AGS Internal Committee Report: Graduate Student Life Survey

2018-2019

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Introduction

Motivation for the Graduate Student Life Survey

The Internal Committee of the Associate Graduate Students (AGS) of University of California, Irvine (UCI) created and administered the Graduate Student Life Survey to evaluate graduate life at UCI. The purpose of the survey was to identify key strengths and weaknesses of the graduate program and develop a list of key action points which AGS and the University can address. These data are meant to forward the goals of AGS as well as those of our campus partners such as Graduate Division, Student Affairs, Housing, and many others.

This report focuses on the issues that AGS finds most in need, including housing, finances, mental health and wellness, students with dependents, and campus climate. Key findings are reported in the introduction, with more specifics and action items reported in each individual section.

Survey Methodology

We collected data using Qualtrics online survey software. Our sampling was advertised through multiple campus-wide, graduate student specific emails, in addition to a printed flyer campaign and word of mouth. Participants had to verify that they were graduate students using their UCI NetID and password. This campaign took place during the end of the fall and the first two weeks of the winter quarters. We used a tiered incentive structure offering three $75 and 20 $40 Amazon and 5 $5 Starbucks gift cards to increase the response rate of the survey.

We collected 1,116 responses out of 6,278 total graduate students, yielding a 17.5% response rate. Some questions pertain only to particular groups of students (such as commuters), so the response rates for certain questions in this report vary accordingly.

Basic Respondent Demographics

The survey encompassed all levels of graduate students (PhD, terminal master's programs, and professional students) and schools (Henry Samueli School of Engineering, Claire Trevor School of the Arts, School of Humanities, etc.). Survey respondents consisted of 69% PhD students, 24% Masters students, 3% Law students, and 4% Medical. Due to small sample sizes, we were forced to aggregate departments and schools together for meaningful analyses. See Table 1 for the per-school yield rate (% of respondents divided by the total number of students from each school).

Table 1: Yield rate by school.

School	# of respondents	# in school	yield rate (%)
Arts	45	162	28%
Bio-Sci	75	333	23%
Business	67	930	7%
Education	41	214	19%
Engineering	206	963	21%
Humanities	52	296	18%
ICS	97	715	14%
Law	31	517	6%
Phys. Sci.	120	518	23%
Soc. Eco.	103	428	24%
Medicine	69	575	12%
Nursing	4	49	8%
Pharm Sci	8	36	22%
Pub. Health.	19	76	25%
Soc. Sci.	131	466	28%
Total	1068	6278	17%

The average age of the respondents was 27 (SD = 4.56) and the average year in the program was 2.5 years (SD = 1.58). Approximately 43% identified as male, 55% as female, 1.5% as transgender, transsexual, or other, and 2.2% as non-binary. Approximately 64% were California residents, 8% out-of-state, 28% international students, and 0.6% undocumented students. 45% of students were white, 13% Latino/a/x, 3% Black/African American, 1.5% Native American, and 35% Asian. Some groups were combined due to small sample sizes.

Overview of Key Findings

Housing, finances, and mental health remain the largest challenge for a significant number of graduate students. These issues are tightly interwoven and will require a coordinated approach to effectively address them. On-campus housing satisfaction has eroded over the past 5 years and deserves more attention and resources to address the problems students are having, especially with regards to the waitlist and maintenance.

A major finding of this report is that students who are experiencing financial insecurity are at a major academic disadvantage compared to their financially stable companions, and that financial insecurity exhibits strong school-wide variability. Addressing this issue is not just a matter of improving students' lives, but forwarding the academic mission of UCI.

The last major finding of this report is that students with dependents face unique issues within their graduate experience. Students with dependents represent about 16% of the graduate student population at UCI - likely the highest proportion among all UC campuses. A major stressor for these students is finding affordable, short-term childcare services so they can attend professional networking events and classes on campus. Another major issue is the lack of available affordable housing, long commutes, lack of lactation spaces on campus, and lack of awareness of the unique issues students with dependents face.

Each subsequent section presents specific action items to address the concerns reveled by the survey. While we recognize that it will be difficult to address every concern, we hope that these action items will provide a starting point for conversations of actionable policy.

Housing

Introduction

For students, housing is an integral part of their lives. Most students live where they study and work, while others commute and park near campus. This year, approximately half of respondents were satisfied, and the rest were either neutral or dissatisfied with their housing situations. There were some significant issues regarding maintenance, waitlist transparency, and housing/financial security that are to be addressed in this section.

Summary of Key Findings and Action Items

Nearly one half of respondents reported some level of sufficiency with the "feeling" of their community, and nearly a half reported either neutrality or satisfaction with rent prices. Most are stressed about paying for rent based on their incomes, which is understandable given the high cost of living in Southern California. Most of the housing concerns involved finances, but a notable amount expressed concerns regarding maintenance personnel intrusions (for on-campus housing). Other concerns involve respondents' proximity to community amenities and parking (for Campus Village residents in particular).

We recommend the following items to address housing concerns:

1. Invest innovative efforts into reducing housing costs and expanding emergency housing access through,
   a. The basic needs bill
   b. Multi-use housing options and donations for mental health/wellness integrated into new housing stock
2. Investigate issues of maintenance and reduce staff obtrusiveness at both Palo Verde and Campus Village Communities,
3. Improve transparency and issues with the housing guarantee and waitlist, and
4. Examine the causes behind the significant decrease in on-campus housing satisfaction and address those concerns.

Housing & Finances

Housing costs are one of the major financial burdens for our graduate students. The average student pays $900 per month on housing, which comes to $10,800 for the year. While students living off campus reported higher housing costs than those living on campus, there were not significant differences in housing costs between those groups in our sample. **The average graduate student at UCI spends 43% of their income on housing.**

According to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, individuals and families who pay more than 30 percent of their income for housing are considered cost burdened. When

AGS conducted a similar survey in 2013, we also found that students were paying approximately 40% of their income on housing - again, meeting the federal definition of cost burdened by housing expenses. **Over the last 6 years, UCI has consistently been above the federal standards of burden in terms of housing costs for graduate students.**

Table 2: Graduate Housing Rates for 2018-2019

Housing Community	Monthly Rent	
	Single (Cost / Bedroom)	**Family** (Cost / Unit)
Palo Verde		
■ Studio & 1 Bedroom	$883 - $1164	$883 - $1164
■ 2 Bedroom	$692 - $873	$1384 - $1746
■ 3 Bedroom	$631 - $709	$1893 - $2127
Verano Place		
■ 1 Bedroom	$1036	$1036
■ 2 Bedroom	$557 - $818	$1114 - $1636
■ 3 Bedroom	$403	$1209
Campus Village		
■ 2 Bedroom	$802	$1604
American Campus Communities (ACC)		
■ Studio & 1 Bedroom	$909 - $1629	$909 - $1629
■ 2 Bedroom	$698 - $1199	$1396 - $2398
■ 3 Bedroom	$760 - $1089	$2280 - $3267
■ 4 Bedroom	$925	$3700

Satisfaction Among Housing Communities

Overall, graduate students appear to be somewhat satisfied with their overall housing situation. In our survey, respondents indicated their level of satisfaction with various characteristics of the housing community they live in. Results for responses from UCI owned (Verano Place, Palo Verde, and Campus Village) and off-campus/ACC housing communities are shown in the table below. The community in which residents reside had a significant effect on their satisfaction with rent, community feeling, and community & family programs.

Table 3: Overall Satisfaction with Housing Community Characteristics

Housing Criteria	Responses	Satisfied	% Satisfied
Rent	1108	541	49%
Parking	1111	661	59%
Community Feeling	1108	485	44%
Noise	1110	674	61%
Roommate	1092	678	62%
Proximity to Community Amenities/Campus	1112	831	75%
Overall	1127	636	56%

*Satisfied in this table is a combination of both "Somewhat Satisfied" and "Extremely Satisfied" responses.

Table 4: Overall Satisfaction with Housing Situation

Housing Community	Responses	Satisfied	% Satisfied
Palo Verde	300	185	62%
Verano Place	400	227	57%
Campus Village	21	8	38%
American Campus Communities	24	15	63%
Off-Campus	382	201	53%
Total	1127	636	56%

*Satisfied in this table is a combination of both "Somewhat Satisfied" and "Extremely Satisfied" responses.

Table 5: Satisfaction with Rent

Housing Community	Responses	Satisfied	% Satisfied
Palo Verde	298	157	53%
Verano Place	398	223	56%
Campus Village	21	4	19%
American Campus Communities	24	8	33%
Off-Campus	367	149	41%
Total	1108	541	49%

*Satisfied in this table is a combination of both "Somewhat Satisfied" and "Extremely Satisfied" responses.

Satisfaction with rent was highest among students in Verano Place and Palo Verde, with just over 50% reporting being somewhat or extremely satisfied (Table 3). Satisfaction with rent was lowest among Campus Village residents, with fewer than a quarter of respondents living in Campus Village reporting satisfaction, although this was a notably smaller sample.

While looking at means in the data is important for analysis, it can hide the significant variability within the data and the impact that has on the graduate student population.. One said that they "pay 33% of [their] income just for the rent;" another noted, "80% of [their] income goes toward rent." Indeed, some of the participants stated that "[on] campus is most affordable but between rent, car payment and car insurance, I'm left with less than half of my monthly earnings." Most respondents report that they "simply cannot afford reasonable housing outside of university graduate student housing with [their] TA or GSR stipend".

The issues with housing security are beyond rent prices, but also are related to the housing waitlist and difficulties in finding off-campus housing for MS students (Table 2). One "[was] homeless for the first two weeks of grad school. It was a horrible experience, but no on campus housing was available for master's students. [They] eventually found off campus housing. After a week of settling in, [they] felt way less stress."

While about two-thirds of respondents pay rent for on-campus residences, there were some extreme cases of rent issues among the remaining residents who live off-campus. Rent security is reported to be a serious issue for most students, which is only getting worse with rising rent prices, most notably those in New Verano.

Table 6: Satisfaction with Parking

Housing Community	Responses	Satisfied	% Satisfied
Palo Verde	300	191	64%
Verano Place	399	255	64%
Campus Village	21	3	14%
American Campus Communities	24	10	42%
Off-Campus	367	202	55%
Total	1111	661	59%

*Satisfied in this table is a combination of both "Somewhat Satisfied" and "Extremely Satisfied" responses.

Some on-campus residents in Palo Verde and Verano Place reported having high satisfaction with parking (64%). Those in American Campus Communities were less than satisfied, perhaps due to the limited parking spaces among the undergraduate and graduate residents. The residents in Campus Village were the least satisfied, with only a 14% satisfaction rate. Indeed, some have, "noticed the parking lot is more full compared to previous years" and "no spots were left" when they returned. Those living off-campus note a higher parking satisfaction of 55%.

Table 7: Satisfaction with Community Feeling

Housing Community	Responses	Satisfied	% Satisfied
Palo Verde	300	126	42%
Verano Place	397	162	41%
Campus Village	21	6	29%
American Campus Communities	24	9	38%
Off-Campus	366	182	50%
Total	1108	485	44%

*Satisfied in this table is a combination of both "Somewhat Satisfied" and "Extremely Satisfied" responses.

Few residents were satisfied with the community feeling of their respective housing communities (Table 7). Campus Village and ACC communities have the lowest satisfaction ratings for community feeling, likely due to the mixture of undergraduates and grads living together.

Campus Village scored the lowest rating in community feeling, where respondents noted "I'm not happy at Campus Village", "I did not want to live in Campus Village", "when I lived in campus village that was a horrible experience". This might be due to issues with maintenance staff: testimonies from participants include that "[the] maintenance staff has walked straight into [their]

apartment", when "[they were] getting dressed", and "the place was absolutely filthy and full of cockroaches when [they] moved in". Several people noted the maintenance team's obtrusiveness in Palo Verde as well, which may stem from the maintenance team's expectation of on-campus residents to be out of their residences Monday-Friday, 8am-5pm. **Conversely, the feedback on maintenance staff was much higher in Verano Place**, where most people said that "maintenance staff are some of the kindest, quickest-acting people on campus", signifying that housing maintenance is not problematic everywhere on campus.

**Table 8:** Satisfaction with Proximity to Community Amenities

Housing Community	Responses	Satisfied	% Satisfied
Palo Verde	300	263	88%
Verano Place	399	354	89%
Campus Village	21	19	90%
American Campus Communities	24	16	67%
Off-Campus	368	179	49%
Total	1112	831	75%

*Satisfied in this table is a combination of both "Somewhat Satisfied" and "Extremely Satisfied" responses.

Most people were satisfied with their proximity to community amenities (Table 8). Indeed, local grocery stores, eateries, and campus-wide amenities such as the University Town Center and an Albertsons shopping center are within 30-minute walks from Palo Verde, Verano Place, and Campus Village residences, and are otherwise accessible via several bus routes around campus. There are also inter-city bus routes that can transport people almost anywhere within Orange County, and nearby train stations for inter-county transportation, for non-local amenities such as bike locations. There are local taxis and similar car transportation such as Uber or Lyft for late-night transportation. Notably, American Campus Communities and off-campus residents responded with lower satisfaction, 67% and 49% respectively, probably given that they are somewhat farther removed from community amenities.

Satisfaction with Housing Communities Over Time

One discouraging statistic has been the erosion of overall on-campus community housing satisfaction over time through comparison with previous years surveys (2013-2014, 2014-2015, and 2018-2019). Campus Village has experienced the highest decrease in satisfaction, with ~80% of residents satisfied with their housing situation in 2014-2015, and only 38% satisfied in 2018-2019. **However, Palo Verde and Verano Place have also experienced significant (double digit) decreases in overall satisfaction throughout the past 5 years (Figure 1).**
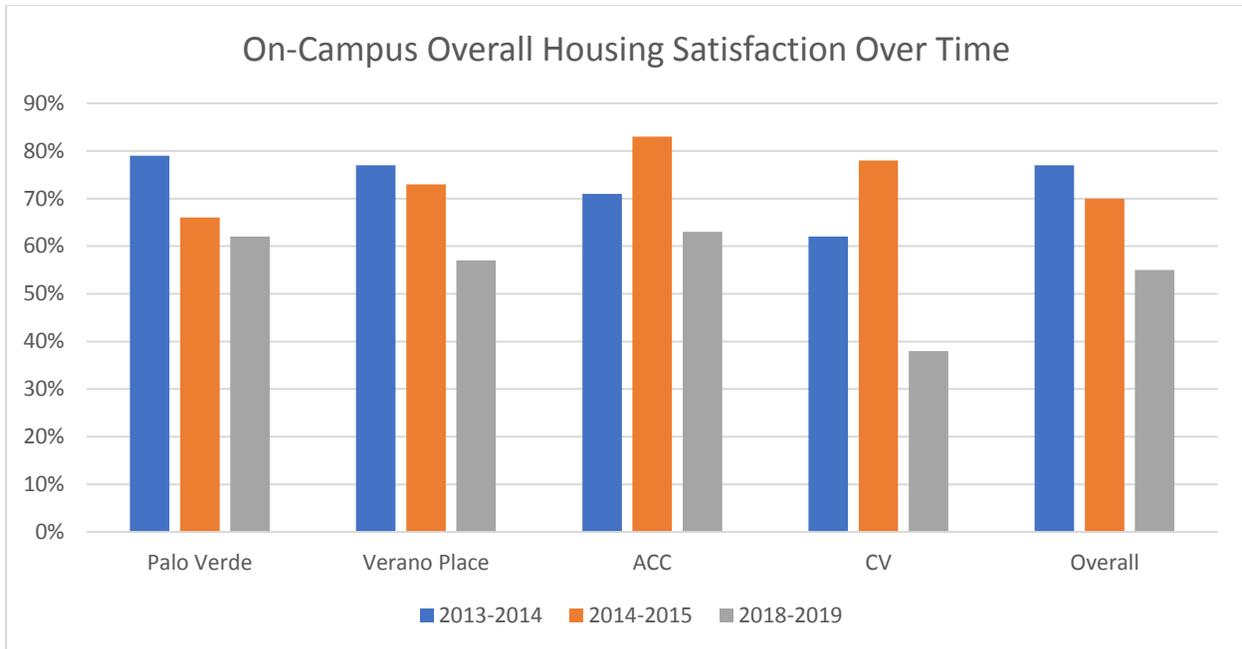
Figure 1: AGS Graduate Student Life survey overall on-campus housing satisfaction, by community over time.

An analysis of student's responses on satisfaction with different aspects of housing did not shed any significant light on the issue. Rent costs remain the highest source of dissatisfaction with students, yet rent has largely kept pace with inflation; and the proportion of student income spent on rent has remained constant. In addition, there has been no significant drop in student income from 2013 to today. Therefore, other expenses or dissatisfaction with their communities is likely the main driver in the decrease in overall satisfaction.

Sources of Stress

Students were offered the opportunity to respond to several open-ended questions about their interactions with UCI housing, and the impact and process of finding affordable housing for their graduate tenure. This was the largest source of written responses for graduate students with over 700 (>50%) responses.

Feedback was mixed on interactions with housing staff members. They were applauded for their attempts to help and for their friendliness, but the most common negative feedback was that they could be unfriendly, non-transparent, and unknowledgeable.

Regarding the housing contract process, comments noted that the entire process (initial application, transfer application, waitlist) needs to be more transparent. The application process was confusing for some respondents, and many residents felt it was difficult to determine their position on the waitlist or the likelihood of getting off the waitlist and into an apartment. The lack of transparency across the process was discussed in conjunction with high levels of self-reported stress and frustration.

Moreover, there is a notable amount of frustration regarding the housing guarantee in the respondents' comments. Of survey respondents, 38.96% ranked housing cost and availability as their top stressor. The frustration came from master's students who are not offered any guarantee, from students unexpectedly having their lease terminated earlier than expected, and from students who either missed an initial deadline or declined an offer due to the timing of the lease start date.

Conclusions

Rent and community feeling remain the largest source of dissatisfaction for graduate students (49% and 44%, respectively). There were a variety of concerns raised, such as being homeless and having maintenance workers intrude in people's apartments while they were getting dressed. Respondents found parking and proximity to campus amenities a positive (59% and 75%, respectively), but CV residents expressed more difficulty in finding spaces compared to their peers in PV and VP. Overall, roughly half of students on campus were satisfied with their housing and housing communities (56%), a significant downturn from years prior (70-77% satisfaction rating).

Finances

Introduction

Graduate students' financial insecurity is a key source of stress during their education. As noted in the recent National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine [Report on Graduate STEM Education](#) (2018), better policies are need to financially support graduate students. Such findings hold, and are perhaps even more necessary, for graduate students in the Arts and Humanities. This section provides an overview of graduate students' financial situations at UCI.

Summary of Key Findings and Action Items

Less than half of all graduate students feel financially secure. There is very significant variability of security status between different schools, with arts students approximately three times more likely to be financially insecure than ICS students. Somewhat surprisingly, the Law school also had a significantly higher levels of insecurity compared to the University-wide average. Housing remains one of the most significant expenses for graduate students, with the average student spending 43% of their income on housing. Survey results support the conclusion that income is the largest predictor of insecurity, with insecure students making on average $400 a month less than insecure students, with no statistically significant difference between the groups expenses.

Graduate students who are financially insecure are more than twice as likely to experience extreme stress on a day to-day-level compared to financially secure students. Furthermore, financially insecure students top concerns are finances and housing costs, compared to secure students top concerns of research and coursework progress.

We recommend the following action items to address the issue of financial insecurity:

1. The university put more resources into understanding the connections between Graduate Student financial/housing insecurity and mental health to better understand underlying drivers and solutions,
2. Develop creative solutions into reducing housing costs, and expanding current on-campus housing stock,
3. Graduate Division to perform an assessment of the finances (students funded under TA/RA'ships, external fellowships, etc.) of every school and department, and publicly publish the results on a yearly basis on departmental websites and through the Office of Institutional Research so prospective students are accurately informed of their schools' financial situation before they choose to attend UCI, and
4. Focus more resources on addressing the financial concerns of their current students, even if that means delaying short-term strategic enrollment growth benchmarks.

Student Incomes and Average Expenses

The median income in our sample was $2100 per month, or $25,200 per year after taxes.[1] Approximately 44% of students make $1900 or less per month, which comes out to $22,800 or less per year after taxes.

Housing costs are one of the major financial burdens for our graduate students. The average student pays $900 per month on housing, $10,800 a year. While students living off campus reported higher housing costs than those living on campus, there were not significant differences in housing costs between those groups in our sample.[2] **The average graduate student at UCI spends 43% of their income on housing.**

According to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, individuals and families who pay more than 30 percent of their income for housing are considered cost burdened. When AGS conducted a similar survey in 2013, we also found that students were paying approximately 40% of their income on housing - again, meeting the federal definition of cost burdened by housing expenses. **Over the last 6 years, UCI has not been able to reduce the significant financial burden of housing for graduate students.**

Of course, students need to pay for much more than housing. Such costs include food, childcare, and recreational activities to maintain physical and mental well-being. The average monthly expenses in our sample (monthly housing costs plus average monthly expenses besides housing) was $1898 per month.

While the average student at UCI has enough money to get by each month, their finances are still very tight. And this statistic obscures the fact that many of our graduate students are not paid enough to get by on a month-to-month basis. As stated in previously, 58% of graduate students cite their financial situation as a major source of stress.

Financial Insecurity at UCI

Less than half of graduate students at UCI (47%) feel financially secure. About **32% of students explicitly feel financially insecure**, while 21% of students did not report explicit security or insecurity regarding their finances.

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[1] We are reporting medians throughout this section due to a number of extreme scores in our sample and a lack of a priori methods for how to address these outliers.

[2] While not statistically significant, students living off-campus pay about $150 more per month in housing expenses, which comes out to $1,800 more per year. This statistically insignificant result is still practically significant for these students.

Table 9: Level of financial security among graduate student population

Level of Financial Security

Level	Number of Students	% of Total
Insecure	359	31.9 %
Neutral	241	21.4 %
Secure	525	46.7 %

Levels of financial insecurity vary widely across schools within UCI. While the Schools of Physical Sciences, Biological Sciences, and the Donald Bren School of Computer Science all had less than 26% of students report financial insecurity, the Claire Trevor School of the Arts (CTSA), the School of Law, the School of Social Ecology, and the School of Humanities all had greater than 38% insecurity. **CTSA (71% insecurity) and the School of Law (58% insecurity) stood out as the most financially insecure schools on campus.**

Our data suggest that levels of security are driven by differences in students' incomes, not differences in students' expenses. **There are no significant differences between students who feel financially insecure, neutral, or secure in their total expenses, but students who feel financially insecure have significantly lower incomes (median income = $1700 a month) than those who feel financially neutral or secure (median incomes = $2100 a month).**

Attending UCI as a graduate student entails significant financial costs that are nearly impossible to avoid. The main difference between those who live comfortably and those who struggle to survive is the amount of money they are paid to work at UCI.

Connections Between Financial Insecurity, Housing, Mental Health, and Academic Achievement

Financial security affects every aspect of a graduate student's life. Of particular concern is the effect that financial insecurity has on student's academic achievement, mental health, and ability to effectively perform their duties as a graduate student.

Figure 2 compares the day-to-day stress levels of students who rated themselves as financially secure vs. insecure. The differences in mental health between financially secure vs insecure students is extremely significant. **Students who are financially insecure are more than twice as likely compared to financially secure students to experience extreme stress (27% vs 13%) on a day-to-day level.** Therefore, the most effective programming to improve graduate student mental health is to improve their financial situation.
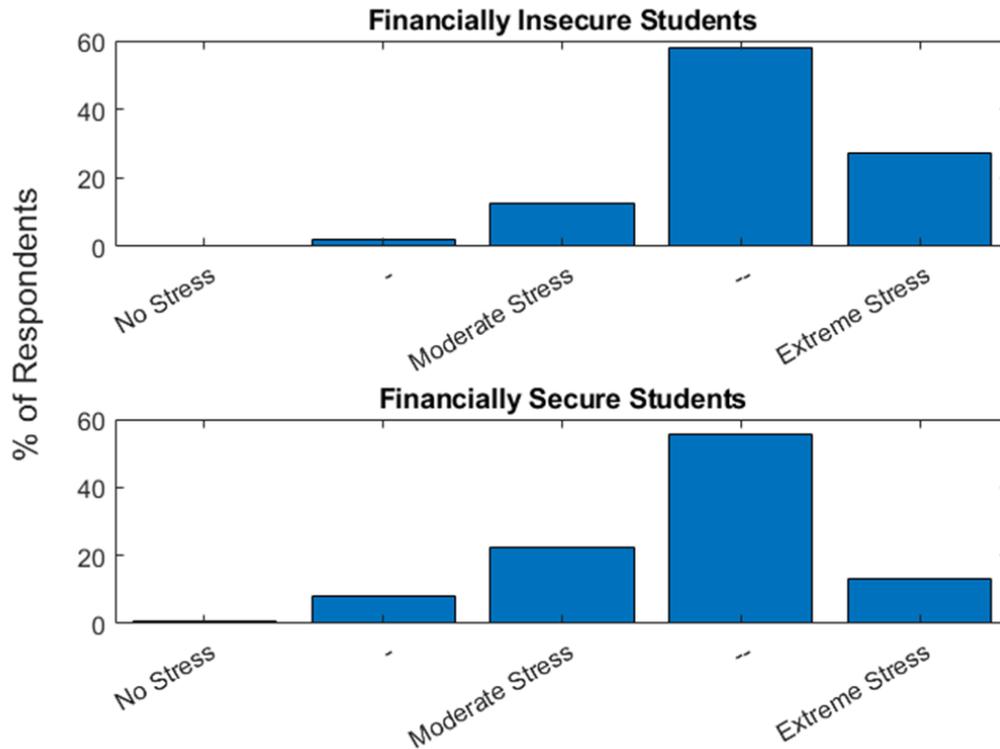
Figure 2: Comparison between financially insecure (top panel) with secure (bottom panel) on student's day-to-day stress levels.

In addition, among students who are financially secure, research progress, finances/cost of living, and course work were listed as the top three issues/sources of stress, respectively. Among students who were financially insecure, finances/cost of living, housing costs, and research progress were listed as the top three sources of stress (Figure 3).

Financially Secure Students
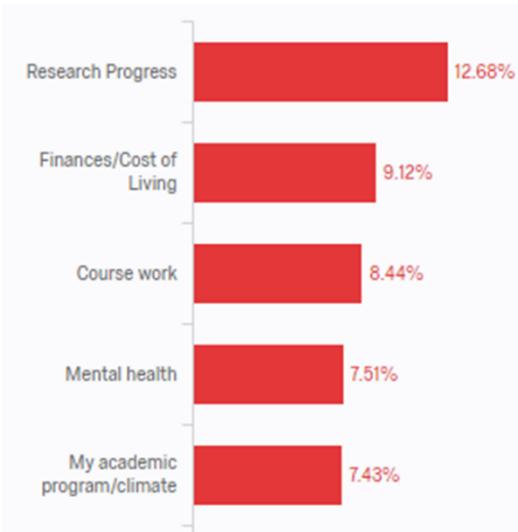
Financially Insecure Students

Figure 3: Comparison of selected top stressors (by percentage of total responses) between financially secure (left panel) vs insecure students (right panel).

This result demonstrates the severe negative impact that financial and housing insecurity has on the academic achievement of our most vulnerable students. The most effective program to improve academic achievement in the University will likely be address the issues related to housing and financial insecurity.

Conclusions and Recommendations

While nearly half of the graduate population feels financially secure, over 30% of the population feels financially insecure. Even the average, financially-secure student only has about $200 in wiggle room each month. Unanticipated expenses - such as a medical emergency or a bike theft - could put many of these financially secure students into tough situations. And these same unanticipated expenses would put currently insecure students into dire financial straits. **We recommend that the university allocate more resources towards understanding and addressing graduate students' financial concerns.**

The percentage of graduate students' income spent on housing expenses is nearly the same as rates first catalogued by AGS in 2013. These housing costs are driven, in part, but the high costs of living in Orange County, yet maintaining the status quo on housing costs is to place a federally recognized level of financial burden on UCI graduate students. **UCI must put resources into creative solutions for reducing the financial burden of housing costs, especially if the university wants to remain a competitive destination for prospective PhD students.**

While financial instability is a concern across UCI, there are specific schools that need to address these financial concerns more immediately than others. The Claire Trevor School of the

Arts and the School of Law stand out as having over 50% of their students feeling financially insecure, but the School of Social Ecology and the School of Humanities also need to work towards reducing financial insecurity within their departments. **We recommend that Graduate Division provide templates for each School to compile better data on their students' financial security and publicly publish these data on each department's websites, in addition to the Office of Institutional Research website. Such information will be critical for enabling these schools to find solutions that are best for their particular situations, and appropriately inform incoming students on the financial status of those schools. These data would also allow Graduate Division to better understand university-wide financial concerns.**

While UCI has been focusing on growing the graduate student population, our data suggest that many *current* graduate students are being left behind. UCI is [aiming](#) to reach a 25% graduate to undergraduate ratio by 2026-2027, yet it is not clear that there will be adequate financial and infrastructural resources to support that many more graduate students. It is difficult to see how growing the graduate population will free up funding to relieve the financial burdens already placed on current students, yet it is easy to imagine how an emphasis on future students could direct funds away from the current UCI students who desperately need financial assistance. **UCI needs to focus more resources on addressing the financial concerns of their current students, even if that means delaying short-term strategic growth benchmarks. Creating an institution where students feel financially stable will be of greater long-term benefit for the culture and standing of the university than a prioritization of enrollment ratios at current students' expense.**

Students with Dependents

Summary of Key Findings and Action Items

Recognizing and including the voice of students with children or dependents is an important part of an inclusive campus culture. Students with children represent 16% of graduate students, making UC Irvine the campus with, proportionally, the most graduate student parents of the UCs ([University Office of the President, 2019](#)). Of the respondents in the AGS survey, 141 identified having one or more children or dependents. Most (62%) had one child and roughly a quarter (26%) had two children or dependents.

We recommend the following items to address concerns for students with dependents:
1. Acknowledge the marginalization of students with dependents and take steps to create a more inclusive environment.
2. Expand lactation spaces and the housing guarantee to students with dependents.
3. Expand access to affordable childcare, specifically shorter-term childcare for parents who do not need a full day (the "IKEA" model).
4. Increase awareness of the resources available to students with dependents through marketing campaigns and outreach to student/parent organizations.
5. Broaden family friendly programming and workshops, especially for professional development events by offering on-site care, and short-term childcare (see point 3).
6. Expand funding opportunities for students with dependents, such as the "Maternity Fellowship" in the school of social sciences.

Financial Concerns

Families often rely on the non-student partner to provide financial support. Around 80% of students with dependents said they made $2,500 or less a month as a household. About half reported that someone else in the household contributed to the household income while another 14% said someone else somewhat contributed. Almost a third reported that the contributing income made up 75% or more of total household income.

Housing Concerns

Most families, at the time of the survey, lived on campus in Verano or Palo Verde (57%) and the remainder lived off campus. No families said they were homeless. For families living on campus, responses speak to mixed experiences. The proximity to campus was a benefit of housing. **Over 90% of students living on campus said they were extremely or somewhat satisfied with proximity to campus, compared to 36% of commuters.**

Yet, responses speak to stressors associated with the cost and experience of living in on campus graduate housing. Fewer than half of residents in Verano were either extremely (24%) or somewhat satisfied (24%) with the cost of rent. **In terms of satisfaction with staff and**

support, findings varied between housing complexes. While about 70% of Verano residents with dependents were satisfied, only 55% of Palo Verde residents with dependents reported positively about their community.

While acknowledging that campus housing is cheaper than rent in the surrounding, some responses described how the cost was still a burden for families. For instance,
- "I live with my wife and 2 children. We living [sic] the cheapest apartments in Verano and pay $1155. This is easily over 50% of our after tax income. This is too much for a small two bedroom apartment with cockroaches and no AC."
- "Student housing is the best choice for my family, but that choice has lost its luster more every year. Despite the fact that the union's contract negotiations failed to keep pace with inflation, the rent has gone up every year in my unit. We're lacking sufficient financial support from the university to adequately subsidize housing, and while I'm fortunate to be financially secure, many of my peers are going into debt for a program that's supposed to be 'fully funded.'"

Furthermore, a master's student noted the stress associated with the lack of a guarantee for a 2nd year of housing because of the instability it created for childcare and their child's schooling.

Students with families commented on the lack of inclusion of families in on-campus housing, in particular the Palo Verde community where some students reported feeling harassed by the housing office staff (see discrimination section for further examples). Residents also noted a lack of response to complaints, particularly around animal policies. For example:
- "... parents in Palo Verde have informed the head office for over 9 months that a sign for "no dogs" be place at the playground because people bring their dogs in there so the dogs can run around. Also, some people go to the playground to drink and smoke. Sometimes the beer bottles are in there when the children walk in to play. Nothing has been done about these issues, no follow-up or emails informing residents this behavior is not permitted."
- "Little consideration for the needs of parents with older children."

Commuting

Approximately 41.8% of graduate student parents who completed the survey live off campus. Commuting by car is the main source of transportation to campus (70.7%). A little over half of the students who commute by car reported that finding a parking spot on a daily basis is somewhat to extremely difficult. Of the commuters, over half of them (55.1%) live greater than 30 minutes from campus and almost 30% report living at least one hour or more away. Commuting and its associated stressors may negatively impact student parents.

"I have less time to work on campus because my day now includes an hour daily commute. This has limited my ability to run experiments and has delayed my progress. I do not socialize with my peers as much. I cannot participate in many of the service and professional development opportunities that I'd like to."

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Professional Development

Among student parents, approximately half (48.2%) have presented research at a conference while a graduate student. Of these students, the average cost to attend was $1,379.41 dollars, including travel costs, registration, lodging and other miscellaneous expenses. Although the amount that was reimbursed by students' respective departments varied (ranging from $0 to $3,000), the average amount reimbursed was $790.32. The majority of students conveyed that in order to receive funding for a conference, they had to be presenting a poster or be giving an oral presentation. As one student stated, "If I decide I should go without having a presentation scheduled, I must cover the fees in full out of pocket." Fortunately, less than 5 students reported that their department did not offer assistance at all.

The survey highlights that graduate student parents are largely unaware of the available resources offered by AGS for professional development. Amongst all graduate student parents, 43.2% were not aware that AGS offered travel grants to graduate students for conference travel. Of those who were aware (n=79), only 34% had used them. Aside from the travel grants, more than half (n=91) of the student parents did not know about the AGS Research Symposium. Of those who were familiar with these opportunities, only 14 graduate student parents had presented at the AGS Research Symposium. Male parents were more likely than their counterparts to be unaware of these opportunities. When asked what programs would be helpful for their research or professional development, many responses suggested skill-building workshops, events exploring career opportunities, and networking events.

While many student parents expressed a desire to have professional development and socializing events such as networking and career building activities, many also mentioned the need for these events to be kid friendly. "I have never been able to come to any event because I have children to take care of when events take place." Regarding the types of events that would appeal to student parents, family- friendly or family-oriented events were frequently stated. Interestingly, of the 131 student parents that answered this part of the survey, almost half (n=63) of them were not aware of the family-oriented events that AGS holds.

Wellbeing

Acknowledging student wellbeing among graduate student parents is essential. The graduate life survey revealed that the majority of student parents (68.0%) rate their health and happiness as being extremely important. Fortunately, less than 10% reported feeling that their wellbeing was moderately important to not important at all. Despite this and similar to graduate students overall, the survey highlights that stress is a daily part of life for student parents as well. Of the 118 parents who answered the question regarding stress, 20.3% reported experiencing extreme

stress on a daily basis. An additional 62.7% of students expressed feeling more than moderate stress regularly. Among the top stressors reported by student parents are finances and cost of living, balancing family responsibility, research progress, housing costs and course work. Although the majority of these reflect those of the graduate population at large, balancing family responsibility was reported as the second greatest stressor amongst student parents versus 15th among graduate students overall.

There are a variety of resources available on campus to support students' wellbeing. Despite most students feeling stressed on a regular basis, more than half of student parents (63.3%) have not ever been to UCI's Counseling Center. Of the 51 students on campus who made use of this resource, 51.0% waiting less than one week for an appointment with a counselor, followed by 29.4% who waited between 1 and 2 weeks, and 19.6% who waited more than 2 weeks. Of the 47 students who answered the satisfaction question, almost three quarters of them were satisfied or very satisfied with those services. Student parents who did not feel satisfied expressed concerns with insurance costs and coverage for dependents. "Make dental and medical services be cheaper or free for spouse and dependents as paying $2500 per quarter isn't possible." **In particular, psychological and psychiatric service coverage for dependents seem to pose the most dissatisfaction.** For example, one student said: "It concerns me, as a parent of a child who has experienced psychological issues, that UCI offers no services for dependents of students."

Discrimination and Parent-Specific Difficulties

Student parents often feel discrimination just given their status as parents. Case in point, one student put it, "You didn't put anything here about being a parent, and I think that that is very telling, because I feel very discriminated against and harassed as a parent." Another student expressed "A professor told me to drop a class because I was pregnant." Female students expressed more instances of discrimination due to their parenting role than their counterparts. Often students discussed not sharing details of their personal life.

Several students stated they felt targeted by staff in Palo Verde for having families, noting that parents felt "unwelcome and surveilled "and that, "On multiple occasions [staff person] has confronted children for being too loud in the middle of the day or for playing in communal areas, also during the day." Another student parent shared, "The only way I've been made to feel discriminated is in our housing because we have children"

The following quotes share the experiences of student parents.
- "Another graduate student in my department harassed me several times while I was pregnant. Neither OEOD nor my department did anything about it, aside from letting me move offices to escape my harasser. Only Student Conduct was helpful."
- "As a single parent of young age I feel patronized routinely by those with more power than me. That includes all staff and some faculty and my colleagues that do not know me. I try not to tell anyone about my personal life but sometimes I have to for administrative purposes."

- "I am constantly treated less than my colleagues due to my status as a mother and am seen as the least efficient worker in the lab since I need to leave in time to pick my daughter up from day care. I've also run department events where I was given to purchase dinner for the participants, only to be accused as purchasing food for my daughter when I gave the department head my receipts. This is only an example of many occurrences."

Lactation space

One student noted the difficulty in finding space for lactation, stating:
- "I have not had an experience with discrimination. However, I think there is more the university could do to accommodate student parents, especially students who are breastfeeding. I have seen very few lactation rooms on campus, for instance. As a grad student, I do not have my own office (or even my own cubicles) and there is limited space in my department's building, so that would make it quite difficult to breastfeed/pump milk while I'm on campus."

Conclusions and Recommendations

There are many ways in which UCI can support student parents. First, the university needs to understand the needs of student parents. A survey specifically of student parents would identify key issues and potential solutions as informed from these students themselves. Based on the survey results, graduate student parents have needs similar to those of their colleagues yet encounter additional challenges that are unique to their roles as parents. We recommend greater acknowledgement of these unique challenges system-wide, as many parents feel that they are marginalized. These sentiments were common amongst student parents, who are juggling multiple roles. Having students feel discriminated against because of their status as a parent is unacceptable and is detrimental for student parents' general wellbeing.

Another prevailing obstacle among student parents was affordable childcare. It was cited as an impediment to attending professional development events, socializing, and academic progress. Given that 33% of graduate student parents stated feeling insecure or very insecure about their funding and financial situation and a majority of the graduate student parents expressed feeling stressed, it is important to provide feasible and affordable options for students. **One specific recommendation that may be helpful for those who need a short-term childcare option would be the implementation of a childcare model similar to that of IKEA.** Establishing at least one or two places on campus in which student parents can drop off their children for a short time while they attend a class or workshop would be one approach to addressing the inability to find care for a short term. Furthermore, it would address one of the main reasons stated for being unable to attend workshops or professional development events.

According to UCI's Lactation Accommodation Guidelines, there are three lactation stations on Campus. **One recommendation would be to have more dedicated spaces throughout campus for student parents, especially those that are breastfeeding.** Additionally, making

these spaces more accessible and noticeable would be advisable. As one student stated, "I think there is more the university could do to accommodate student parents, especially students who are breastfeeding. I have seen very few lactation rooms on campus, for instance. As a grad student, I do not have my own office (or even my own cubicles) and there is limited space in my department's building, so that would make it quite difficult to breastfeed/pump milk while I'm on campus."

In general, increasing awareness of available resources is critical. While more resources are clearly needed to help student parents, the survey highlights that many student graduate parents do not know of the resources and events that are available. Finding other methods of reaching student parents is essential. Although emails and social media were suggested, it is likely that multiple platforms should be used. Creating an inclusive environment, one that doesn't make graduate student parents feel like 'the exception' would be extremely helpful in making them feel supported and welcome.

Staffing and advocate roles tailored towards parents could provide a known path to departmental guidance and referral services to student parents. **These roles could include "Student Parent Advocate" within each School or a "Student Parent Specialist" located in the Graduate Resource Center or Wellness, Health, and Counseling Services.** For instance, about half of respondents with families were not aware of the Fresh Basic Needs Hub despite its prospect for being an additional food support for families. Liaisons could provide this type of information to families.

Developing programming centered on student parent needs (i.e. work/life balance, mental health, parenting support group, student parents' night out) would provide student parents with access to resources and a means to network with fellow parents. This includes family friendly residential programming and dedicated spaces for children to play and learn.

Acknowledge and support student parents in their academic pursuits, starting from pregnancy. For instance, the development of a "birth plan" can provide clarity for both advisor and student and lessen stress for pregnant students as to how projects and coursework will be handled in the final months of pregnancy and post-birth. **Another potential support mechanism is funding for students with newborns or newly adopted children, such as the School of Social Sciences' "Maternity Fellowship."**

Finally, the expansion of affordable family housing would benefit students with families and reduce the financial stress they face.

Campus Climate

Campus climate plays an integral role in shaping the graduate and professional student experience. Campus climate is defined as "the current attitudes, behaviors and standards of faculty, staff, administrators and students concerning the level of respect for individual needs, abilities and potential" (Rankin & Associates, 2014).

Summary of Key Findings and Action Items

Women continue to experience significantly higher rates of discrimination based on sex compared to their male counterparts (27% of cisgender females vs 3.5% of cisgender males). Students who identify as transgender, transsexual, non-binary, or other experienced the highest rates of gender discrimination (45%). 30% of students who identified as Latino/a/x or Black/African American reported feelings of discrimination compared to 7.9% of self-identified white students. There were also comments surrounding campus accessibility issues for students in wheelchairs or other mobility impairments. Of the students who reported their issues with discrimination to the Office of Equal Opportunity and Diversity (OEOD), a full 65% were dissatisfied with how the office addressed the issue.

We recommend the following items to address concerns of campus climate:
1. Implement updated codes of conduct with clear language and expectations for departments to hold their students, faculty, and staff accountable for providing an inclusive and safe academic environment,
2. Increase awareness of resource centers and inclusive organizations for graduate students from under-represented backgrounds to find community and support (ie. LGBT Resource Center, Womxn's Hub, Dream Resource Center, etc),
3. Host support groups lead and facilitated by mental health professionals for students with different identities and abilities,
4. UCI to find a permanent funding source for the CARE office,
5. Audit current state of ADA and handicap accessibility to address accessibility issues,
6. Hire an assistant for Phong Luong, Psy. D., graduate division counselor to continue to provide valuable services to graduate students in need.

Identity Based Stress

The survey asked students if they had been discriminated against based on: sexual orientation, sex, service in the uniformed areas, religion, race, pregnancy, political orientation, physical or mental disability, medical condition, marital status, immigration status, gender identity, gender, ethnicity, color, citizenship, ancestry and age.

There were high instances of discrimination. 27% of students report being discriminated against based on sex and/or gender. 23% of students report being discriminated against based on race, while 22% of students report being discriminated against based on ethnicity. 15.5% of students report being discriminated against based on their age. 11% of students report being discriminated against based on their political orientation.

Discrimination is more than just a number. We asked students to describe how their experiences with discrimination, harassment, and disabilities have affected their time here at UCI, with a collection of responses shown below.

- "My advisor only takes Male graduate students seriously and funds them over me."
- "A professor told me to drop a class because I was pregnant."
- "Some funding opportunities are not available to me because of my lack of US citizenship."
- When I was rotating through labs my first year I spent a quarter in a lab with all Chinese members and a Chinese PI. He literally held all lab meetings in Mandarin, avoided me, ignored my attempts to contact him, told me there were no spaces in his lab, and then immediately took on more Chinese students.
- "Racism and sexism in my department/by faculty are so prominent. Sexual harassment is something I encounter regularly by senior male faculty in my department. I have been groped and inappropriately touched in other ways many times by them. I have also been told not to get pregnant/have children and that if I did I would not be able to achieve my career goals. I do not feel comfortable reporting such incidents because I am afraid of possible retaliation. I have also been told several times negative comments regarding my ethnicity and race."
- "Another graduate student in my department harassed me several times while I was pregnant. Neither OEOD nor my department did anything about it, aside from letting me move offices to escape my harasser. Only Student Conduct was helpful."
- "I had inquired about the possibility of participating in the athletics program as a transgender student. I spoke with the NCAA and I was told I needed to go through the school for the waiver request process. Since I have become eligible the coach has repeated made excuses as to why I would not have an opportunity to try out for the team. Most recently the coach admitted that I would never be considered for the team, without any justification, even though the team has a walk on player. Its been quite a bit disheartening to say the least."
- "Another grad student in my department applied for the same internship as me. I got an interview and he didn't. When he found out, he said it was because I'm a woman and I was only interviewed on that basis as a diversity hire. I reported this to my advisor, who spoke with the other student's advisor, and we had several conversations and it never went beyond that step because I got tired of talking about it and because no one seemed interested on helping me take my complaint further."
- "As a Jew the annual MSU event dubbed "hate week" was always a little weird. However, It serves as a great opportunity for discussion but usually it is so heated as an environment that discussion never happens."
- "Being called a 'non-native speaker of English' (I'm not one), 'emotional', or faculty doubting my disability, requesting me to take an English test (which I had to pay out of pocket). In general OEOD is not so helpful and supporting students who do not have a lot of power. The only good support I found at UCI is Phong Luong."

Issues with ADA Access

Students with mobility issues reported difficulties in getting around campus. A selection of their responses are below.

- "I am a wheelchair user and require an accessible unit. They only been able to provide me a 2bedroom. I have no need for a 2-unit apartment. This require that I pay a more than I would usually pay. This has put financial strain on me and girlfriend. They offered a single unit which I was willing to take but they refuse to make reasonable accommodations because I already had an accessible unit."
- "UCI campus is not a very friendly place for people with mobility issues. Even with a handicap placard, it is still difficult to get around campus due to the length of walks between parking lot and buildings, and the Disability Services Center does not provide ride service from graduate housing to main campus or from the medical side of campus across the footbridge to main campus. This makes it incredibly difficult for me to attend talks and professional development events. Wheelchair ramps are very steep and handicap accessible paths are often built so that you have to travel a little out of the way to get where you're going. Some of the food courts on campus do not have handicap accessible doors or a direct handicap accessible route to them."

Campus Resources

Graduate students specifically mentioned helpful support coming from Phong Luong, Graduate Division Counselor in managing interdepartmental faculty/student/staff relationships, and as a valuable mental health resource. OEOD was mentioned as a source of frustration for multiple students, with 65% of students who reported discrimination to OEOD unsatisfied with how the department handled their complaint.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Students who identify as Latino/a/x or Black/African American experience 3.7X more stress with identity compared with White students. Women continue to face significant difficulties with sexual harassment from faculty and other graduate students, and are 7.7X more likely to experience identity-based stress compared with their male counterparts. Students with mobility issues mentioned specific instances of not being able to access key campus resources due to a lack of handicap accessible routes.

UCI has not yet found a permeant funding source for the CARE office, a valuable campus resource. We recommend the campus take steps to find a funding mechanism for this office. In addition, we recommend the university address the issues with racism and sexism prevalent among faculty and other graduate students on campus and increase awareness of the resource centers available to students. We recommend that the university investigate the mobility issues raised by the students mentioned within this report. Finally, we recommend that UCI hire an assistant for Phong Luong, Graduate Division Counselor to help him expand and continue his incredible work.

Mental Health and Wellness

The health and happiness of graduate students is of major concern to AGS. Unfortunately, survey result indicate that a significant proportion of UCI graduate students are unhappy and/or stressed. Furthermore, many UC Irvine, graduate students are either not seeking help, unable to find help, or using maladaptive means of coping with their stress.

Summary of Key Findings and Action Items

18% of UCI graduate students experience extreme stress on a daily basis. Students who are financially insecure are twice as likely to experience extreme stress compared to students who are financially insecure. The top five sources of stress for graduate students are finances, research progress, course work, mental health, and their academic program/climate. 30% of graduate students report having made an appointment with the UCI counseling center, with 20% experiencing wait times of greater than 2 weeks with 15% being unsatisfied with the services provided.

We recommend the following items to address concerns of mental health on campus:
1. Hire an assistant for Phong Luong, Psy. D., graduate division counselor to continue to provide valuable services to graduate students in need, and
2. Hire additional counselors for the counseling center to cope with prolonged wait-times.

References

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