Support Graduate and Professional Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Over the past several weeks, graduate students have been required to adapt to a new structure of learning across the world, as COVID-19 continues to have devastating impacts on our public health and way of life. Our students continue to support major research initiatives at their institutions, restructure traditional courses to comply with online teaching platforms, and mentor others, all while navigating obstacles to complete their own studies and personal hardships. We, the Student Advocates for Graduate Education (SAGE), a coalition of 14 Research-1 Universities, write to share our concerns on the often-forgotten graduate and professional students who continue to struggle in the face of the impacts of COVID-19.

Congress must do more in the coming weeks to provide a solid foundation for students, researchers, universities, laboratories, hospitals, and medical professionals in the wake of COVID-19. Graduate students specifically play a large role in COVID-19 relief efforts: leading clinical trials, generating new information, and conducting cutting-edge research. Relief for graduate students, including direct financial support, will expand on our contributions towards cures, treatments, and vaccines that will have a strong impact on our society.

SAGE applauds the continued efforts to support higher education, including the $30.75 billion Education Stabilization Fund from the third spending bill, H.R. 748, Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Nearly half (46.3%) of the total funds are allocated toward higher education ($14.25 billion), while the other half will be given to institutions for emergency funding for their students. This will provide some relief to students, colleges, and universities, but transparency, guidance, and continued support remain ambiguous. Graduate students, especially international students, student parents and caretakers, and students with disabilities, however, continue to remain some of the most vulnerable populations at this time.

While increased funding is essential to move forward during the COVID-19 crisis, SAGE would like to specifically bring attention to a few matters that are directly impacting graduate students; the first being international students. According to the Department of Homeland Security, international students must maintain their immigration status by registering for coursework, either in person or virtually, and enrolling at their respective institutions. However, limited or no access to internet services, computers, or virtual learning resources hinders their ability to complete their academic studies or research objectives. If students are unable to maintain their enrollment, this puts international students with expiring/expired visas at risk of losing their immigration status. Also, the U.S. recently suspended all U.S. visa issuances due to COVID-19, placing students who have left the country unable to renew their visas to return to the U.S. and continue their education. One major concern voiced by international students is the time constraints associated with the Optional Practical Training Program, or OPT, which allows international students to apply for temporary work in the U.S. after they graduate. Applying for OPT requires students to be in the U.S. at the time of application, which poses a conflict for students who left the U.S. for various reasons before pandemic restrictions and closures occurred. The OPT program allows only 90 days of unemployment before their work authorization is revoked and they are forced to leave the country. With many job offers being rescinded and company freezes taking effect, numerous international students have lost job opportunities and will be forced to leave the U.S. once their allotted 90 days of unemployment expires due to COVID-19 restrictions. It is imperative that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) not penalize international students and waive any unemployment days against OPT time restrictions while under government restrictions based on COVID-19. Additionally, we
urge the DHS and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to provide greater transparency and guidance for U.S. institutions to best support international students.

The next matter SAGE would like to highlight are our student parents and students with other dependents. About 12% of graduate students are also parents. This unique community not only has to maintain their own education and research goals, but now also has to take care of young children who cannot access daycare services and provide for primary and secondary school-age children now learning at home. Students who have to care for family or elderly relatives in their communities also face additional challenges, particularly for communities with limited resources. While the stimulus bill addresses an additional $500 stipend per child, the CARES act does not address if students with children could expect to receive additional support. SAGE believes it is critical that the government provides additional support and resources for these students who have to care for children or other dependents while navigating their own graduate degrees during the COVID-19 crisis.

While the Department of Education Office of Civil Rights recently addressed concerns for students with disabilities for grades K-12, it did not address concerns for accessibility to higher education resources. SAGE believes it is essential for higher education institutions to make online learning accessible to students of all abilities during the COVID-19 crisis. This includes, but not limited to, online services equipped to handle closed captioning, flexible deadlines, tele-therapy, tele-intervention services, and general guidance and assistance. Students unable to use online services should be provided with equally effective alternate access to the curriculum or services.

Finally, campus-wide shutdowns have significantly affected the mental health of graduate and professional students. Many institutions feel the need to continue “business as usual” using virtual access. This is not a realistic expectation, even for students with the technological capabilities for internet or computer needs. In addition to juggling all possible research, teaching, and writing responsibilities, many students are under stress in their personal or financial needs. Students may have had to leave campus to take care of loved ones who are sick, or struggling with the effects of self-isolating. Furthermore, students are stressed by financial insecurity due to losing research or teaching positions and their funding, summer internships, and potential jobs, leading to food and housing insecurity in the meantime. These additional factors have significant impacts on our mental health that also require the support and accommodations necessary to reduce anxiety due to personal, academic, and financial struggles. We ask that the federal government provide better access to mental health resources through grants and support of institutional policies generally, but especially during the COVID-19 crisis.

SAGE will continue to advocate on behalf of graduate and professional students. It is our priority to improve the quality of graduate and professional student life at their own campuses and promote access, quality, and opportunity for graduate and professional students at the federal level.

Student Advocates for Graduate Education (SAGE) is a coalition of Graduate Student Governance Organizations from leading U.S. public research universities who are committed to improving the quality of graduate student life at their own campuses, and promoting access, quality, and opportunity for graduate and professional students at the federal level. This statement has the support of graduate student leaders from:

Michigan State University     University of California- San Diego
Ohio State University         University of Maryland
Rutgers University            University of Michigan
Texas A&M University           University of North Carolina- Chapel Hill
University of Arizona         University of Pittsburgh
University of California- Davis University of Texas - Austin
University of California- Irvine University of Washington