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Chair of the Assembly of the Academic Senate
Faculty Representative to the Regents
University of California
1111 Franklin Street, 12th Floor
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July 29, 2022

MICHAEL DRAKE, PRESIDENT
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Re: Mitigating the Effects of Covid on Graduate Students

Dear President Drake:

At its July 2022 meeting, the Academic Council endorsed the attached letter from the Coordinating Committee on Graduate Affairs (CCGA) and the UC Council of Graduate Deans. The letter expresses concern about how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected graduate students and will continue to affect UC's graduate education mission over the long term. It proposes actions the University can take to ensure better support and protection for graduate students and the graduate education mission.

The letter discusses significant effects of the pandemic, including delays in progress and graduation, lost research time and funding, loss of future faculty from the pipeline, and lost opportunities for early career scholars. Individual campuses have addressed these issues partially, but the Council believes more can and should be done and that a systemwide approach is needed to ensure consistency of progress in recovering from the effects of Covid across campuses. Council joins CCGA in asking the University to implement several systemwide initiatives to support graduate students. These include additional funding to support students and Principal Investigators (PIs) who lost or consumed funding for graduate students who were unable to make progress during the pandemic; PIs were encouraged to continue supporting these students, and we have received reports that they were told to expect supplemental Covid relief funds to make them whole. To our knowledge, this did not happen. Suggested initiatives also include investing in affordable student housing; devising a long-term strategic plan for increasing graduate education funding overall; and increasing resources to incentivize recent graduates' entry into academia in part by conforming academic hiring processes to the Achievement Relative to Opportunities principles.

It is hard to understate the critical role played by graduate education and research in every aspect of the University's mission, its competitiveness, and excellence. These recommendations will help ensure long-term support for these missions. We look forward to working with you. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have additional questions.

Sincerely,

Robert Horwitz

Robert Horwitz, Chair
Academic Council

Cc: Provost Brown
Academic Council
CCGA
Chief of Staff Kao
Chief Policy Advisor McAuliffe
Senate Directors
Executive Director Lin

Encl.

**COORDINATING COMMITTEE ON GRADUATE AFFAIRS (CCGA)**

Andrea Kasko, Chair
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ACADEMIC SENATE

University of California
1111 Franklin Street, 12th Floor
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July 20, 2022

**ROBERT HORWITZ
ACADEMIC SENATE CHAIR**

Dear Chair Horwitz,

CCGA and the Council of Graduate Deans are writing this joint memo to express our grave concern about the future of graduate education at the University of California, in the context of long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While both undergraduate education and graduate education have been significantly impacted by the pandemic, graduate students and postdoctoral scholars, and in particular, PhD students and MS thesis students, are experiencing on-going hardships that affect not only them, but also future students pursuing research-based degrees. Because their degree and post-graduate training is based on research and creative work, and not solely on course work, the pandemic has disproportionately affected their progress. Access to laboratories, studios, libraries, and off-site research was severely limited in the first half of 2020, and many campuses had significant restrictions through spring 2021. Students and postdocs performing seasonal-based, on-site, or human subject research lost many months of research time. In addition to limited access to research, students and postdocs had limited access to in-person mentorship from their advisors, and networking within their disciplines. Group meetings were held remotely, conferences were cancelled or held remotely, and the advising was done remotely, affecting student motivation and progression. All graduate students and postdocs have been adversely affected.

Each of the campuses addressed these delays in progress individually through the work of their local graduate divisions and graduate deans. Several UC campuses extended the normative time to degree, a metric which has different consequences/benefits on each campus. Additional financial support was provided to graduate students on each campus. While these policies helped to soften the short-term impact of the pandemic on graduate students, the long-term impacts are still emerging.

Graduate student funding remains a systemwide challenge, one that materially impacts our ability to “Grow Our Own”. In programs where PIs fund graduate students, the delays in graduation due to COVID-19 mean that these PIs are unable to fund new students, resulting in smaller incoming classes of graduate students. External fellowships and grants awarded to graduate students were consumed, deferred or cancelled during these months when access to research sites/locations was restricted, and these funds were not replaced, leaving students without sufficient financial support to complete their degrees. This has left departments scrambling to find funding to support them because external funding was spent. The applicant pool applying for external fellowships is also greatly increasing, further limiting the ability of graduate students to obtain financial support.

Graduate students are critical partners in instruction and are our future faculty. Smaller classes of graduate students mean fewer teaching assistants for the increasing number of undergraduate students.

In order to address the problem of lost research time and funds, we ask that UC provide additional funding to specifically support graduate students (and their PIs) who lost or consumed funding due to limited access to research proportional to the amount lost due to the pandemic. We also ask the UC to develop a long-term strategic plan for increasing funding for graduate education overall, so that UC campuses are able to consistently offer competitive multi-year funding packages and recruit the very best students.

We have broadly discussed the impacts of the pandemic on faculty, but graduate student instructors/teaching assistants experienced the same or similar challenges, and in some cases, exacerbated challenges. Graduate student instructors/ teaching assistants were often the first line of communication for undergraduate students experiencing personal loss, health challenges and learning difficulties during the pandemic. Furthermore, graduate students were often themselves impacted in terms of their health and that of their families while at the same time teaching and attempting to carry on research to support their graduate work. The problems of exhaustion and burnout which plague faculty and staff alike were thereby exacerbated for many of our graduate students. The issues extend to research opportunities and career advancement. Early career scholars face the same issues as faculty, but without long term job security and with intense pressure to make up for lost time in their research, often whilst navigating challenges such as school and day-care closures. This may affect their future career choices and competitiveness. Ultimately, this could have an impact on faculty recruitment and retention in the UC. Graduate students and postdocs may be more reluctant to pursue post-doctoral research and/or enter academia, limiting the pool of future faculty. This is occurring precisely at a time in which the UC is hoping to cultivate an increasingly diverse professoriate. We believe it is critical that the UC provides opportunities for graduate students and postdocs commensurate with the opportunities lost due to the pandemic.

In order to address the problem of loss of future faculty from the pipeline due to the pandemic, we request that the UC provide or increase resources to incentivize entry into academia, especially as part of the “Grow Our Own” initiatives (i.e. UC-HSI Pathways to the Professoriate Program, UC Presidential Postdoctoral Scholars Program, etc.).

In order to address the problem of lost opportunities for early career scholars, we recommend that all academic hiring processes, particularly for junior faculty and other early career opportunities such as the Presidential Postdoctoral Program, conform to the Achievement Relative to Opportunities (ARO) principles to fairly evaluate candidates.

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the precarity of graduate students and exposed long-standing challenges in graduate education at the UCs. The undergraduate educational mission of UC cannot grow without commensurate growth in graduate education. Graduate students are in a unique position compared to many of our undergrads, supporting themselves (and sometimes family) fully while pursuing their graduate degrees. It is very difficult for students to support themselves, let alone any partners or dependents, while pursuing full-time graduate degrees. Graduate students cannot afford to live in the communities surrounding their campuses, and, in some programs, are taking on enormous debt to complete their degree. Furthermore, graduate students have unique needs in terms of mental health resources compared to undergraduates.

In order to meet the basic needs of our students, we ask the UC to invest in sufficient affordable housing for graduate and undergraduate students alike (including married and family housing), so

that campuses can offer affordable housing guarantees to graduate students similar to offers made to undergraduates; provide sufficient mental health resources for all our students, especially as the need for such resources has deepened; and provide resources to address food insecurity for all our students. Such services should be provided with attention and sensitivity to the special needs of graduate students, including considerations for families and dependents, and recognizing graduate students' dual roles as trainees and professionals within the institution.

The world class research standing of UC depends not just on current graduate students but also their future career choices. It is the responsibility of the UC and campus leaderships to address these structural problems, to ensure the future of the UC is as successful as its past. Faculty (CCGA) and administration (CoGD) are committed to working together and with the Office of the President to develop resources to help meet these challenges.

In order to maintain the academic excellence of the UCs and our commitments to the state of California, we ask the UC Administration to commit resources to address the issues described above.

The power of the UC system relies on a broad and diverse multi-campus community, and failure to address the problems in graduate education that arose because of the pandemic, or were exposed by the pandemic, will exclude participation of many, disrupting our collective commitment to academic excellence, diversity and inclusion.

Sincerely



Andrea M. Kasko
Chair, CCGA

Shaun Bowler
Chair, Council of Graduate Deans

c: Susan Cochran, Academic Senate Vice Chair
Monica Lin, Academic Senate Executive Director
Michael LaBriola, Academic Senate Assistant Director
CCGA Members
Council of Graduate Deans