**Mental and Physical Health and Well-being**

*Introduction*

Stress-related mental health issues are a common concern among the graduate and professional student population, with good reason. Graduate students may be thrown into a rigorous research environment with little preparation or feedback on their project or performance. The ‘self guided’ nature of graduate study may mean that students rarely see their advisors. Engineering and science students are cordoned off in small labs sometimes with less than ten students, and find few opportunities to meet others in different fields. Professional students face an intimidating admissions process and an intensive, competitive environment: law students are even pitted against each other in forced grade curves.

Graduate and professional students alike often find that they lose their self-sufficiency as they must shoulder income cuts, take out enormous loans, and subject themselves to the whims of their advisors, who may wield extraordinary power over their academic careers. Finally, the majority of graduate and professional students move to Ithaca from afar. They therefore lose their support networks even as they must manage their families and relationships from a distance or relocate their families to the local area, where jobs for spouses are scarce and daycare an expensive prospect.

Mental health was identified as a major concern in the 2007 Graduate Community Initiative and subsequent GPSAs have made mental health a priority. In the spring of 2012, the GPSA and the Graduate School hosted the Dine and Discuss event to discuss mental health and how graduate and professional students think about mental health resources. Almost 60 graduate and professional students attended the event and many ideas were gathered about how mental health resources can better be available to graduate and professional students.

**Objective 1: Provide mental health resources that give emotional and psychological support.**

**Objective 2: Support and promote graduate student physical fitness**

*Rationale:* Graduate students have responded that exercise is the most common way they combat stress and improve their mental well being (3). Exercise helps to alleviate mental and physical health problems that commonly affect graduate students. This includes improving sleep, enhancing mood, helping to alleviate anxiety and long term depression, and decreasing the risk of suicide, diabetes, heart disease and obesity. The University has an obligation to its students to foster a healthy community. Part of this is providing access to preventative health care (e.g. physical fitness). Currently Cornell Fitness Centers are not subsidized by the University. The result is a set of fitness centers that are over capacity and turning away students who pay for memberships. Graduate students have additional obstacles in participating in physical fitness including a demanding work schedule, access to transportation to and from the fitness amenities, the lack of activities during school breaks, and some graduate students’ desire to not exercise with undergraduates.

Actions:

1. Build a new fitness center to increase capacity so that all people who want to exercise at the fitness centers have the opportunity to do so. During peak gym hours, students cannot access the cardio machines and weight training areas because of they are too crowded. Cardio machine wait times can exceed 4 hours and sometimes students are not even allowed to enter the gyms because they have reached fire capacity.
2. The Cornell Wellness Program for faculty and staff should contribute the full student membership rate to the fitness centers. Currently, Cornell’s Wellness Program only contributes $69 dollars to the fitness centers per member, while students must pay $145.
3. The GPSA and Cornell should collaborate with TCAT to make sure that buses from core graduate student hotpots (look at living data) always stop at least one fitness center during all CFC hours of operation (especially breaks). Promote these bus routes so graduate students know about them
4. Create a free short term parking policy for fitness center users at the lots near the buildings during holiday, fall, winter, and spring breaks (in addition to the free nights and weekends policy)
5. Develop supplemental membership plans for graduate students that can extend membership to a set of private gyms when Cornell’s Fitness Centers are not in operation.
6. Include fitness amenities in the redesign of graduate student housing, so that graduate students who live in on campus housing have similar access to fitness centers as undergraduates who live in on campus housing.
7. The GPSA programming board should organize graduate student intramural sports teams so that graduate students can participate in intramural sports even if their department doesn’t have a team or they don’t want to join an undergraduate team.
8. The GPSA programming board should include physical activities into graduate student mixers and events.
9. Create fitness classes that restrict enrollment to graduate and professional students either through the Cornell Fitness Centers or physical education courses.
10. Any plan to build new amenities should consider graduate students needs, especially their ability to access the amenity.
11. The GPSA/GPSAFC should offer byline funding to the Cornell fitness centers in exchange for reduced membership prices or increased membership benefits to promote graduate student physical fitness. Every year since 2006, more than half of the graduate student population has purchased a fitness center membership. This is a higher rate of participation than most entities the GPSAFC funds.

**Objective 3: Support the development of work related skills that improve mental health**

*Rationale*: One source of stress and anxiety for graduate students results from a lack of time management, problems with advisor-advisee communication, and other work related skills.

Actions:

1. The Graduate School should continue offering their workshops on time management, navigating life as a graduate student, and advisor/advisee relationships
2. Expand and promote the available resources for solving graduate student - advisor conflicts
3. Every field’s Director of Graduate Studies, in collaboration with the graduate school, should develop a set of recommendations for their graduate students about which of the Graduate Schools’ resources are typically useful for the types of students in their field
4. The Graduate School should expand the availability of their thesis write ins to accommodate graduate students with differing schedules
5. The Graduate School should target procrastination at earlier stages in a graduate student’s career by expanding their concept of “thesis write ins” to include “thesis research ins” where students get together to quietly read, think, and problem solve.

**Objective 4: Support development of meaningful relationships through social events**

*Rationale*: At the 2012 Dine & Discuss focused on Mental Health “social events” was stated as the best way by which mental health can be supported for graduate and professional students (3). Furthermore, the third biggest challenge to healthy mental health was self reported as “difficulty making friends.”(3) This theme is an annual one. At a recent town hall, again there was an expressed desire for more social activity. Specifically, all students that participated agreed that more interdisciplinary mixers are needed to improve mental health & wellbeing as well as a sense of community (7). Cornell supports a lot of social events, however, there should be a focus on making it easier to disseminate this information.

Actions:

1. Improve events calendar to be searchable by activity type
2. Implement a click and add system to link emails about events with google calendar/RSVP
3. The GPSA and Big Red Barn should continue sponsoring events, but increase focus on “icebreakers” and “exercise focus events”
4. Considering the need for more social events has been voiced at two events, we ask that the Graduate School and the GPSA continue collecting data regarding the quality of established social events

**Objective 5: Provide support for the unique challenges faced by International Students when dealing with mental health & well-being**