



## Cornell University Graduate and Professional Student Assembly

### ***Draft GPCI-Graduate and Professional Community Initiative:***

# Mental Health and Well-being

## Introduction

The 2013 GPCI asked for increased mental health and physical fitness resources that would enable graduate and professional students to manage work-related stress, as well as programming to promote the development of meaningful relationships. Mental health resources have increased since 2013 and demand for these resources has likewise increased. In this iteration of the GPCI document, we persist in requesting increased offerings for graduate and professional students, who often feel that their needs are deprioritized and subordinate to those of the much larger undergraduate student population. With the exception of late-night free workout specials now being offered on Friday and Saturday nights through the Cornell Fitness Centers, very little progress has been made on physical fitness and recreation goals laid out in the 2013 GPCI. While we know that the building of a large, centralized fitness center requires complicated, high-level strategic planning, we feel as though this future-oriented goal has been sidelined and that, additionally, little is being done to make Cornell Fitness Centers more usable in the present. In regard to programming, we have seen carefully crafted mentoring series, workshops on personal finances, and more subject matters. We highly commend those involved in creating effective programming and ask that the Graduate School continue funding and creating opportunities for organizing these valuable events for graduate and professional students. Additionally, the 2013 GPCI described the need for quantifiable data on students' quality-of-life. The Graduate School implemented the biennial doctoral experience survey starting in 2013 and publishes the data collected and a report following each survey. We would like to reference this survey in this 2019 GPCI to signify our continued demand for high quality data collection, data analysis, and public reporting. We also ask that students continue to receive notification and reminder emails from diverse bodies on campus to ensure high response rates. We also ask that survey questions continue to be analyzed for their efficacy: for how they adequately, or inadequately, address crucial components of the student experience including but not limited to personal life (family and housing), professional relationships (including the advisor-advisee relationship), career trajectories, skill development for career success, mental health and well-being, and more.

Results from the 2017 doctoral experience survey showed that about one-third of graduate students report their relationship with their advisor was an obstacle to their academic progress in the last year. It is widely understood that the advisor-advisee relationship is crucial for graduate student success during and beyond graduate school. Faculty advisors who serve as mentors and graduate students who may serve as future mentors need training on mentorship-related best practices. For example, graduate

students could benefit from programming that emphasizes defining and finding good mentorship, while faculty advisors might learn to better manage projects, people, and conflicts that arise in the workplace and the academy. When facing a conflict with their advisor, many graduate students do not know where to turn, and it is important that every student understand what resources are available to them, both in early stages of minor conflicts and late stages of major conflicts.

Furthermore, looking at data from the same survey shows that 44% of Cornell graduate students reported that their mental health was an obstacle to their academic progress in the past year and 48% said academic or social isolation was. While it may or may not be normal that most Cornell graduate students report feeling overwhelmed by all they have to do, we hope that an increase in support on a structural level that supports social and academic connectedness would result in an academic culture that is rigorous without the toll on student mental health and well-being. Here we request that data on graduate and professional students who take leaves of absences or leave their academic program prior to graduating also be collected and reported biennially.

## Objectives

### Objective 1: Improve support for graduate advisor-advisee relationships

*Rationale:* Approximately one-third of Cornell doctoral students stated that their relationship with their graduate advisor was an obstacle to the academic success in past year (2017 Graduate School Doctoral Experience survey). Additionally, the GPSA Student Advocacy Committee held a Dine & Discuss on graduate and professional student mental health, an event that clarified just how crucial the advisor-advisee relationships are to success and how detrimental it can be when these relationships become strained. It is well understood that graduate advisors play a major role in their students' ability to succeed and in their day-to-day well-being. We do not want to limit the diverse range of productive and positive mentoring styles, but instead intend to set expectations for both parties so that graduate students and advisors have improved communication and success. Much undue stress is placed on graduate students due to a lack of communication or misunderstandings of expectations. Because student surveys list advisor relationships as key factor for success in graduate school, we want to see the following changes:

#### *Actions:*

- a. Enforce education on and usage of the new Student Progress Report (SRP) system.
- b. When advisee-advisor relationships are established, require a first meeting where initial expectations of both parties can be discussed including, but not limited to: frequency of in-person meetings, best forms of communication, coursework load, approximate timeline of key milestones in the program (coursework, thesis proposal, A exam, B exam, number of publications expected before graduation), etc.
- c. Distribute a student-written document to guide incoming graduate students on how to choose an advisor and identify good (and thus also bad) advising dynamics
- d. Mandate training that equips faculty with best practices for managing and mentoring students, avoiding or resolving conflict, and sensitizes them to the needs of students from underrepresented minority groups, international students, students with disabilities, and students with families

- e. Encourage DGS's and faculty champions to have discussions with their fellow faculty members on the need to support the well-being and success of graduate students and encourage attendance at Notice and Respond trainings and programming offered by the Center for Teaching Innovation
- f. Increase support for graduate students that may be experiencing conflicts with their advisor in the following ways:
  - I. Hold the DGS and GFA of each field accountable to meet the minimum requirements of their role set by the Graduate School
  - II. Educate graduate students about the roles of the DGS and GFA in their field as part of their support network
  - III. Increase student knowledge of services available to them through the Ombudmans Office and the Graduate School and more

## Objective 2: Improve graduate and professional student access to physical well-being, recreation, and fitness

*Rationale:* Cornell's graduate and professional students cite physical exercise as the most common way they combat work-related stress. However, many barriers exist that limit students' ability to exercise regularly. Some of these barriers include costs, limited hours, decentralized facilities, limited transportation and parking, poor quality or quantity of equipment, inaccessibility, and overcrowding. While a lot of progress was made on certain objectives laid out in the 2013 GPCI document (such as increasing programming and data collection), very little progress has been made in regard to physical fitness. Furthermore, while we commend the hard work and progress on behalf of Cornell Health in terms of accessible on-campus healthcare, more can still be done to support the physical well-being of students.

### *Actions:*

- a. Include the building of a large, centralized fitness center into the campus strategic plan; this will ensure that gathering the funding—and other necessary resources to make any project of significant scale and cost happen—will be prioritized
- b. Until then, work with existing Cornell fitness centers and community fitness centers to get Cornell students joint or low-cost memberships and work on the following:
- c. Improve hours of fitness centers on evenings, weekends, and breaks, including summer and winter breaks
- d. Reinstate gym membership reimbursement, as also urged by the JED Foundation
- e. Offer fitness and outdoor recreation courses and events specifically targeted to graduate and professional students, year-round
- f. Have hours and announcements for all on-campus facilities, their hours, and any cancellations clearly posted online and in the Big Red Rec listserv
- g. Continue and consider expanding the "late night special" offer of free gym entry to graduate and professional students during less busy hours such as evenings and weekends
- h. Coordinate TCAT lines for Cornell Fitness Centers and Cornell Health
- i. Continue to encourage graduate and professional students to serve on the student health benefits committee and heed the committee's recommendations
- j. Increase promotion of disability as a type of diversity and support services offered by SDS to meet student needs in and outside of the classroom

- k. Allow students to request an interpreter or translator when scheduling appointments online using myCornellHealth
- l. Increase lighting on campus for all street crossings and commonly used walkways, sidewalks, and stairs; and work with officials in the community to improve lighting near TCAT bus stops and on routes walked by students
- m. Have more interdisciplinary social events with physical components targeted to graduate and professional students such as yoga, swimming, and climbing
- n. Make the Lindseth climbing center more inclusive for diverse graduate and professional students and consider funding for their Adaptive Climbing Initiative Course Proposal

### Objective 3: Improve programming, resources, and healthcare that can ameliorate overall graduate and professional student mental well-being and prevent mental health crises

*Rationale:* Doctoral students often cite the lack of structure in an academic program or department as a significant source of stress. While programming has improved since the 2013 GPCI document was published, and efforts have been made to clarify expectations for graduate and professional students, we would like to emphasize the value of these programs and the need for their maintenance and expansion. More than half of graduate and professional students surveyed in 2017 stated both that time management was an obstacle to their academic progress in the past year and that they were not receiving guidance or instruction on personal skills (such as time management and financial awareness) within or outside their degree program. Additionally, almost half of these doctoral students also reported they weren't getting critical skills for academic success such as dissertation writing or writing for funding proposals either within or outside of their degree program either. These personal and professional skills are crucial for building the self-confidence and success we hope to see in Cornell's graduate and professional students.

#### *Actions:*

- a. Increase programming that targets personal skills such as time management, organization, relationships, and finances
- b. Increase programming that targets professional skills such as how to write a dissertation, manuscript, or funding proposal
- c. Support Skorton Initiatives for mental health and develop a Peer-to-Peer (P2P) Notice & Respond Training specifically for graduate and professional students
- d. Expand existing resources by providing hours and locations that meet the needs of graduate and professional student populations both on and off campus (such as expanding Let's Talk hours and locations to the vet school, Cornell AgriTech, and Cornell Tech)
- e. Hire more CAPS counselors to be able to meet the rising demand for one-on-one counseling on-campus
- f. Mandate training for CAPS staff to learn skills on how to effectively support diverse students including but not limited to students of color, students from diverse class backgrounds, international students, LGBTQ+ students, and students with disabilities
- g. Increase access to on-campus psychiatrists and necessary medication
- h. Carefully manage off-campus referrals by following up with students about their ability to find off-campus care due to transportation and scheduling