Advocacy Platform – 2020

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Increase Funding and Equity to Support Graduate Research

An investment in the public good and global competitiveness

Graduate students are the backbone of research conducted at American universities and rely on federal research funding for financial support. Federal investment in research funding drives the United States technological advantage, contributes to local economies, and fuels innovation. Universities benefit from graduate students due to the high research and teaching power returns given proportionately low overhead and labor costs [1]. Yet graduate students across disciplines are particularly vulnerable to funding declines. While we are encouraged by recent bipartisan support for increasing federal research funding, it is important that this increase supports all graduate students given the diversity of research disciplines and researchers. Initiatives to educate and train the next generation of graduate students must coincide with initiatives to increase research funding.

Increase graduate student funding opportunities for underfunded and non-STEM fields

Steady rates of National Institute of Health (NIH) F31, F32, and National Science Foundation (NSF) GRFP grant proposals do not match the growing graduate student population. Flat funding for select agencies [2] and loss of key fellowships have a tremendous impact on non-stem fields.

➢ 50% of GRFP awards go to the top 30 scoring universities and the NSF is less transparent in the success and support of diverse applicants compared to peer institutions [3]
➢ FY18, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) received $152.8 million adjusting for inflation, which is still below its FY 1973–1995 appropriation levels [4]
➢ The humanities are more dependent on teaching assistantships and self-sustaining funding [4]

SAGE Recommends:
➢ We suggest an expansion of current fellowship opportunities for graduate students, particularly the introduction of an NEH Humanities graduate fellowship, the re-introduction of the EPA STAR fellowship, and increased transparency and equity among NIH and NSF GRFP fellowship funding.
➢ Support and pass bills that emphasize agency transparency such as: H.R. 2528/S. 2579 STEM Opportunities Act and H.R. 4623/S.1744 Keep STEM Talent Act

Improve diversity-focused funding efficacy to ensure success of underrepresented students

Support in mentoring, research, opportunities, and academia are critical for the success of underrepresented students in STEM [5]. Beyond funding, a support structure is necessary to make the graduate training environment more inclusive and equitable. Current diversity-focused fundings, such as NIH F31-Diversity and NSF GRFP, do not explicitly provide this type of support, nor do they request it from the applicants’ institutions [7, 8]. Specific attention is needed to support female investigators, who make up only 36% of total R01 awardees as of 2018 even though female investigators are equally likely to be successful in their research [9].

SAGE Recommends:
➢ Support and pass bills that provide important student support structures such as H.R. 4528/S.2578 Women and Minorities in STEM Booster Act


Accessible graduate education is necessary to train a diverse workforce

Finances influence student access to graduate education, the ability to afford the expenses of daily living during training, and the opportunity to contribute to the economy after graduation under the burden of school debt. Student loan debt in the U.S. has grown 157% in the last 11 years [1]. Over 64% of graduate and professional students have loans, with the average debt of graduate borrowers at $57,600 [2]. Graduate students hold 40% of the $1.51 trillion total student loan debt [2]. This burden falls disproportionately on underserved populations, particularly students of color, first-generation students, and women [3]. Borrowers with the highest levels of debt can see negative amortization in income-based repayment plans. We need legislation for access and transparency for students who borrow in order to complete their degrees, and to provide policy that stimulates economic growth through realizable and functional loan repayment programs.

Comprehensive Higher Education Act Reauthorization

The Higher Education Act (HEA) was due for reauthorization in 2013 [4]. Comprehensive reauthorization is crucial to preserve and encourage accessibility in higher education. We support the Student Aid Improvement Act of 2019 to streamline FAFSA. However, we urge the passing of the more comprehensive reform package found in the College Affordability Act, which provides a number of benefits that address barriers to success during and after graduation.

SAGE Recommends:

- Support H.R. 4674 - College Affordability Act - Create a Federal Direct Perkins Loan Program
- Support S. 2557 - Student Aid Improvement Act of 2019 - Streamline FAFSA applications

Affordable Living: Student Loan Repayments and Basic Needs

Under increasing loan debt, we strongly support legislation to increase flexibility in student loan repayment, decrease interest rates, and relieve the burden of student debt. Food insecurity for undergraduate students is 7 times the national average, with limited data also showing disparities for graduate students [5]. Food insecurity is linked to multiple negative outcomes, including educational attainment and success [5]. Students must be adequately supported to maximize achievement.

SAGE Recommends:

- Support H.R. 4627 - Create accountability within FSA
- Support H.R. 4596 & S. 3243 - Increase transparency in student loan information
- Support H.R. 4749, H.R. 4658, H.R. 4645, & H.R. 4391 - Increase flexibility in loan repayment
- Support H.R. 4297 & H.R. 4968/S. 2225 - Increase student eligibility for federal financial assistance programs, such as SNAP
- Support S. 2235/HR 3887 - Discharge student loans


Combating Campus Sexual Misconduct

Creating safer and more supportive campus and community environments for graduate students

Instances of sexual misconduct, harassment, abuse, and assault are pervasive on college campuses. Graduate students are subject to unique risks and power dynamics such as financial support, future academic success, professional connections, and job placements that are often dependent on advisors and other faculty. SAGE advocates for sexual misconduct policies that foster academic environments conducive to the personal and professional safety of all students.

Among graduate and professional students, the 2019 American Association of University’s (AAU) Campus Climate Survey [1] found that:

- **2.5% of men, 10.8% of women, and 14.6% of transgender and gender non-conforming students** reported instances of nonconsensual sexual contact involving physical force or an inability to consent or stop
- From 2015 to 2019, **graduate women** experienced a **2.4% increase** in the rate of nonconsensual sexual contact
- **Only 17.1% of students felt “very” or “extremely” informed** about their school’s reporting process
- **Only 45% of students who had experienced nonconsensual sexual contact** felt their institution was "very" or "extremely" likely to **take a report of sexual assault seriously**
- Among those who have reported sexual harassment, an alarming portion of **incidents were perpetrated by faculty members or instructors**: 24% for women and 18.4% for men; these rates are **4x higher for graduate students than for undergraduates**

### Oppose Changes to Title IX Regulations

The Department of Education’s proposed Title IX regulations negatively impact survivors of sexual misconduct. Provisions within the proposed regulations act as undue burdens that could retraumatize survivors, limit the scope and jurisdiction of institutions, and act as determinants against survivors coming forward with reports of sexual misconduct. [2]

**SAGE Recommends:**

- Support H.R. 4674 College Affordability Act (Higher Education Reauthorization)
- Support H.R. 5388 to provide that the Secretary of Education may not issue or enforce certain rules that weaken the enforcement of the prohibition of sex discrimination applicable under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972

### Invest in Support for Graduate Student Survivors

The following bills would ensure graduate student survivors have access to the resources and support they need as well as providing universities with the tools to employ proven prevention practices.

**SAGE Recommends:**

- Promote services in broader communities to supplement limited campus resources
  - Support H.R. 1585 Reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act
  - Support H.R. 1082/S. 402 Survivors' Access to Supportive Care Act
- Enhance research and transparency to reduce sexual misconduct on campuses
  - Support H.R. 36 Combating Sexual Harassment in Science Act of 2019
  - Support S. 976 Campus Accountability and Safety Act

Student Immigration Reform to Recruit and Retain the Brightest Minds

The ability of the U.S. to attract the brightest minds of the world is continuously diminishing.

The surge in highly-qualified students coming to the U.S. has waned. International student enrollment dropped by 6.6% in the 2017-2018 academic year [1,2]. These drops translate to a direct loss of income that international students provide to academic institutions and to several industries where the demand for highly-skilled workers continues to exceed supply from the U.S. workforce.

➢ International students supported 455K jobs and contributed $39B to the U.S. economy in 2018 [3]
➢ Immigrants founded 20% of Fortune 500 companies, including South-African born Elon Musk (Tesla, SpaceX), Russian-born Sergey Brin (Google) [4]

Retaining the World's Thinkers in the American Economy after Graduation

By impeding US-trained international talent from working for our companies we are losing from the next generation of innovators. The drop in international student applications originates from the perception of the growing difficulty to work in US companies after graduation.

➢ Increased delays in processing F1 student-visa OPT (Optional Practical Training) applications
➢ H1-B working visa denials reached 32% in 2019, a drastic increase from 6% in 2015 [5]
➢ The expanding use of “Request for Evidence” has delayed 60% of H1-B applications [6]

SAGE Recommends:
➢ Support S.2091 - Backlog Elimination, Legal Immigration, and Employment Visa Enhancement Act, to attract more high-skilled individuals and alleviate shortages
➢ Support S.1744 & H.R.4623 - Keep Stem Talent Act, to provide a path for U.S.-trained international students in STEM advanced degrees to stay and work in the U.S
➢ End H1-B and F1 OPT restrictive visa policies by better defining specialty occupations and H1-B qualifications beyond compensation

Equality of Opportunity in America: Allow Undocumented Students to Spur Our Economy

Higher education correlates with better wages and health, lower unemployment, and decreased likelihoods of needing disability payments [7]. Expanding access to state financial aid would facilitate undocumented student’s access to higher education and their ability to contribute to the US economy [8]. For example, Dreamers in Texas contribute more than 5x the amount in tuition than received in aid [9]

SAGE Recommends:
➢ Support H.R. 6, American Dream and Promise Act of 2019, to allow a pathway to citizenship for eligible undocumented immigrants
➢ Support H.R. 1298, Higher Education Dream Act of 2019, to support tuition equity for eligible immigrant youth Dreamers and to remove the barriers imposed by Section 505 of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 in order to promote access to postsecondary education for students regardless of residency and immigration status
Prioritizing Graduate Student Mental Health and Wellness
Investing in mental health is necessary to help America’s future innovators and leaders

3,000,000 post baccalaureate students
are affected personally and professionally by the rise in Mental Health problems [1]

Universities feel unable to adequately meet the increase in mental health needs.
➢ University mental health service utilization increased by 29.6% between 2009 and 2015 despite institutional enrollment growing by only 5.6% [5]
➢ 81% of university presidents report student mental health as a priority, yet only 43% reported mental health being a part of their university’s strategic plan and only 30% reported having the tools they need to address college mental health concerns [6]

This can lead to shortages of trained professionals for the future workforce and impact productivity.
➢ Domestic students graduate at lower rates compared to their international counterparts, with 43% not finishing their PhD in ten years [4]
➢ Poor mental health contributes to students seriously considering leaving their studies [7,8] and has been shown to be a factor in those who’ve left [9]
➢ Untreated mental health problems have long-term impacts on productivity. Mental health costs were reported to be the third costliest disease in the US averaging $348/employee annually [10]

Therefore, we must do the following:

Address Access to Mental Health Services for Graduate Students

High levels of MH problems exist among graduate students, leading to unique and specific mental health challenges both academically and socially, that require improved access and resources for support. [11]

SAGE Recommends:
➢ Support S. 1895: Lower Health Care Costs Act - Benchmark rates for in- and out-of-network providers will improve the minimal standards of insurance, lowering financial barriers for graduate students who wish to access mental health care.
➢ Modify H.R. 1109: Mental Health Services for Students Act of 2019 – Expand to include graduate students. Provide resources (screening, treatment, and outreach programs) to higher education
➢ Re-institute S. 2634: Garrett Lee Smith Act - Provide campus services for suicide prevention for five fiscal years and expand resources to focus on specific graduate student needs

Address Campus Climate for Graduate Students

Future mental health assessment and services should be required for all future federal funding.

SAGE Recommends:
➢ Support S. 800/H.R. 1766: College Transparency Act - Require data collection on student demographics for institutions receiving federal funding. Expand data collection from mental health measures to include additional measures, i.e. time to degree, campus climate, compensation, and outcomes for students with dependents. Report disaggregated data based on degree level and academic field
➢ Support H.R. 3192: Improving Mental Health Access for Students Act - Require institutions receiving federal funding to share contact information of suicide prevention services on student identification cards


Student Advocates for Graduate Education (SAGE) is a coalition of Graduate and Professional Student Government Organizations from leading R1 U.S. public research universities who are committed to improving the quality of graduate student life at our campuses and promoting access, affordability, and opportunity-based policy for graduate and professional students at the federal level.

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Ohio State University
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