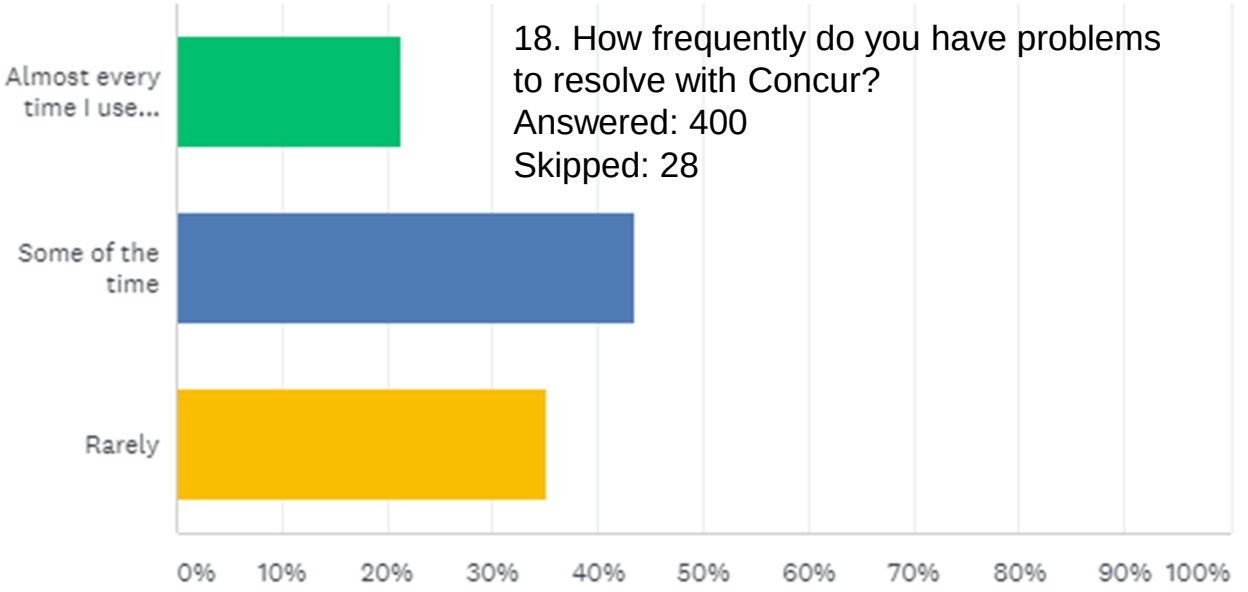
14. Are you satisfied with the state of flooring, heating, air quality, lighting, electrical, and network connections in your work space?
Answered: 419
Skipped: 9



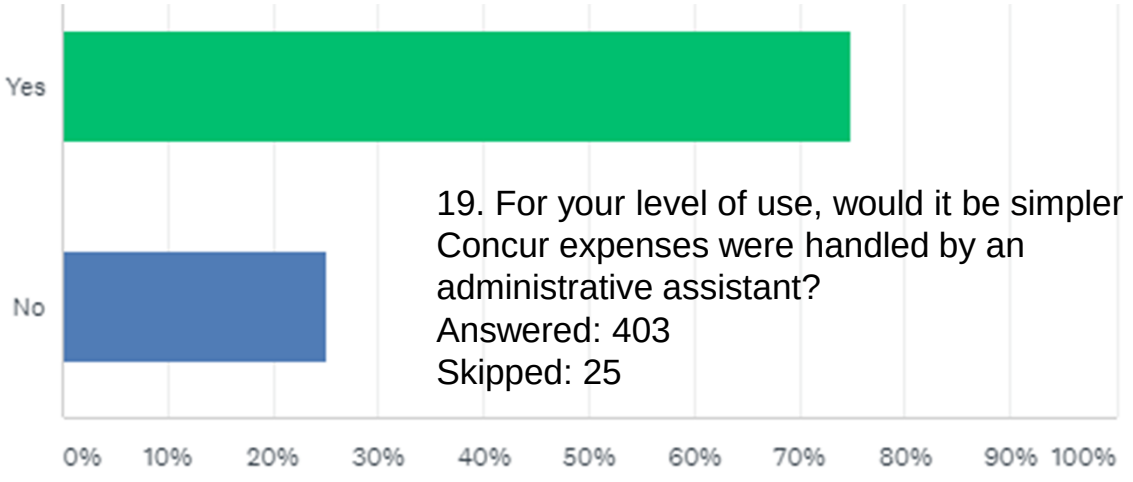
15. Is your office cleaned (garbage, recycling, floors, windows) to an acceptable level, and frequently enough?
Answered: 418
Skipped: 10



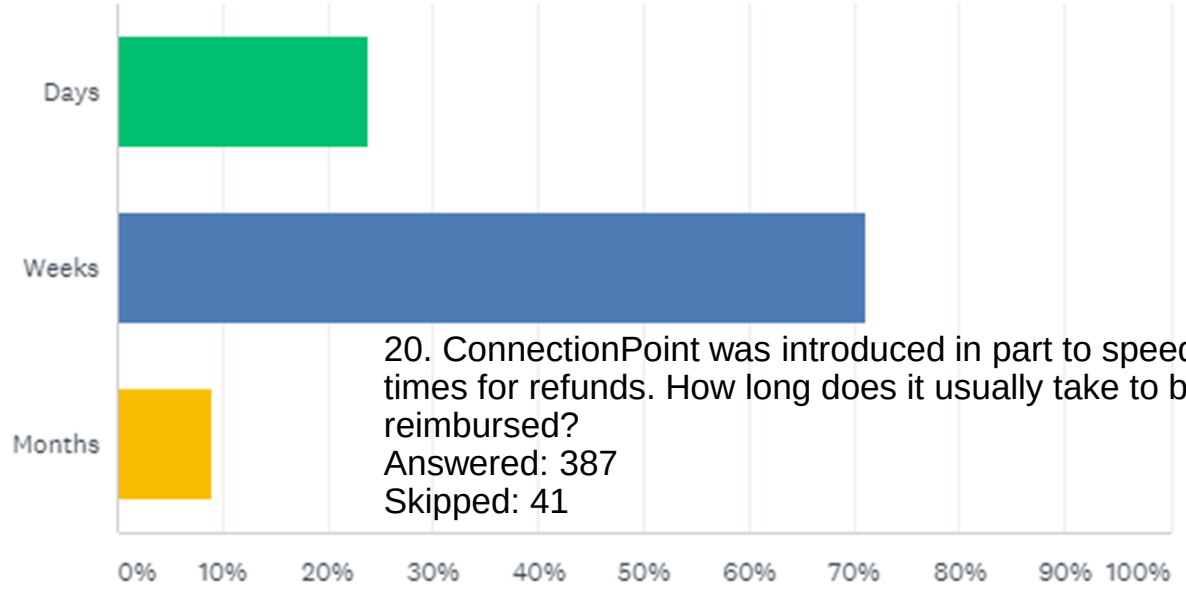
17. Do you have P-Card reconciliation difficulties?
Answered: 405
Skipped: 23



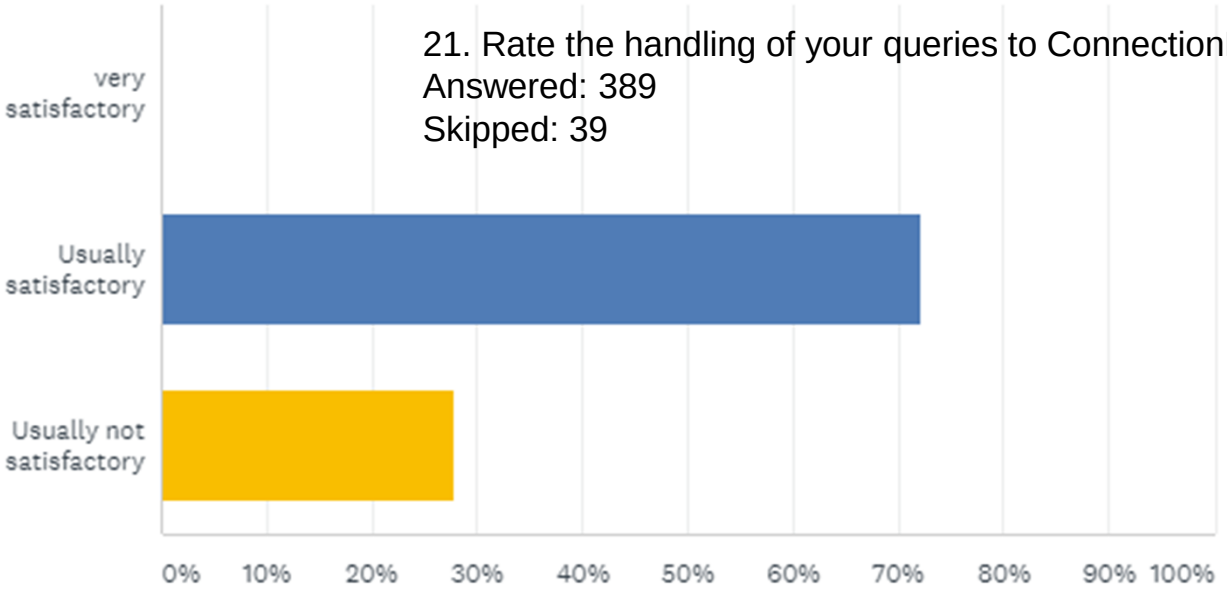
18. How frequently do you have problems to resolve with Concur?
Answered: 400
Skipped: 28



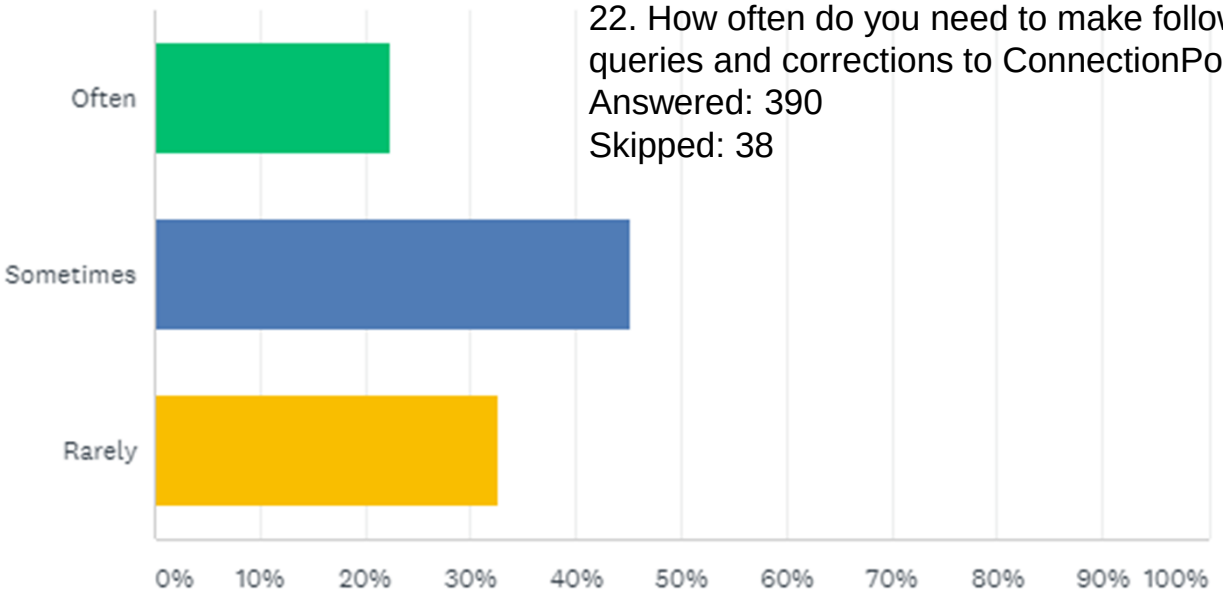
19. For your level of use, would it be simpler if Concur expenses were handled by an administrative assistant?
Answered: 403
Skipped: 25



20. ConnectionPoint was introduced in part to speed-up times for refunds. How long does it usually take to be reimbursed?
Answered: 387
Skipped: 41

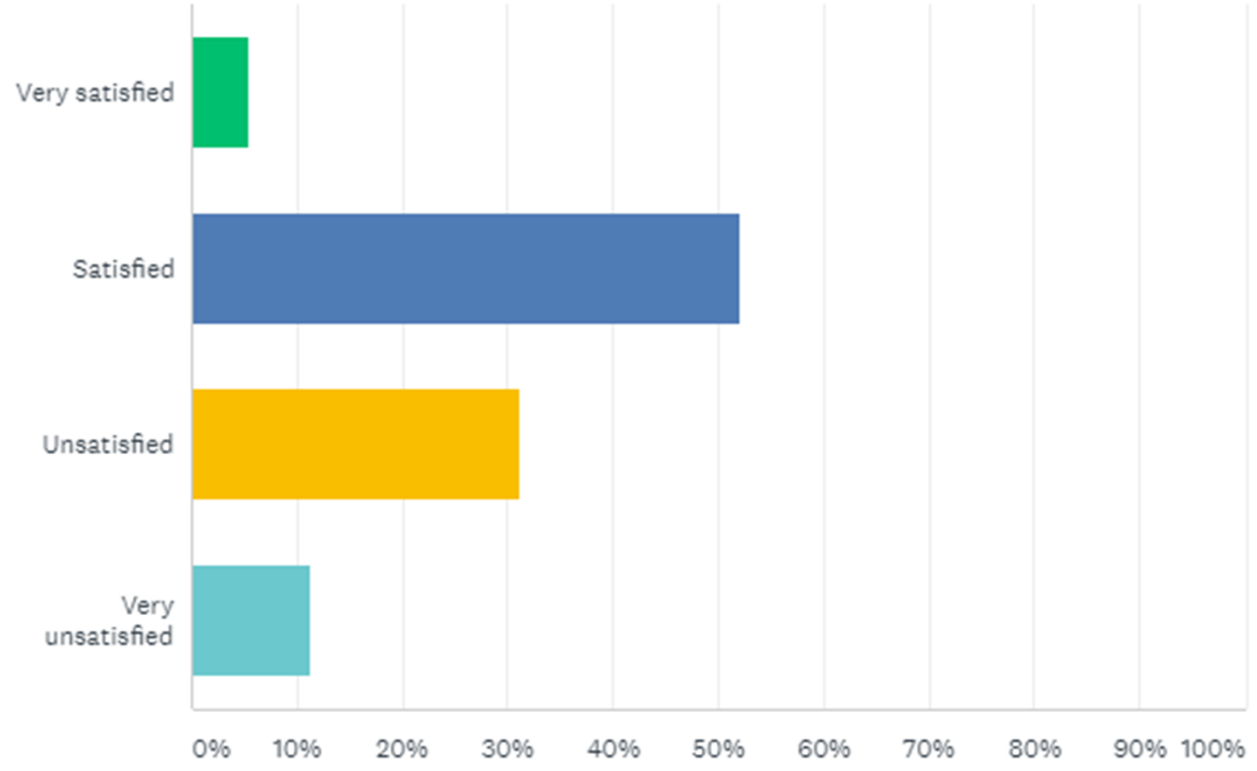


21. Rate the handling of your queries to ConnectionPoint:
Answered: 389
Skipped: 39

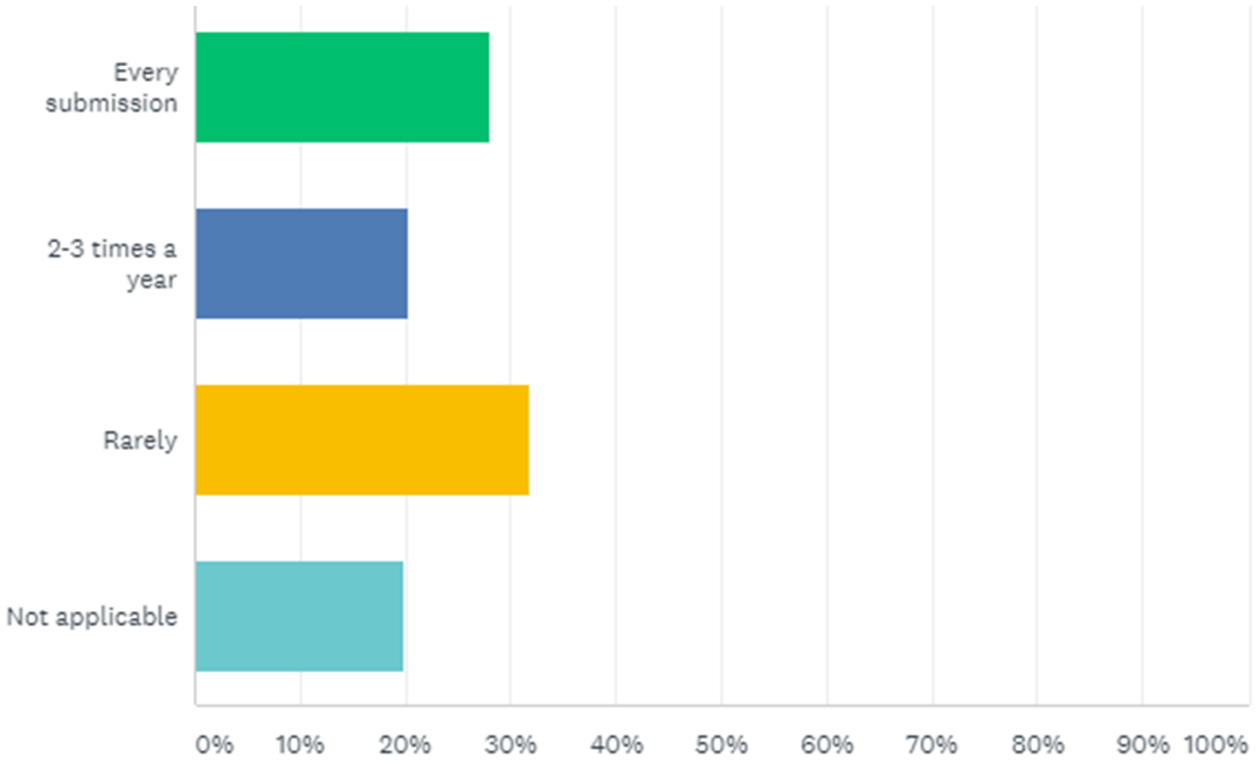


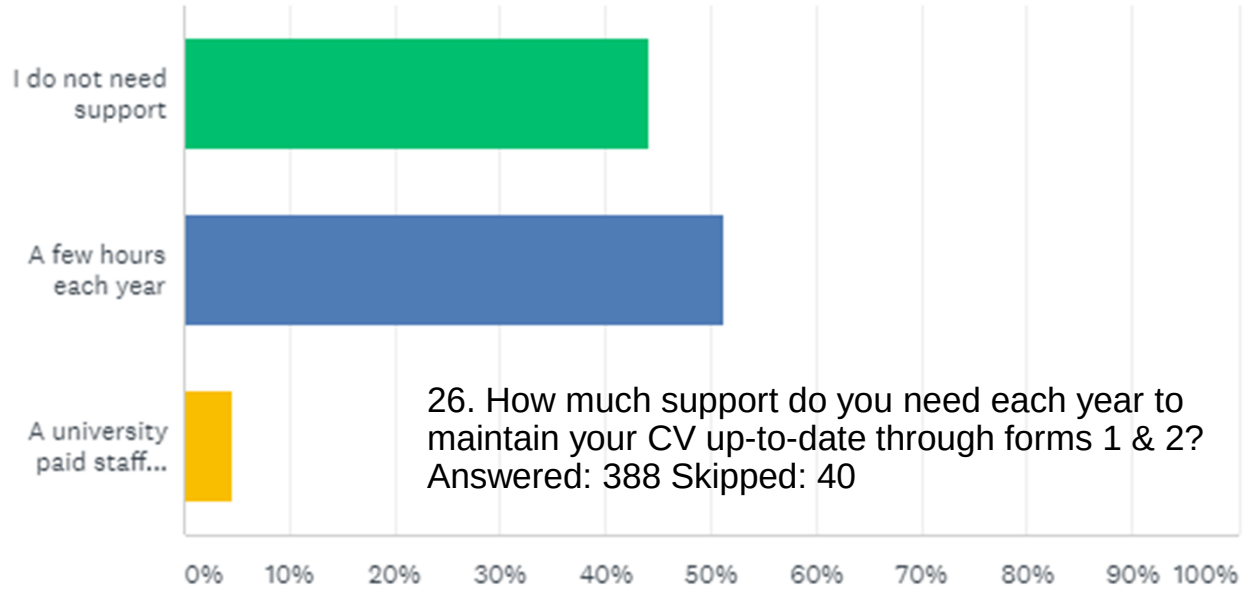
22. How often do you need to make follow-up queries and corrections to ConnectionPoint?
Answered: 390
Skipped: 38

23. How satisfied are you generally with ConnectionPoint?
Answered: 391 Skipped: 37

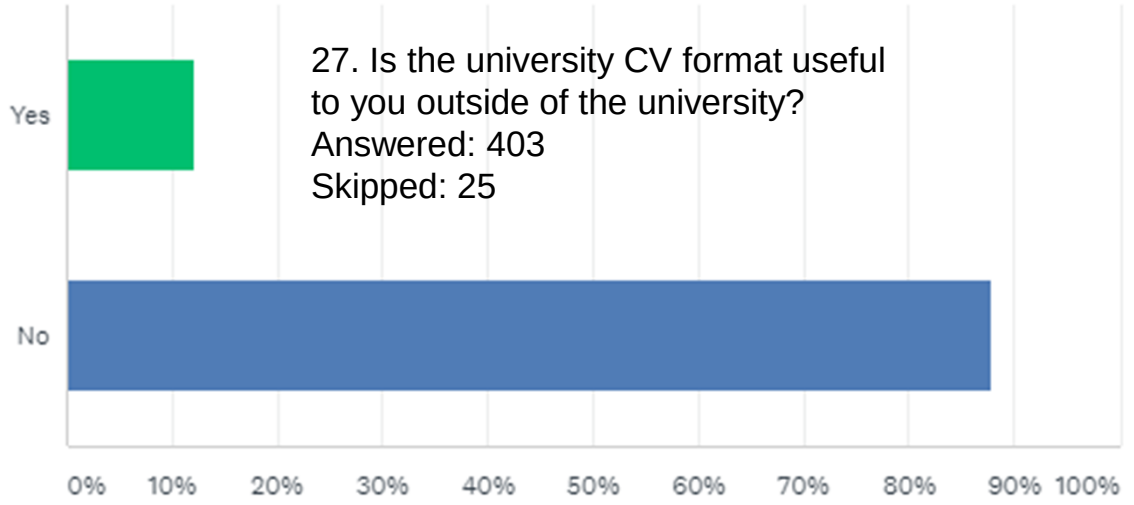


24. How often do you have problems managing grants or new submissions through UNIVRS?
Answered: 396 Skipped: 32

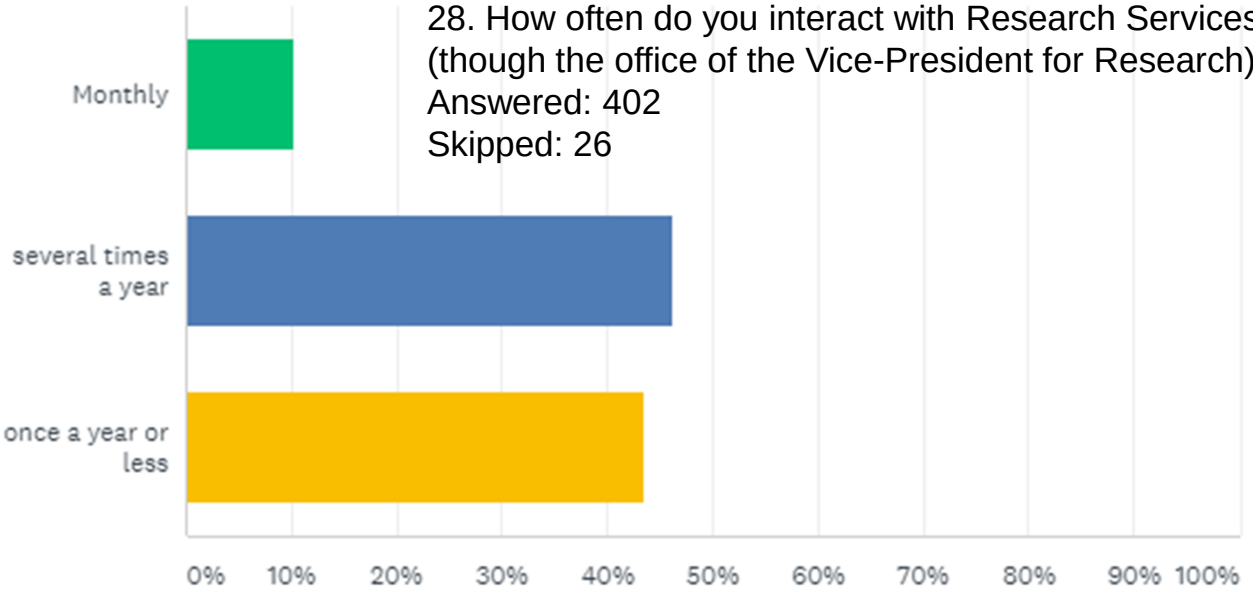




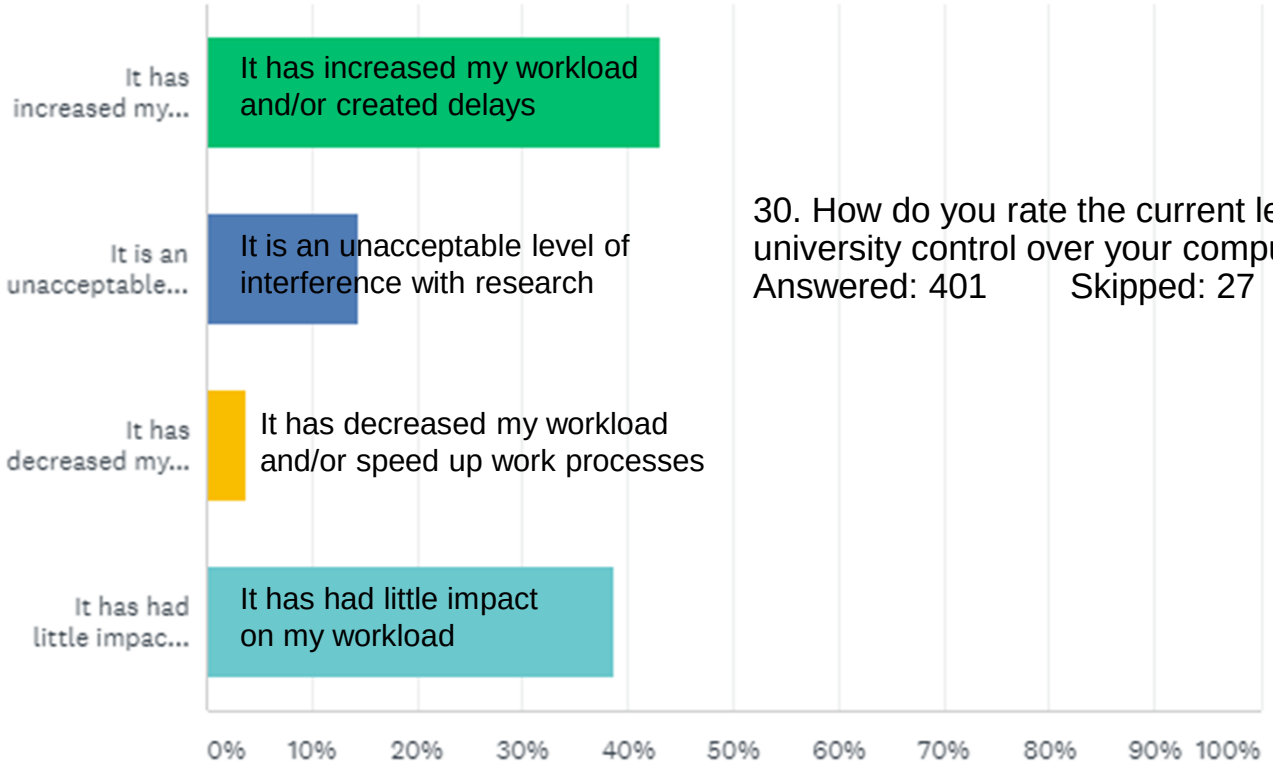
26. How much support do you need each year to maintain your CV up-to-date through forms 1 & 2?
Answered: 388 Skipped: 40



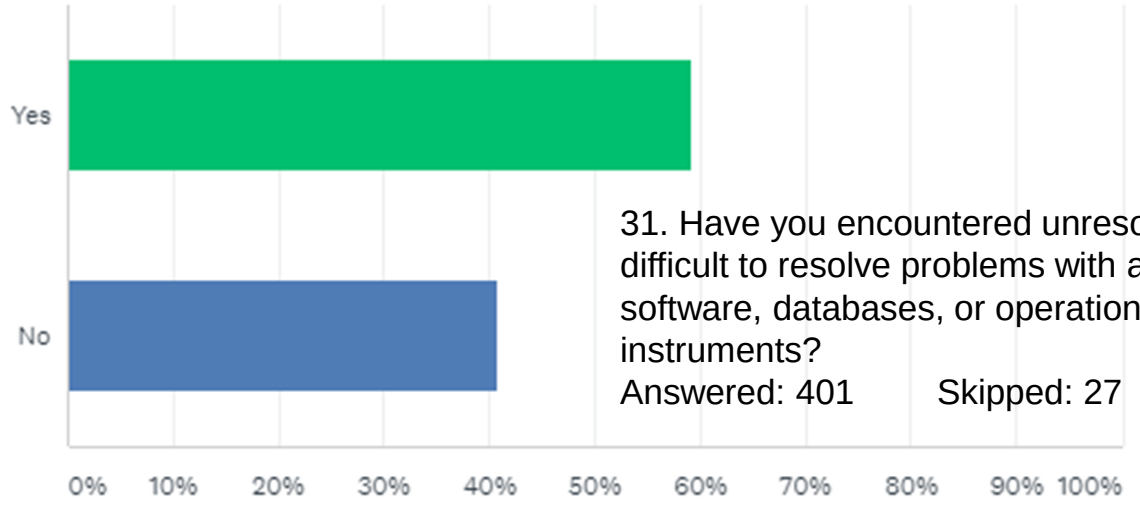
27. Is the university CV format useful to you outside of the university?
Answered: 403
Skipped: 25



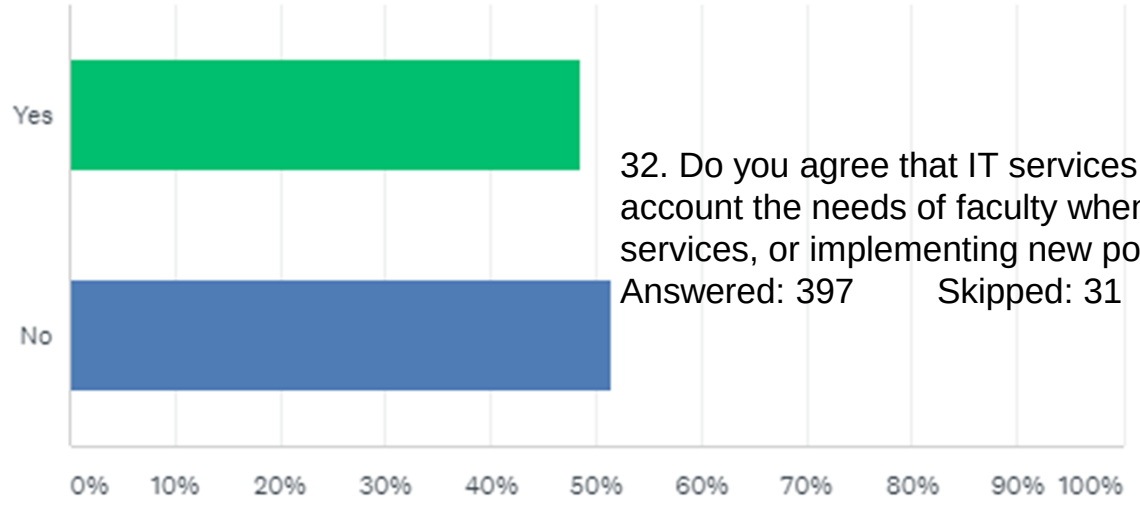
28. How often do you interact with Research Services (though the office of the Vice-President for Research)?
Answered: 402
Skipped: 26



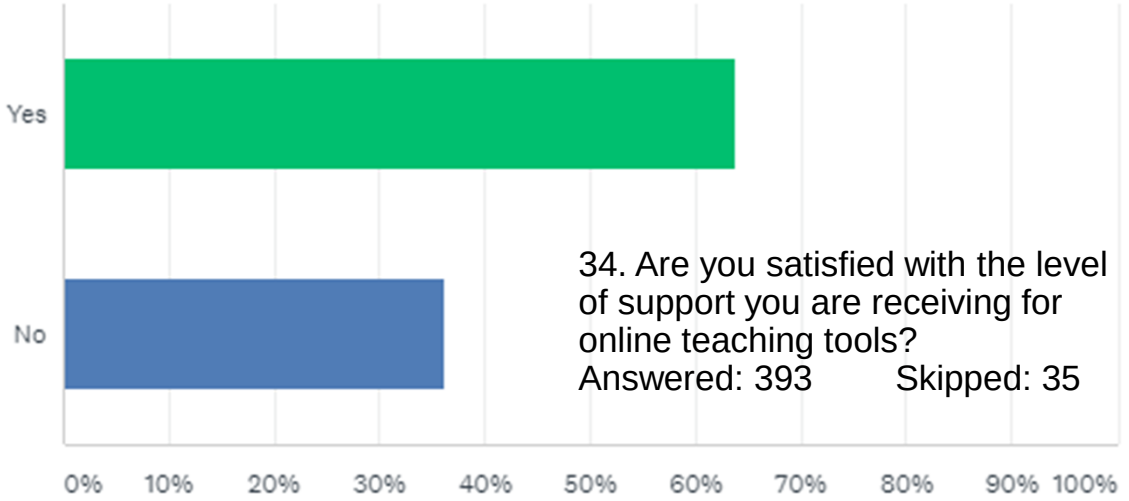
30. How do you rate the current level of university control over your computers?
Answered: 401 Skipped: 27



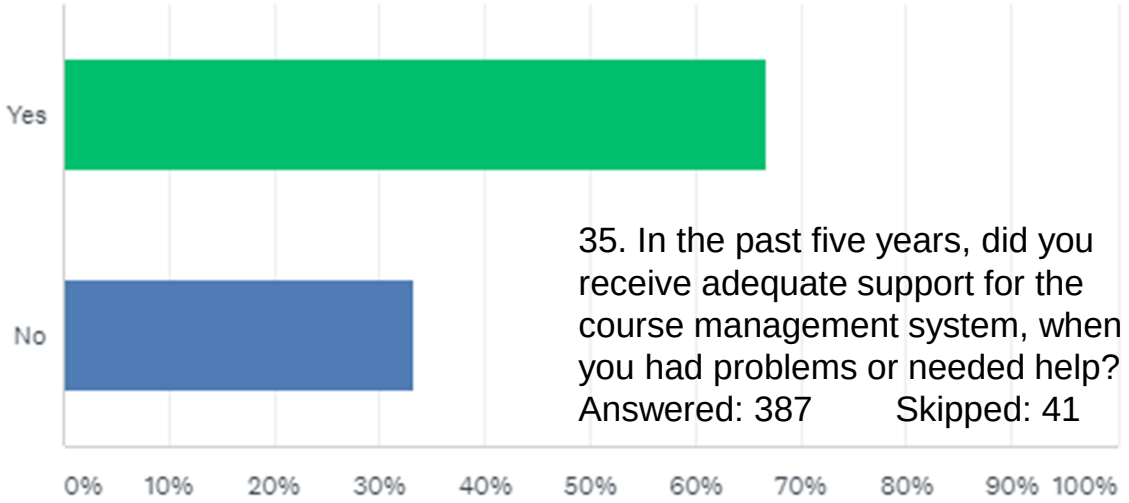
31. Have you encountered unresolved or difficult to resolve problems with access to software, databases, or operation of instruments?
Answered: 401 Skipped: 27



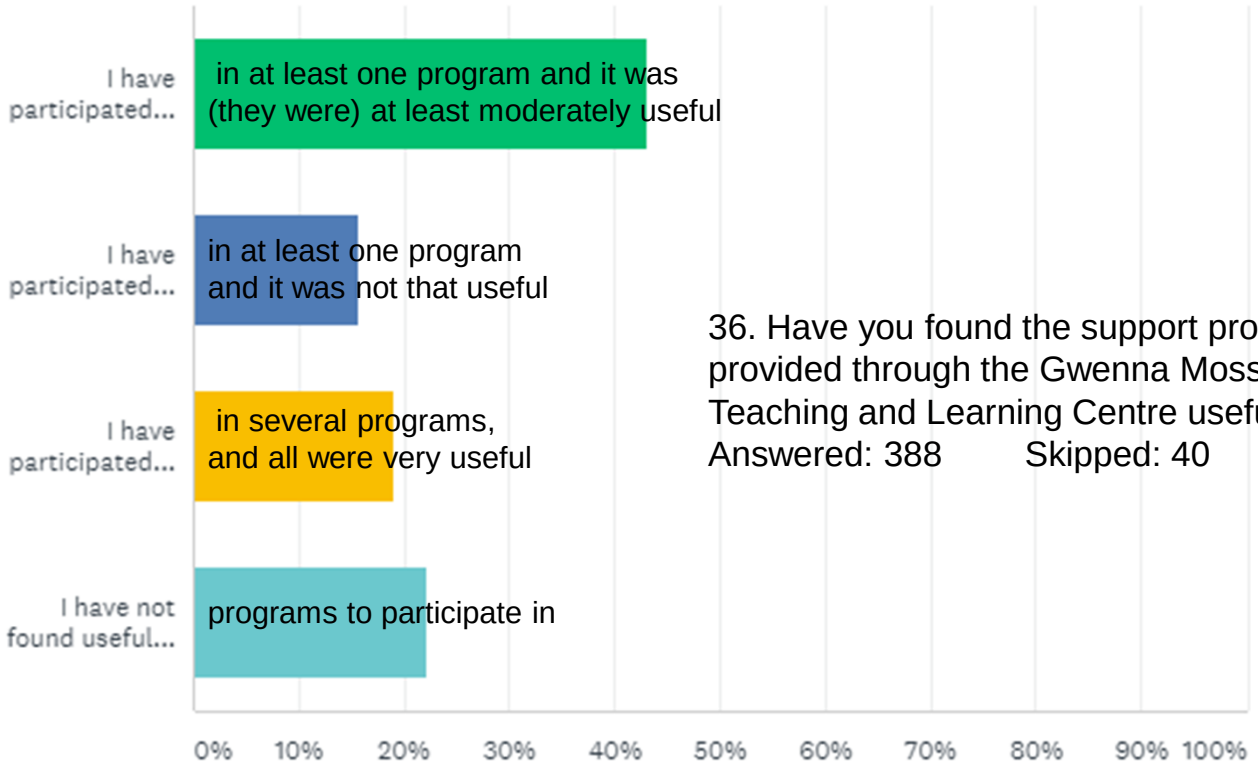
32. Do you agree that IT services take into account the needs of faculty when updating services, or implementing new policy?
Answered: 397 Skipped: 31



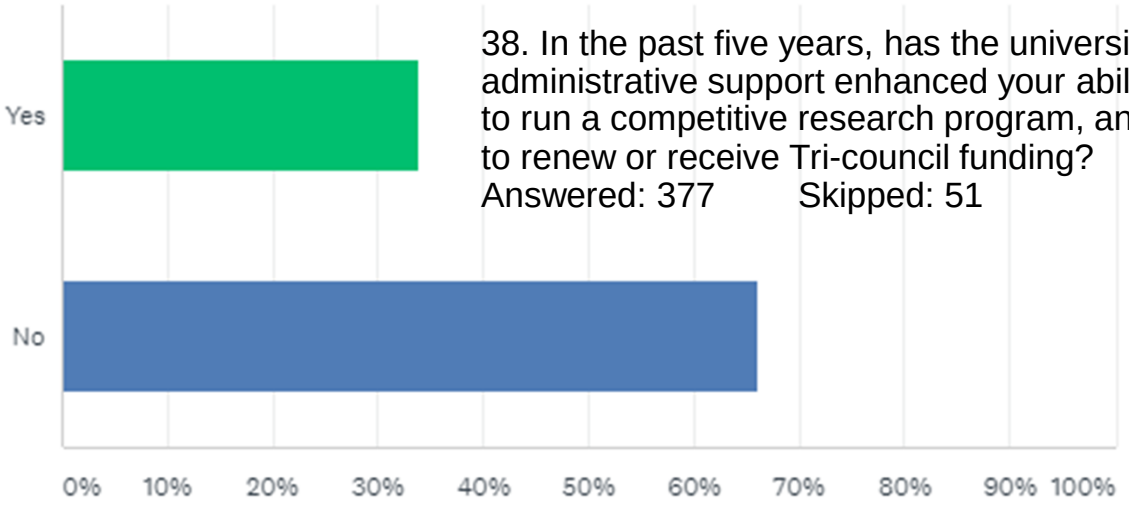
34. Are you satisfied with the level of support you are receiving for online teaching tools?
Answered: 393 Skipped: 35



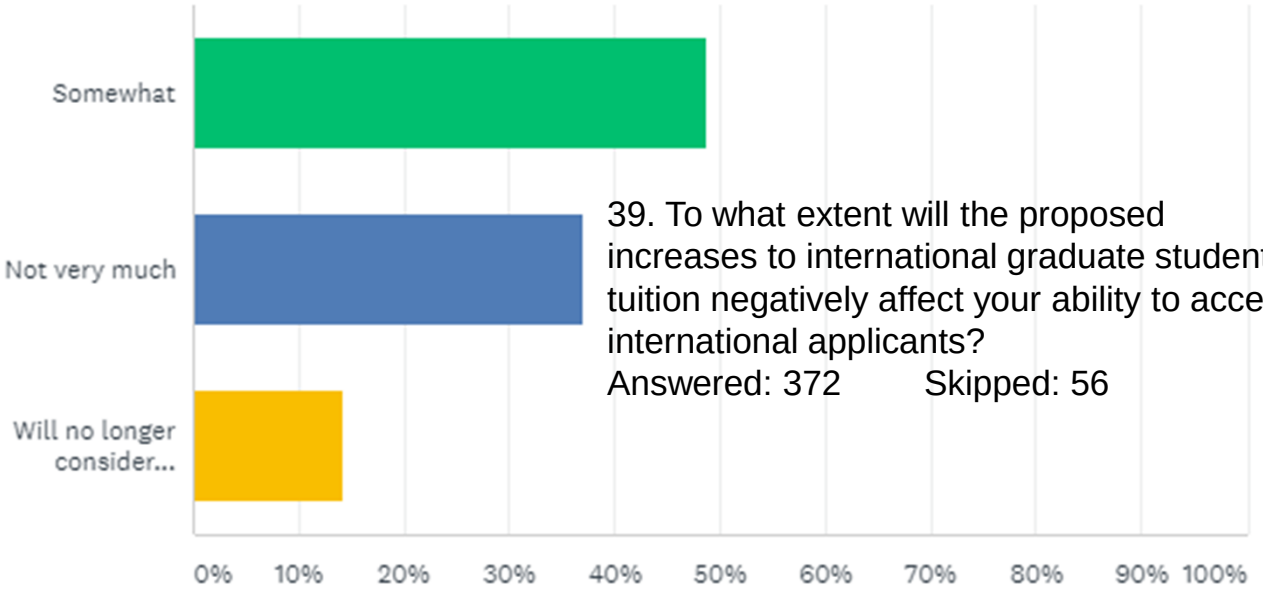
35. In the past five years, did you receive adequate support for the course management system, when you had problems or needed help?
Answered: 387 Skipped: 41



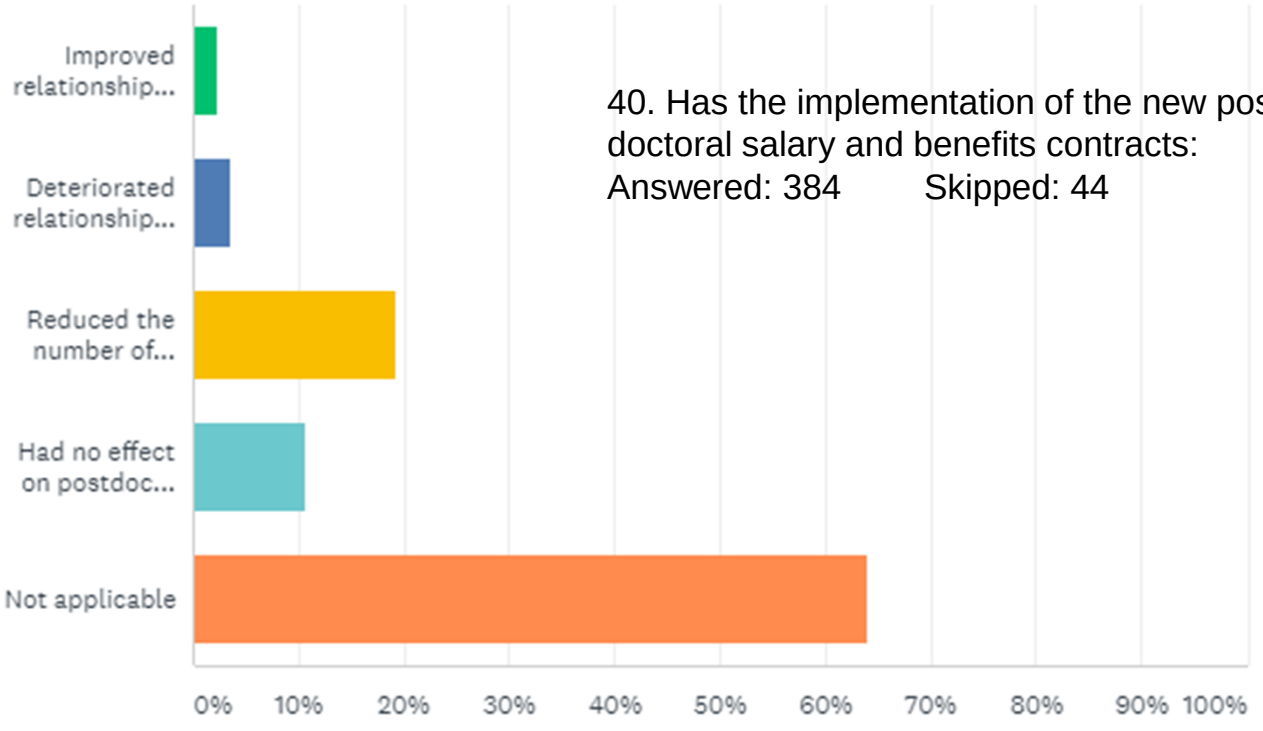
36. Have you found the support programs provided through the Gwenna Moss Teaching and Learning Centre useful?
Answered: 388 Skipped: 40



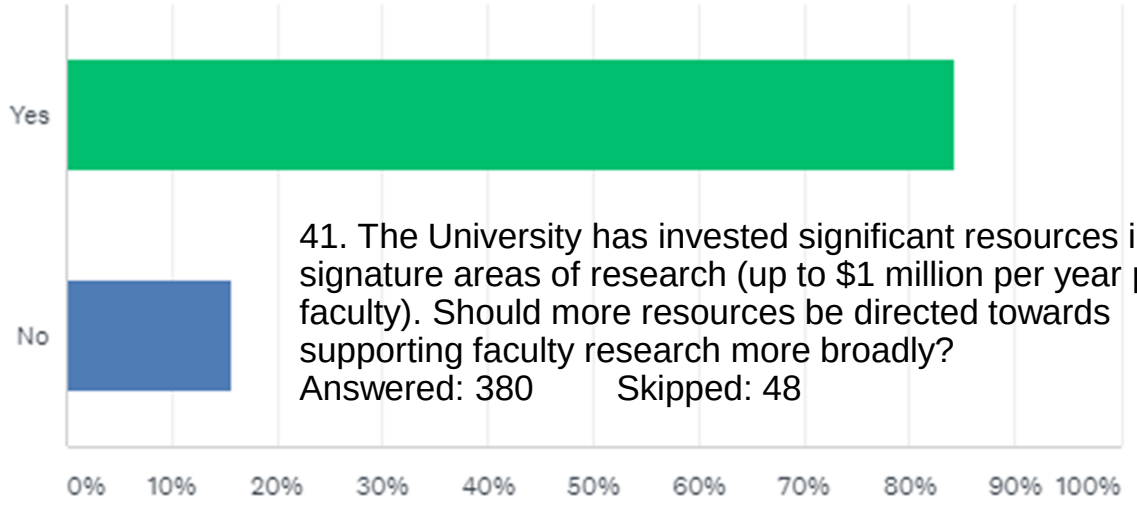
38. In the past five years, has the university administrative support enhanced your ability to run a competitive research program, and to renew or receive Tri-council funding?
Answered: 377 Skipped: 51



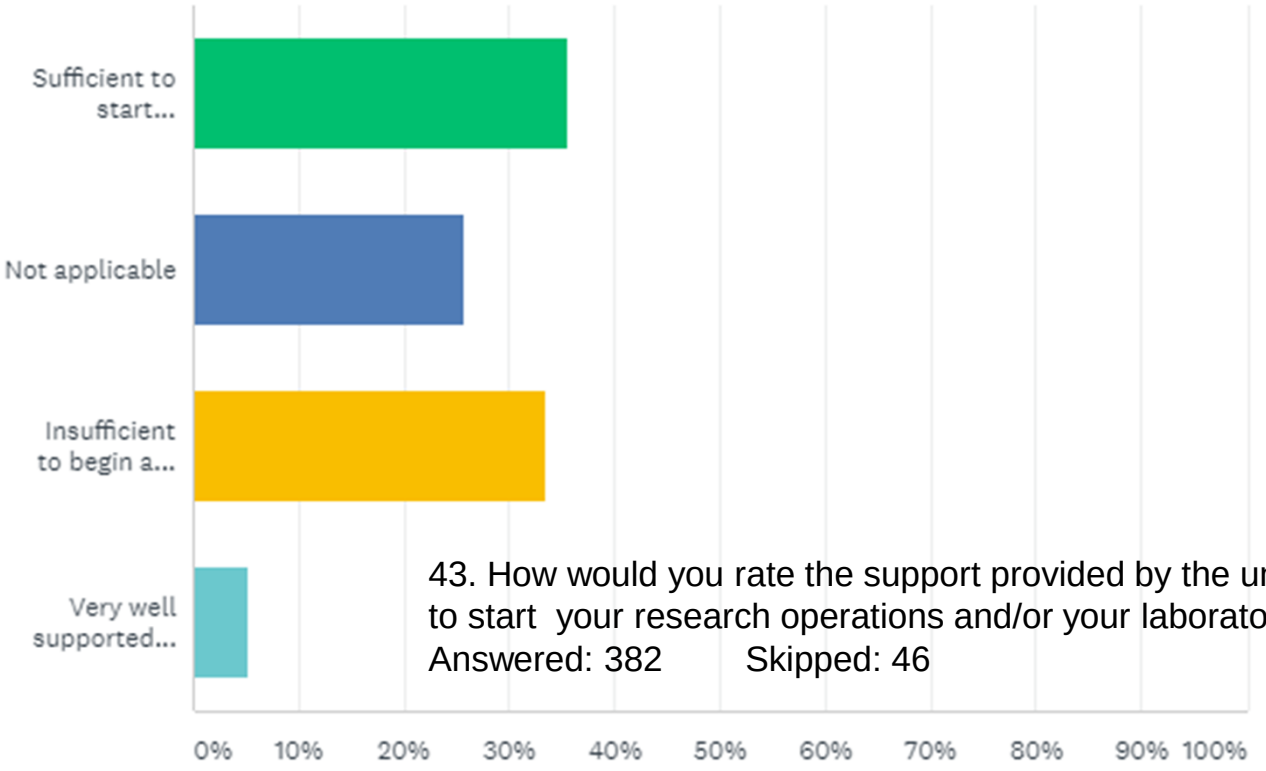
39. To what extent will the proposed increases to international graduate student tuition negatively affect your ability to accept international applicants?
Answered: 372 Skipped: 56



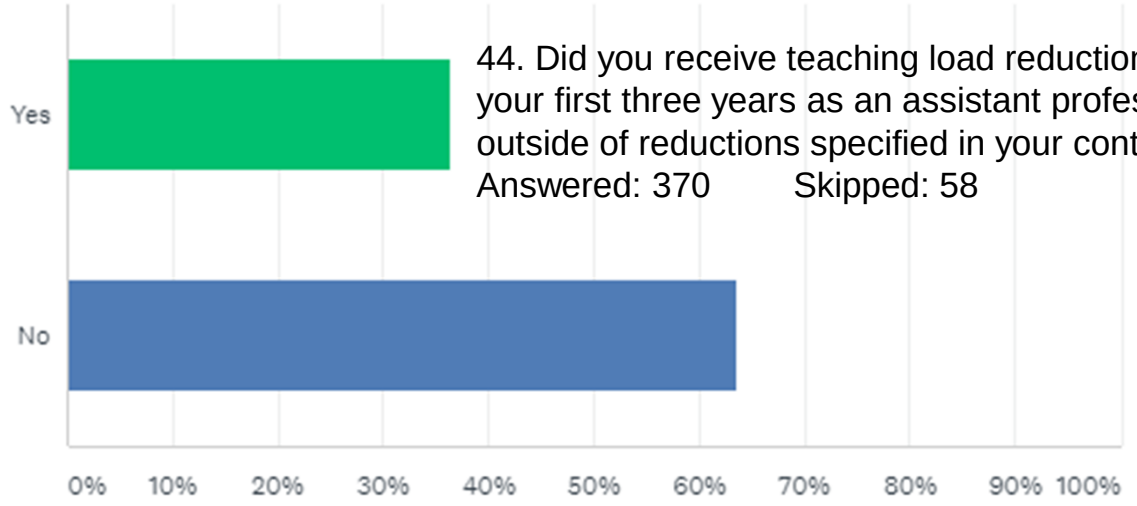
40. Has the implementation of the new post-doctoral salary and benefits contracts:
Answered: 384 Skipped: 44



41. The University has invested significant resources in signature areas of research (up to $1 million per year per faculty). Should more resources be directed towards supporting faculty research more broadly?
Answered: 380 Skipped: 48

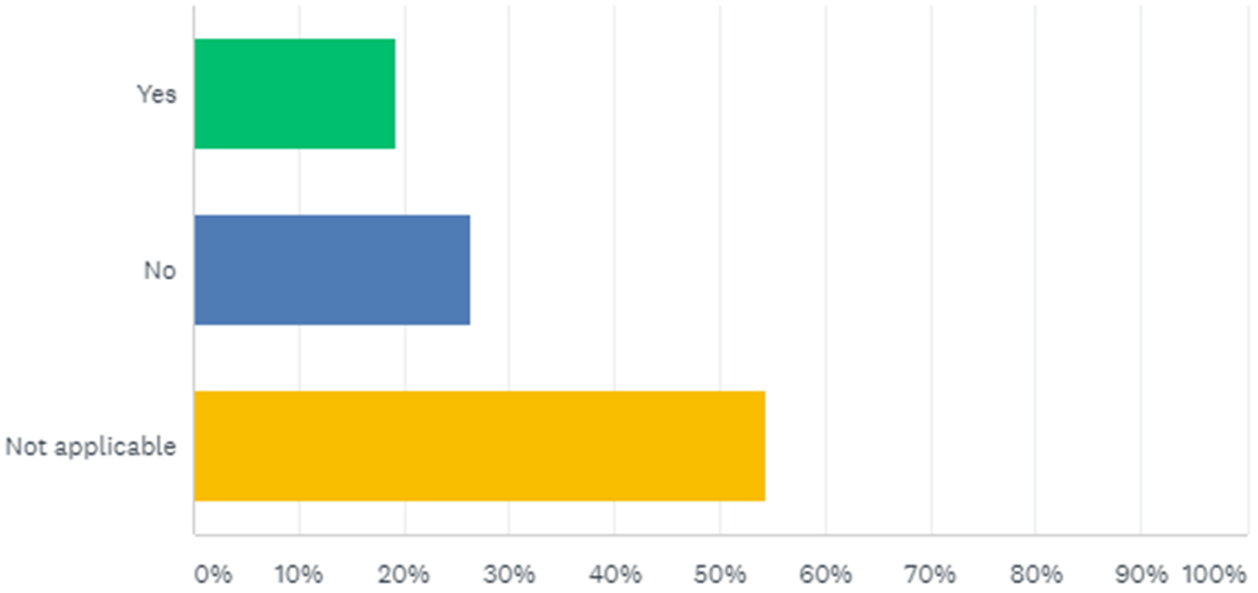


43. How would you rate the support provided by the university to start your research operations and/or your laboratory ?
Answered: 382 Skipped: 46

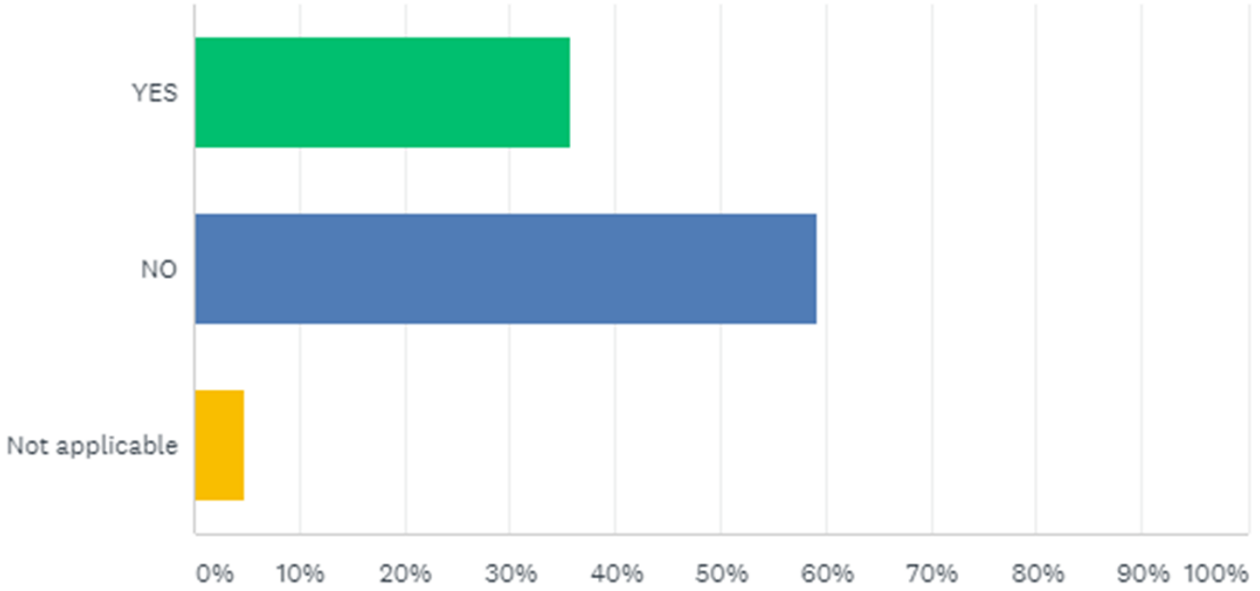


44. Did you receive teaching load reduction during your first three years as an assistant professor, outside of reductions specified in your contract?
Answered: 370 Skipped: 58

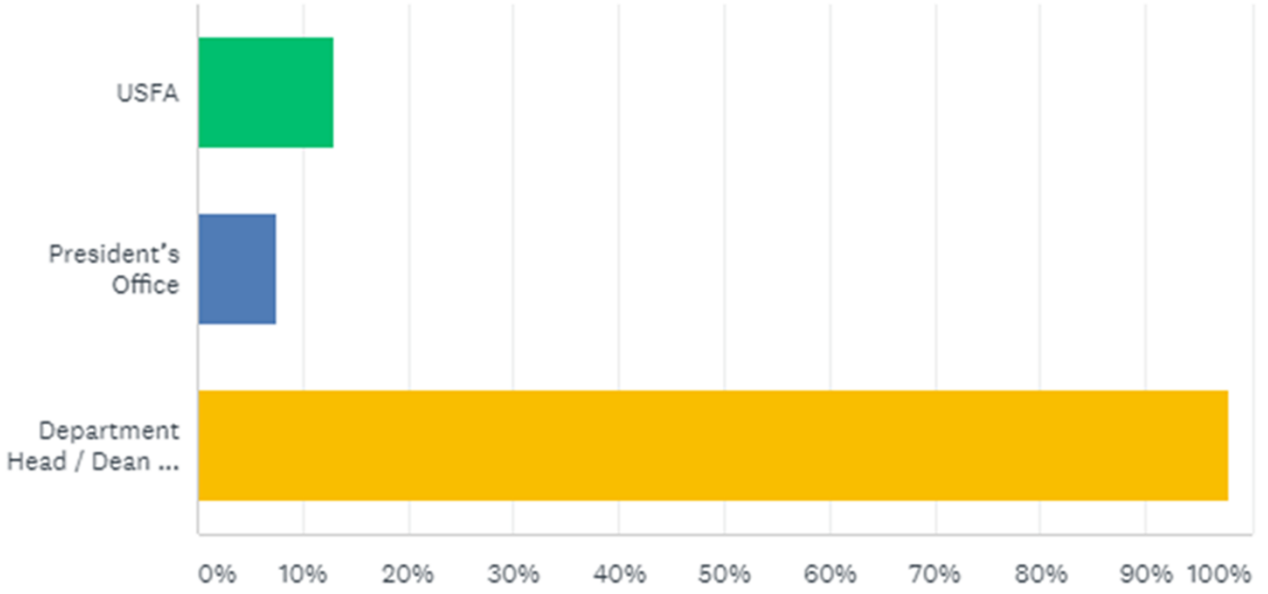
45. Did you find the preparation of your Laboratory research facilities timely and proper?
Answered: 373
Skipped: 55

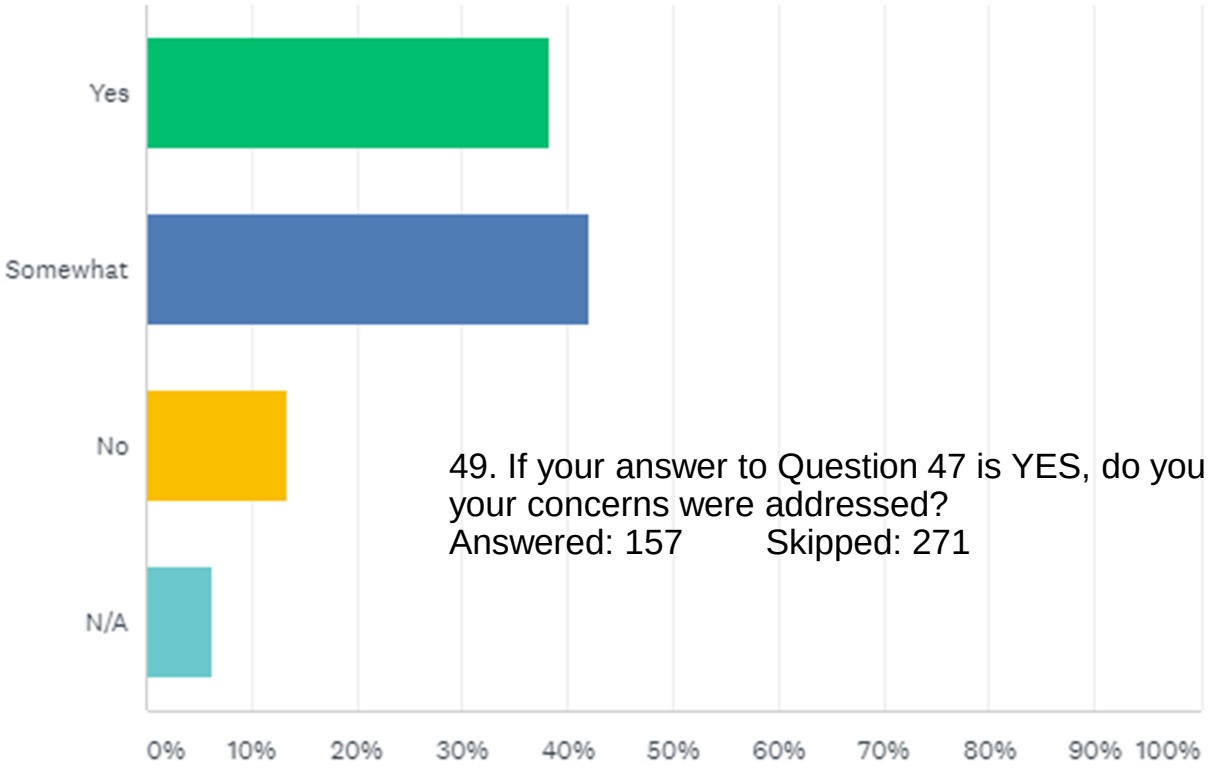


47. Do you feel that you had opportunities to provide input regarding the COVID-19 response in your College or unit?
Answered: 388
Skipped: 40

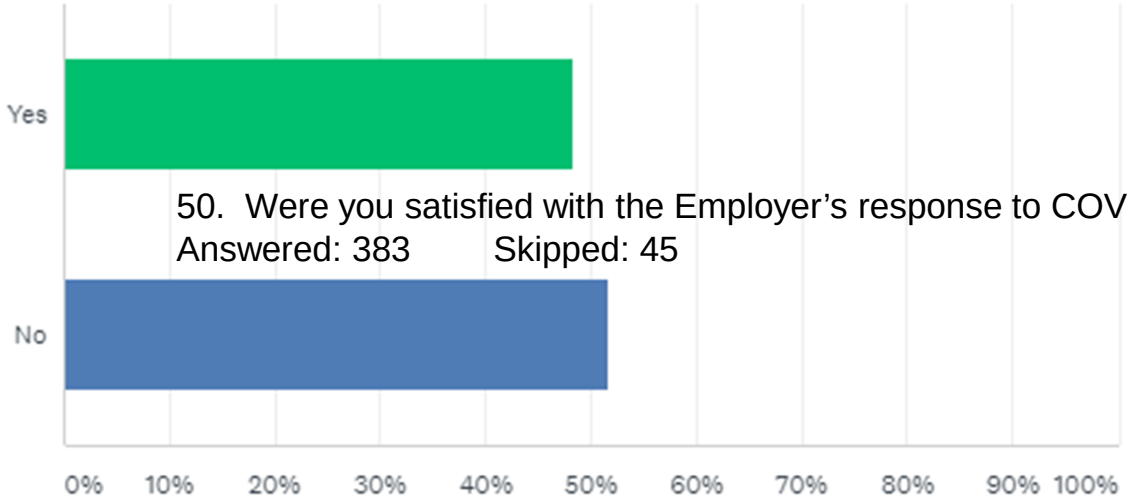


48. If you answered YES to Question 47 is, to whom did you provide input? (Indicate all that apply)
Answered: 147
Skipped: 281

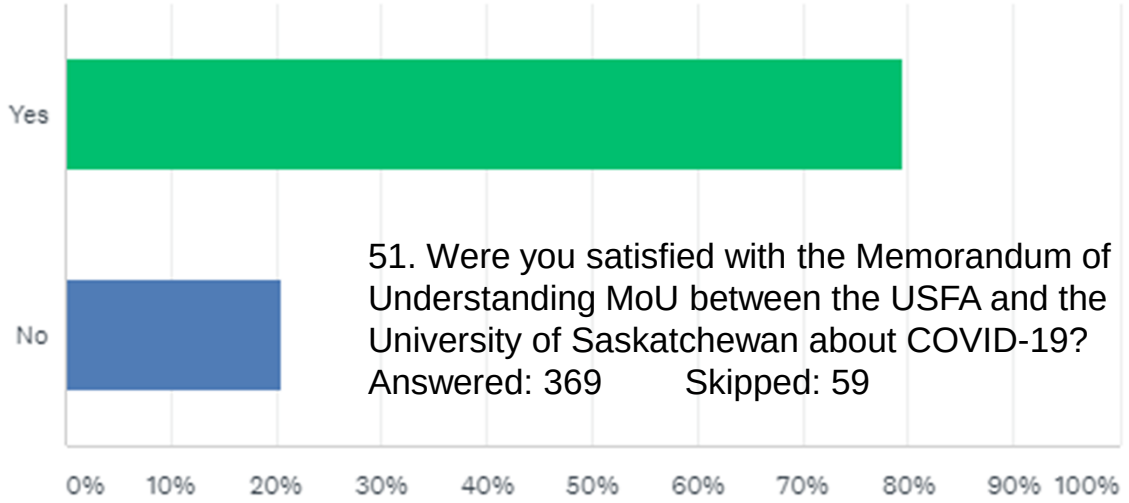




49. If your answer to Question 47 is YES, do you feel your concerns were addressed?
Answered: 157 Skipped: 271

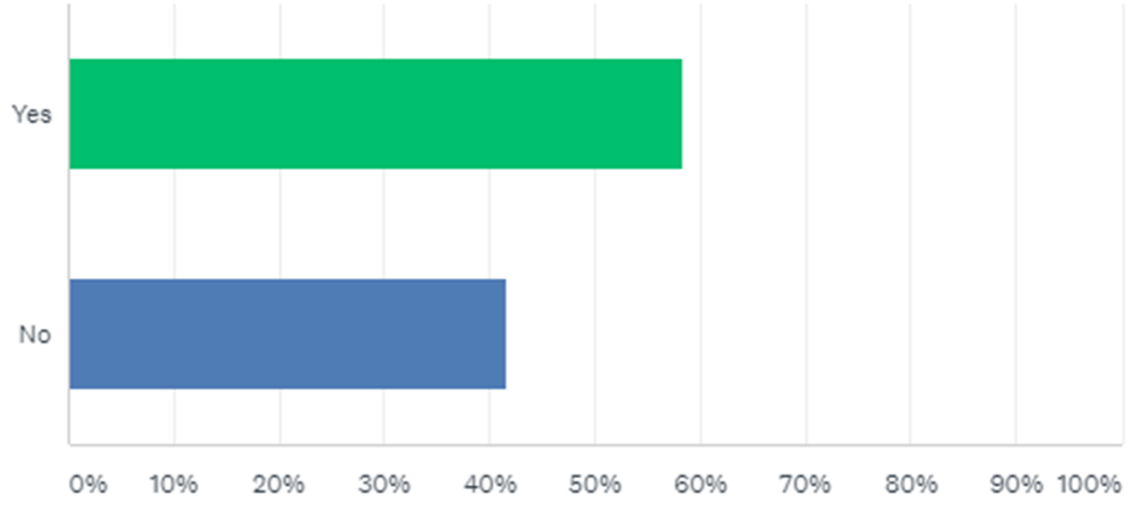
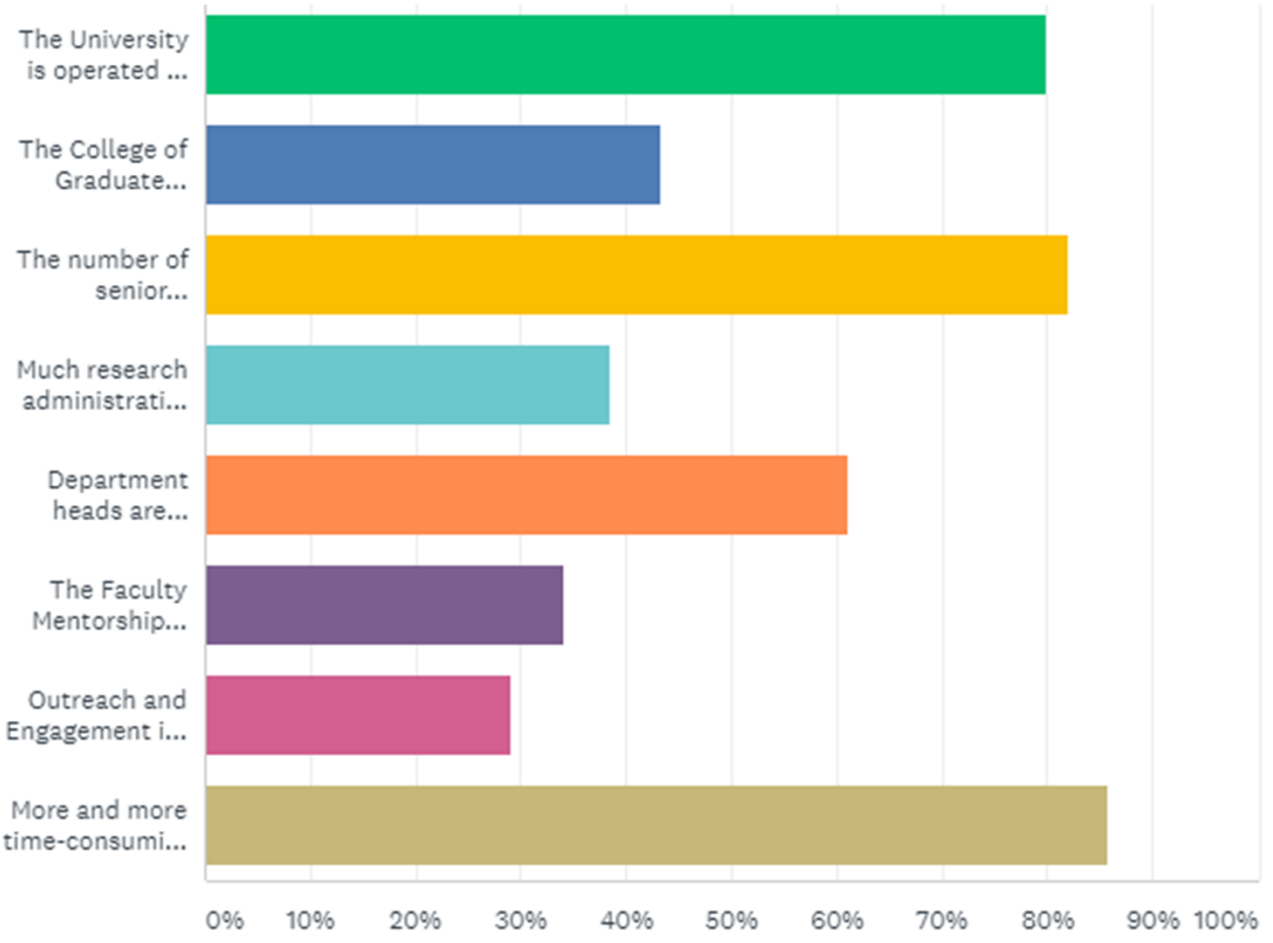


50. Were you satisfied with the Employer's response to COVID-19?
Answered: 383 Skipped: 45



51. Were you satisfied with the Memorandum of Understanding MoU between the USFA and the University of Saskatchewan about COVID-19?
Answered: 369 Skipped: 59

52. Did you feel the University of Saskatchewan played an important role in the local community's response to COVID-19?
Answered: 375 Skipped: 53



54. Faculty identified the following concerns in 2013.
Check all concerns that you agree are still a problem:
Answered: 372 Skipped: 56