Resolution # 69-19

The Graduate and Professional Student Association (GPSA)
The Pennsylvania State University

of the 69th Assembly
April 1, 2020

Be it decided by the Assembly of Elected Delegates,

Additional Recommendations to Address Graduate and Professional Student Challenges Involving COVID-19
In support of protecting graduate and professional student populations during the COVID-19 response

(Decided: [ Y / N / A ])

Nature of the Situation

The Pennsylvania State University and the Graduate School have taken important steps to assure graduate and professional student security during the COVID-19 crisis, but questions still remain on a number of important issues, including clarifications on grading procedures for graduate classes, additional time and financial support for graduate and professional students whose research and dissertation work have been disrupted by the novel coronavirus (including graduate assistant pay beyond April 2020), and a method to ask questions and hear directly from the administration. Below we outline the issues and steps that can be taken to remedy the issues.

Extended Contracts for Graduate Workers

As a result of the COVID-19 restrictions, many graduate and professional student researchers’ and assistants’ work has been disrupted. The university has made provisions for essential research, which are appreciated, but many graduate and professional students conduct non-essential research which is being interrupted due to an inability to regularly work in a lab, access library and archival resources, travel for dissertation work, and conduct research on human subjects, in addition to the
Faculty members are, of course, experiencing similar difficulties, and on March 20, 2020, Provost Jones assured faculty that “Penn State will be extending the provisional tenure period starting with the 2020-2021 academic year for all faculty in their pre-tenure probationary period.” Although graduate and professional students are experiencing many of the same stressors due to the restrictions from COVID-19, they have not received similar assurances that their contracts will be extended.

Several other universities have also initiated a freeze on the faculty tenure clock, including the Ohio State University, Rutgers, MIT, Yale, Stanford, and the University of Pennsylvania, among others. These institutions, alongside Penn State, recognize that it is difficult, if not impossible, for scholars to juggle the demands of teaching during a pandemic with their research as well as additional responsibilities and stressors that emerge during crises, including caring for children, the elderly, and vulnerable populations. All of these stressors and crises affect graduate and professional students as well, making it difficult for them to be successful in their research and teaching, complete their degrees, and find jobs. This is something that has already been acknowledged by the University of California at Berkeley where the university instituted a blanket one-semester increase in the maximum time-to-degree completion for PhD candidates\(^1\).\(^2\).

With the restrictions put in place to protect our community from COVID-19, instructors across the country have had to bear the brunt of transitioning the entire learning experience to virtual learning in a very short amount of time. This has made it increasingly difficult for graduate student teaching assistants to maintain productivity in their research and other scholarly activities. Many graduate students teach courses at University Park, ranging from small classes of less than 30 to large courses of over 200 students, with many listing graduate students as the primary instructor. The transition to remote learning brought on by the restrictions from COVID-19 have, in most cases, increased the amount of work and, most importantly, time needed to teach a course. Not only are the graduate student instructors now needing to host virtual class lectures and office hours, but a large portion of time is needed to figure out how to host quizzes and exams while still maintaining the integrity of the course. Instructors across the country are trying to determine the best method of making sure all of their students are supported equally, when many students do not have equal access to learning materials, broadband, and time in the face of this pandemic.

Because of the challenges listed above, instructors are spending large portions of time trying to find new and innovative ways to maintain the integrity of the course. This includes trying to find ways to transition hands-on classes like experimental labs, field-based labs, theater arts, and many more to an on-line platform. For example, chemistry graduate assistants have had to create virtual lab courses by filming the instructor completing the lab and sending the edited videos to students.

\(^{1}\) https://grad.berkeley.edu/covid-19-information-for-graduate-students/

The students are then able to observe the techniques and collect the data through the eyes of their instructor.

Graduate and professional students at Penn State need the security and peace of mind that faculty have been granted through the extension in the Promotion & Tenure probationary period, in the form of extensions of deadlines for milestones like dissertation submission to the Graduate School. In addition, given the current tenure-track faculty position hiring freezes at Penn State and many other universities, finding a job post-graduation will be increasingly difficult not only this year, but in the coming years. Graduate and professional students at Penn State need the security of at least an additional semester of funding and time to complete their degrees in order for them to adequately prepare for and find a position in what will now be an even more fiercely competitive job market.

**Guaranteed Pay**

Graduate and professional student workers often live paycheck to paycheck. Frequently, the source of their paycheck (research project, teaching appointment, etc.) is solidified months prior to the beginning of the spring/summer/fall term, thus bringing some stability to graduate and professional student workers. Penn State has ensured the pay of graduate student workers until April 30, 2020. Though we applaud this step, it falls short of even ensuring pay through the end of the Spring 2020 semester, let alone summer and fall appointments that are usually worked out at this point in the academic year. Graduate student workers that receive their stipends from departments, colleges, or other internal university funding are facing an anxious time where it is unclear if pay is secured for the remainder of the year. We implore the Graduate School to ensure funding guaranteed in the offer letter for current graduate student workers in addition to the extension to complete degrees asked for above. This will lift a heavy burden from graduate and professional students and allow them to focus on research and teaching--the two missions of Penn State.

**Altered Grading for Graduate Students**

Penn State has recognized that with the realities of COVID-19, many undergraduate students may not be able to perform to their usual standard. The result has been the implementation of new grading markers (SAT, V, Z) that undergraduate students can request once a course has been completed so that the pandemic does not negatively affect their GPAs. Similarly, Penn State Law has moved to a mandatory credit/no credit grading system. Other academic institutions like the University of California at Berkeley and the University of Maryland have instituted an altered grading scales for graduate students in response to the COVID-19 disruption³. However, no similar grading scale has yet been set for graduate and other professional students at Penn State.

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³ [https://grad.berkeley.edu/covid-19-information-for-graduate-students/](https://grad.berkeley.edu/covid-19-information-for-graduate-students/)

⁴ [https://gradschool.umd.edu/newsroom/satisfactory-fail-grading](https://gradschool.umd.edu/newsroom/satisfactory-fail-grading)
despite the fact that many members of this population are experiencing similar hardships, in
addition to frequently bearing the burden of shifting undergraduate instruction online.

Graduate and professional students’ personal and academic lives have been heavily disrupted by
the COVID-19 pandemic and with added stressors and duties, in addition to a frequent lack of
access to resources necessary to complete graduate coursework and research tasks and assignments
(labs, research experiments, library and archival research, etc.), it is unrealistic to expect graduate
and professional students to perform to the standard they usually do. Individual flexibility on the
part of faculty and departments is appreciated, but a formal policy is necessary to ensure uniformity
and prevent unfair penalties to graduate and professional students struggling to adjust to online
instruction and the needs and demands of crisis teaching and research, especially if they are in the
early years of coursework. Therefore, a graduate and professional student grading alternative
like the one offered to undergraduates should be put in place to ensure no graduate or professional
students’ GPA is negatively impacted by the COVID-19 crisis either in the immediate or far-
reaching future.

_Town Hall & Continued Communication_

While this resolution seeks to address serious issues for graduate and professional students, we
recognize that this list is not an all-inclusive one. Therefore, it is necessary for the Graduate School
to host a town hall specifically for graduate and professional students within the next 10 days.
Although the faculty/staff and student/parent town halls on March 24, 2020, addressed some
graduate and professional student concerns, questions and comments relevant to this community
were few, leaving many in the dark and confused about questions relevant to them and their work.
The best way to address these unanswered questions is to host a town hall by April 10, 2020, so
graduate and professional students can ask their specific questions and receive answers and
information directly from the administration.

Additionally, since this situation is continually developing and changing, it is imperative that
communication remains open and continuous between the Graduate School and the graduate and
professional students. This would be best done via additional town halls and additional e-mail
correspondence.

_Recommended Course of Action_

By adopting this resolution, the GPSA formally recommends that Penn State and the Graduate
School commit to the following actions, which we believe will best protect our most vulnerable
community members.
1. Extend the clock for graduate and professional student employees who have fixed funding by one year to match the tenure-track extension granted by the university for faculty. This allows graduate and professional students the time needed to re-tool courses that now need to be taught on-line and adjust to the university’s current work-at-home policy.

2. Guarantee pay for graduate and professional students with assistantships in accordance with their offer letters. Additionally, guarantee that departments provide summer funding at the same budget allocation as the previous academic year.

3. Implement a grading policy similar to that granted to undergraduates to account for the increase in responsibilities that fall on graduate and professional students during this period of transition to work-at-home and on-line learning. The policy for undergraduate grading groups letter grades A-C together. We suggest the grouping of letter grades A-B for graduate students. Many graduate programs require a grade of B or better to maintain good standing in the program. If graduate grading groups letter grades A-C together to form the new "P" grade, a graduate student would be unable to accept this grade due to program requirements of B or better. We suggest the policy considers a grade of C to stand alone as a "V" grade and then be considered for credit. D and F would then be categorized as "Z" and not be considered for credit.

4. Host a Town Hall relevant to graduate and professional students by April 10, 2020, and keep the line of communication open, including the prospect of additional town halls oriented towards graduate and professional students.

Respectfully submitted,

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President ___________________________________________________  Affirm  Veto

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The Graduate and Professional Student Association