

Graduate Student Senate Needs Assessment Report

Fall 2019

Purpose of Report

In order to understand the needs and concerns of current graduate students at Texas Christian University, the Graduate Student Senate conducted a needs-assessment survey during the Fall 2019 semester. GSS specifically sought to identify needs and concerns pertaining to three broad categories:

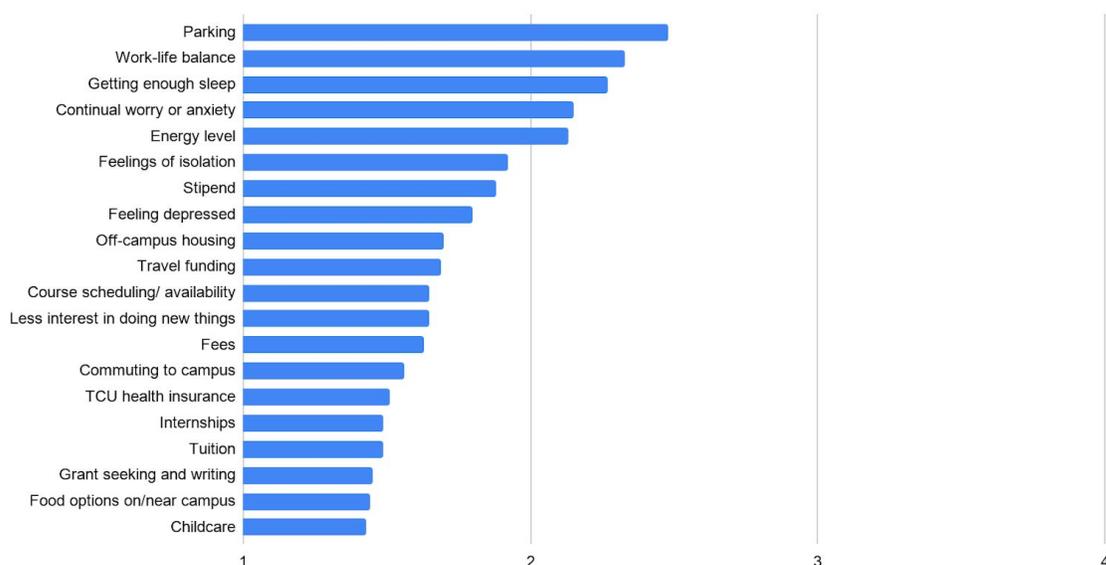
- Academic/Professional;
- Financial/Life; and
- Health/Safety.

Discussion of additional categories occurred; however, it was determined that more targeted surveys on specific topics (e.g., DEI, health insurance) would be undertaken subsequently, likely in Spring 2020.

Findings

A survey was designed in Qualtrics comprising 41 Likert-scale questions plus one written-response follow-up question per category. Responses included “Not a Problem or N/A,” “Minor Problem,” “Moderate Problem,” and “Serious Problem,” which correspond to 1, 2, 3, and 4 on the graph below. For each category, participants were asked to share more about the specific nature of items marked as moderate or serious, including when they first encountered the problem, if it is hindering their academic progress, if they have communicated the problem to someone in a position to address the problem, and what the result was. The survey was disseminated via multiple emails to all graduate students from the GSS email account and via Office of Graduate Studies social media accounts—both using an anonymous link. From Sept. 18 to Oct. 11, the survey received responses from 277 participants for a response rate of 19 percent.

Mean for Top 20 Needs/Concerns



TCU graduate students largely report having their needs met. None of the 41 items listed reach an average of “moderate problem” or higher, and only five items, on average, register as “minor problems.” The topmost needs/concerns of graduate students are the availability of parking (2.48), mental health (six of the top ten needs/concerns pertain to mental health), and finances, including stipends (1.88), off-campus housing (1.7), travel funding (1.69), fees (1.63), and tuition (1.49). Additional concerns include course scheduling and availability (1.65), commuting to campus (1.56), TCU health insurance (1.51), internships (1.49), grant seeking and writing (1.45), food options on/near campus (1.44), and childcare (1.43). The bottommost needs/concerns of graduate students are access to services from, and availability of, TCU Police and Public Safety (1.04), eldercare (1.05), misconduct or potentially criminal behavior of some kind by peer(s) or authority figure(s) (1.07), admissions requirements (1.14), and research compliance (IRB, IBC, IACUC) (1.14). The Office of Graduate Studies (1.18) and Graduate Student Senate (1.15) each ranked low on the needs/concerns of current graduate students.

We found that many of the needs/concerns of graduate students are interrelated. For example, one written response succinctly connects four Financial/Life items and one Health/Safety item: “While I’m grateful for my **stipend**, it doesn’t get close to covering the **cost of housing** for my family. As a result, I live far from campus and **commute** in. This makes me feel **less a part of the community** and forces me to fight undergrad students for **parking**.” This written response underscores the importance of addressing graduate-student needs/concerns holistically, or at least with an eye toward the ways in which quality improvements in one area can have positive effects in another.

Recommendations

The following are recommended actions that GSS and other personnel/units on campus can take to address some of the topmost concerns. These recommendations will be shared with the designated personnel/units as well as the associate deans of each school/college.

Parking

In lieu of the construction of a new parking garage, we recommend that the Police Department begin researching the possible impact of adjusting parking lot allocations and/or differentiating CM permits by proximity to campus: For example, certain lots for just undergraduates and certain for graduates or if “CM1” permits were for commuters whose local addresses were within 1-2 miles of campus and “CM2” permits were for more than 2 miles away. We recommend researching—if this information is not already known—how many students this would impact and how many of each permit, CM1 and CM2, should be issued to ensure a more reasonable availability of parking spaces. We recognize that proposing an administrative band-aid solution to what many graduate students likely perceive as a physical-space problem may seem insufficient; however, because parking availability is a problem that affects the whole campus community, not just graduate students, GSS will not be taking up parking availability as a primary mission this year, beyond this recommendation.

Mental Health

Mental health amongst graduate students nationwide is in “crisis,” according to recent studies.¹ Because six of the top ten needs/concerns of TCU graduate students are mental-health related, GSS takes this need/concern seriously and is preparing to take several actions this year to facilitate a greater sense of community and better mechanisms for advocacy. Some of these actions include the following:²

1. Conducting a follow-up survey specifically about mental health
2. Coordinating sign-ups for graduate-student intramural sports teams;
3. Coordinating sign-ups for multidisciplinary writing support groups;
4. Organizing at least two happy hours a semester;
5. Exploring the development or expansion of existing mental-health support groups; and,
6. Expanding GSS into an actual senate body, increasing the sense of community and solidarity amongst graduate students and increasing their visibility and collegiality amongst the campus community.

Because mental health is such a wide-ranging topic, we will be making this an ongoing GSS commitment for the 2019-20 academic year, laying the groundwork for future representatives to continue and expand on. We look forward to discussing and developing these work-in-progress initiatives with graduate students and others.

Travel Funding

We highly recommend that the Office of Graduate Studies begin, in coordination with GSS, exploring how we might go about increasing both the individual travel-grant award amounts (both domestic and international) and the overall budget for graduate-student travel grants, or finding ways to optimize the funds currently available (e.g., having defined fall budgets and spring budgets). The current number of students applying for travel funds is unlikely to decrease and the current award amounts are not nearly compensatory for actual travel costs. One survey participant explained that “the largest/best conference in our field sucks up the entire annual travel grant almost just for registration costs. Traveling to conferences to present, learn, and network is another career-influencing factor that's not superfluous or greedy to request.” Another participant said the \$400 domestic travel grant “only covers approximately half of the expenses for one conference,” explaining that attending the main conference in their field “costs \$200 for registration fees, flights are approximately \$300, and housing expenses are around \$50-100 dollars a night.” Another participant commented on the particularly low availability of travel funds for spring conferences: “There's just not enough funding for conference travel and it's almost impossible for people to get funding for conferences in May. By the time we get our confirmation that we will be speaking at the conference, funding is no longer available.” Travel grant money has run out earlier and earlier for the past two academic years. While we do not recommend a set amount for

¹ Evans, Teresa M. et al. “[Evidence for a Mental Health Crisis in Graduate Education.](#)” *Nature Biotechnology*, vol. 36, 2018, pp. 282-84. Levecque, Katia, et al. “[Work Organization and Mental Health Problems in PhD Students.](#)” *Research Policy*, vol.46, no. 4, 2017, pp. 868-79. For discussions of these studies, see the following: Pain, Elisabeth, “[Graduate Students Need More Mental Health Support, Study Highlights.](#)” *ScienceMag*, 6 Mar. 2018; Wedemeyer-Strombel, Kathryn R., “[Why We Need to Talk More about Mental Health in Graduate School.](#)” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 27 Aug. 2019.

² A number of these recommendations are based on suggestions from survey participants.

domestic/international travel or a set method for optimizing the available funds, we hope we can begin the process of determining new amounts that better meet the financial needs of graduate students doing research-related travel.

Stipends

To the Office of Graduate Studies, Office of the Budget, and all directors of graduate programs, we strongly recommend that stipends and aid packages for graduate students be increased, taking into consideration the aid packages of programs at competing universities, the rising cost of living in Fort Worth, and the stipend requirement for eligibility for the TCU health insurance subsidy. While not the topmost concern of graduate students, 51 percent of the written-response comments for the Financial/Life section of the survey criticize the current stipends in some way. Because many in leadership are already receptive to the idea of reconsidering the current stipend and aid levels, we would just like to reiterate that stipends and aid packages are never just that, but rather the ability to succeed academically, make use of health insurance, live with less anxiety, and plan for the future. One particularly eloquent written response illustrates the interrelatedness of graduate-student needs and the centrality of her stipend:

Admins brag that healthcare is such a win for grad students, but do not recognize that the costs even with insurance is still not affordable on our current stipends. Without a livable wage, we cannot afford to use medical services when we actually need to. Additionally, I've had to put off having children because I know medically I cannot afford to pay for their insurance or cover the cost of birth through the current student plan. If I could manage it, I know there is no childcare option on campus that would allow me to continue the program. I worry that if I were to become pregnant I would have to drop out of my program.

The stipend issue is not just about budgeting better or "part of being in graduate school" (as I've been told by more than one faculty member). The cost of living has risen exponentially in the metroplex and stipends aren't keeping up. Over 1/3 of my stipend goes to rent alone. I moved farther away in order to get cheaper rent, but now my commute is longer and parking is sparse on campus. I park near the stadium and take the shuttles but sometimes the shuttles run late, then I'm late to class or my academic meetings.

Once again, many of these issues would be greatly reduced by implementation of a living wage. I doubt that the campus can fix parking, rising housing costs, insurance, etc- by the time I finish my program. However not having to stress about summer funding every year, being able to afford to go to the dentist, or being able to save money for emergencies would greatly increase my ability to complete my degree and maintain my health.

We could not agree more. GSS heartily endorses the increase of graduate-student stipends and aid packages.

Questions

If readers of this report have any follow-up questions about the survey, our findings, or our recommendations and plans of action, please email at gss@tcu.edu or reach out to us on social media.