

Final Summary Report
**Presidential Task Force
on Graduate Student Support**
June 2023



The Graduate School
University of Utah
201 South Presidents Circle, Room 302
Salt Lake City, Utah 84112

June 22, 2023

Dear Senior Vice President Montoya and President Randall,

In the spring of 2023, you [convened](#) a presidential task force to study compensation and housing resources for University of Utah graduate students. This month, the Presidential Task Force on Graduate Student Support completed its review and now releases this final advisory report to university leaders and our campus community. I propose that the report be posted on The Graduate School webpage.

Our task force was a diverse group representing every facet of the institution—from academic colleges and the Division of Student Affairs to The Graduate School and Auxiliary Services. The committee split into subcommittees dedicated to four areas of focus: national trends, issues currently facing graduate students, issues facing international graduate students, and the graduate student voice. In addition to weekly discussions, and internal and external analyses, the student-led subcommittee conducted a survey (520 respondents), and we conducted two town halls. We provided two preliminary progress reports in March and April. This summary report attempts to thoroughly capture input, discussions, and recommendations of the committee, survey, and external discussions.

This committee's work has already improved some financial and academic concerns for University of Utah graduate students thanks to your support and that of our colleges and auxiliary services. Beginning with the Fall 2023 Semester, the university has:

- Eliminated the 20 percent graduate student health insurance fee for all eligible graduate students
- Created a [temporary reduction](#) in rent for current housing residents moving to new graduate housing
- Increased all Graduate School-administered scholarship stipends to a minimum of \$24,000/9 months basis, pledging a minimum 15 percent increase
- Launched a campus “climate” survey of graduate students
- Conducted two townhalls of diverse student groups, focused on the task force directives
- Formed a graduate and professional student council
- Adopted a values statement and framework for strategic priorities advocating for graduate student wellness and financial well-being

While comprehensive and thoughtful, this is not intended to be a consensus report. It captures multiple perspectives and recommendations from independent committee members and groups. As such, this document is advisory only. That said, I am committed to reconvene an executive committee, from the whole committee, next spring to review progress made and set updated goals and strategies as the University of Utah continues its work to provide reasonable and practical support for our graduate students.

We also recognize that while this report is centered on the needs of our graduate students, many of the issues they face—particularly struggles with available and affordable housing—are also impacting our staff, faculty, postdocs, and undergraduate students. Many of our challenges are complex and can't be solved by the university alone, nor are the challenges we have the responsibility of any one unit on campus. As the newly appointed dean of The Graduate School, please know that my office and staff are committed to supporting ongoing dialogue and finding solutions to support the values and recommendations of this report. On behalf of the task force, thank you for providing us the opportunity to provide this input.

Sincerely,



Prof. Darryl P. Butt, PhD
Dean of The Graduate School

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Task Force Committee Membership

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Introduction

Graduate students enrich the lives and experiences of our undergraduate students and contribute in measurable ways to the career success of our faculty and staff. More than one-third of our graduate students are paid through assistantships, and they are often paid to teach or do research (typically 20 hours/week). Most of these students also have their tuition costs waived. Most other graduate students are not employed by the university but may cover the costs of their education, partially or wholly, through fellowships, student loans, or external employer contributions.

Recruiting and retaining talented and diverse graduate students is integral to the research and teaching mission of the University of Utah and to the advancement of the president's goals of becoming a top 10 public research university with an enrollment of 40,000 students and \$1 billion-plus in research. In the absence of a different educational model, to achieve more than \$1 billion in research funding, much of the anticipated increase in research productivity will require significant growth in our graduate student numbers—currently approximately 8,200 FTE (full-time equivalent). The funding for salaries, fellowships, tuition, and benefits for graduate students comes from a combination of external grants and contracts awarded to faculty, endowments and contributions from alumni and donors, and state funding from taxpayers and tuition. As we see growth in research and graduate student numbers, and as we seek to strengthen financial support and university services for these students, there will need to be concurrent growth in financial resources.

As is the case nationally, stipends and fellowships vary significantly by discipline, currently ranging between approximately \$16,000 and \$38,000 annually. At the low end, these salary levels have not kept up with the cost of living in Salt Lake City (\$37,000 for a single adult, based on the MIT living wage calculator). Further, the planned growth in research and student numbers, while benefiting the community, could also have the unintended consequence of further accelerating the cost of housing near the university. Achieving the president's goal of becoming a top 10 public university requires that our

offers to prospective graduate students and efforts to retain graduate assistants remain competitive. Competitive funding allows talented students to place a higher focus on their studies, research, and scholarly or creative endeavors, which enhances performance outcomes and makes time to degree more efficient. There is a national focus on graduate student housing, compensation, and quality of experience that requires we address the issues summarized in this report in order to remain a top tier institution.

This task force was charged by the Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs to assess and make recommendations that can lead to improved graduate student recruitment, research productivity, retention, completion rates, and student outcomes. The task force was given five tasks and asked to provide two preliminary updates and a final report. This constitutes the third and final report and incorporates information from the first two draft reports, as well as feedback obtained from a graduate student climate survey and two town halls.

This report is not a consensus report. It captures a variety of perspectives and suggestions to aid in implementing change across the university. It is intended to elevate awareness and provide insights into the challenges faced by graduate students and to provide a menu of options for improved support for this important, growing student population. This document, therefore, is intended to inform the priorities and actions of the colleges, The Graduate School, University Student Apartments, Student Affairs, the Vice President for Research, and the Office of the President.

Executive Summary

Driven by the issues described above, this task force was formed in spring 2023 and charged with the following:

1. Develop a framework of guiding principles for setting current and future levels of graduate student stipends and benefits in support of improved graduate student recruitment, research productivity, retention, completion rates, and student outcomes.
2. Review the current levels of graduate student stipends across campus in the context of the cost of living in the Salt Lake Valley. The committee will examine the level of graduate support for the university's different student demographics, including international students, married graduate students, and graduate students with families.
3. Review the impact of imminent increases in university graduate student housing rent on current graduate and professional students and make recommendations to address these impacts.
4. Review the inequity of graduate student stipends across campus and make recommendations for addressing this issue.
5. Make recommendations for future levels of graduate student stipends, benefits, and student support based on the above considerations.

In advance of this summary report, the task force submitted two preliminary reports to the Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs. Those reports informed and influenced early actions, including the following initiatives:

- Elimination of the 20% graduate student health insurance fee for all eligible graduate students (starting Fall 2023); thus health insurance is now fully covered for eligible students.
- Creation of a temporary reduction in rent for current housing residents moving to new graduate housing (February 2023).

- Increase of all Graduate School-administered scholarship stipends to > \$24,000/9 months (starting Fall 2023), with a minimum 15% increase in stipends.
- Launched a short survey of and conducted two town halls with graduate students to explore student experiences and seek recommendations (summarized in this report).
- Formation of a graduate and profession student advisory board. (Note: As a “Right to Work” state, Utah System of Higher Education (USHE) policy prohibits the university from recognizing collective bargaining per Rule 817, thus, this organization will serve as an important voice for graduate students.)
- Articulation of a values statement and framework for strategic priorities advocating for graduate student wellness and financial well-being, consistent with university goals and priorities, as summarized below.

Task Force Values Statement

The task force reviewed the national landscape on graduate student financial challenges, surveyed graduate students, assessed issues unique to international students, and looked at the impact of imminent increases in university graduate student housing rent on current graduate and professional students. Based on these assessments of the financial impacts on graduate students, a subcommittee of the task force submitted the following values statement as a framework and lens for consideration:

The task force affirms the university’s commitment to graduate students’ quality of experience.

Affordable and safe housing is a prerequisite for meeting the U’s goal to prepare a diverse student population for lives of impact as leaders and citizens.

The university’s role in ensuring access to safe, affordable housing options is essential to meeting the needs of graduate and professional students.

The University of Utah is committed to providing an inclusive and supportive environment to enable graduate students to achieve their academic and career goals while supporting the undergraduate mission of the institution.

Staying true to this commitment includes:

- Assisting graduate students in securing safe and affordable housing on campus and in the surrounding community,
- Ensuring that graduate students (RAs, GAs, and TAs) are compensated appropriately,
- Providing a place for graduate students and their families to have strong community and sense of belonging and support for non-academic activities that promote wellness,
- Valuing international students and their unique needs for housing support,
- Advocating for affordable housing,
- Engaging in meaningful and regular consultation with graduate students concerning graduate student needs,
- Recognizing that this is a national crisis but can only be dealt with locally,
- Assuring that there is truth in advertising when offering graduate positions to prospective students.

Summary of Findings, Discussions, and Recommendations

The task force divided itself into four working groups as follows:

- National picture of graduate education and trends
- Issues currently facing graduate students nationwide
- Issues faced by international students
- A student and Student Affairs-led study of issues facing graduate students (graduate student voices)

In addition, the task force collected documentation, reports, and news articles related to graduate and professional education at the U and nationwide. This resource material formed the focus of the task force's discussions and recommendations. The following summarizes both the collective discussions and the discussions of the working groups.

Emergent Issues and Definitions

Food and housing insecurity: Food and housing insecurity is manifested as inability to simultaneously afford housing, transportation, food, medical expenses, university fees and tuition, as well as ready access to funds for emergencies. Impacts include substandard or unhealthy housing, increased commute times, poor nutrition, neglect of health needs, and even homelessness.

Mental health issues: Mental health issues are manifested as anxiety, depression, loss of connection with peers and community, and physical impairments linked to mental health challenges. Some graduate students also report a feeling of powerlessness in resolving disputes with faculty mentors, leading to ongoing anxiety and potential depression. Impacts include reduced academic and research productivity, increased time to degree, increased attrition rates, and loss of support community.

Challenges of graduate and professional students with families: Graduate and professional students with families find additional challenges due to increased financial strain, including day care costs and strong pressures affecting family-work balance. Graduate students with families often must maintain primary employment outside the university to support their family, thereby causing continuing time conflicts with scheduled class times, meetings with faculty during regular business hours, and access to university student services.

Challenges faced by international students: International students are particularly impacted by an inability to secure initial housing due to lack of U.S. credit rating, limits on outside work or spousal work due to visa restrictions, and a related inability to secure student loans to meet financial shortfalls.

Discrimination and marginalized identities: Graduate and professional students report a lack of commitment to diversity and inclusion by faculty and staff in several departments, despite the continuing work being advanced by the university's Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. First-generation students report not receiving the level of advising necessary to navigate the complexities of university graduate education.

Broad Recommendations

The task force had numerous discussions and subsequent recommendations to aid in ameliorating the identified emergent issues, now and in the future, including:

- Improve student advocacy and governance through the new graduate and professional student council and existing Graduate Student Advisory Committees/Councils,

- Enable graduate student advocacy at the state and national level,
- Increase collaborative initiatives between The Graduate School, Student Affairs, and Residential Housing,
- Improve student support infrastructure to address graduate student needs,
- Increase recognition of the special needs of married/family, international, military, minority, and first-generation graduate students,
- Monitor and improve graduate student stipend and benefit support levels,
- Formalize and strengthen the collaborative linkage between The Graduate School, Vice President for Research, and Student Affairs in graduate and professional student support,
- Establish methods to ensure ongoing graduate student input in Student Affairs and graduate education,
- Establish regular and transparent processes for assessing, tracking, and improving graduate student support,
- Develop university-wide graduate student onboarding (virtual, before arrival),
- Improve graduate student grievance and resolution processes,
- Establish a Graduate School and/or Office of Faculty-administered graduate faculty status policy,
- Establish a graduate faculty mentor training program, potentially linked to graduate faculty status.

Summary of Discussions on Graduate Student Housing

The following highlights some of the pertinent actions that the university has already begun to take and also provides an outline of points of concern and recommended short-term and long-term actions. The committee recognizes that some recommendations could have negative consequences where funds are limited or elastic: Increasing TA stipends, for example, could result in a decrease in the number of students that can be supported. The following is intended to document those considerations and does not constitute the final recommendations of the committee, nor consensus.

Background on Graduate Student Housing Insecurity

- Inflation, rising costs, and shortage of housing in the Salt Lake Valley,
- Graduate student stipend increases have not kept up with inflation,
- Other student costs—including student fees, differential tuition, utilities, food, and health care insurance/co-pays—have been increasing,
- The university needed to condemn and replace substandard, 1960s-era on-campus housing,
- The 12-month cost of taxes, rent, and student fees are now greater than the student stipend for graduate students receiving the university's minimum 9-month tuition benefit,
- A single student receiving only the minimum tuition benefit over 12 months has approximately \$80 per week (or \$11/day) to live on after taxes, housing costs, and student fees. Other living costs include: food, clothing, books, housing deposits, furniture, transportation, laptop computer, cell phone, medicines, medical/vision/dental/mental health service co-payments, etc.
- Out-of-state students, particularly international students, are further challenged by policies and regulations that preclude them from housing eligibility prior to employment and/or establishment of credit.

Effects of Graduate Student Housing Insecurity

- Creates obstacles to attracting the best graduate students to the U,
- Exacerbates retention and completion barriers for URM graduate students and graduate students from vulnerable socioeconomic backgrounds,
- Increases student debt during and upon graduation,
- Requires students to live farther away from campus and complete longer commutes,
- Forces students to take second jobs, which result in a loss of focus on research, teaching undergraduates, reduced retention, and longer time to graduation,
- Impedes establishment of a broader graduate student living community, which is essential for graduate student health and wellness,
- Increases stress on graduate student population, including negative impacts on physical and mental health,
- Results in greater risk of graduate student homelessness.

Proactive Efforts Implemented to Mitigate the Effects of Rising Housing Prices

- Created a temporary reduction in rent for current single graduate student residents moving to new graduate housing when it opens in August 2023 (committed February 2023).
- Eliminated the 20% graduate student health insurance fee for all graduate students (starting Fall 2023).
- Increased all scholarship stipends administered by The Graduate School to > \$24,000/9 months (starting Fall 2023).
- Improved Student Health Insurance Plan (now covering 90% prescription cost) and added university-wide paid graduate student parental leave (in place Fall 2022).
- Several colleges provided one-time payments to students during the Fall 2022 Semester in order to alleviate the pressures of inflation and housing.
- Many departments provided one-time funds to support the initial added costs of moving to Salt Lake City for new graduate students.
- Colleges have started increasing stipends where feasible through existing funding sources, and by increasing funds requested for stipends through grants and contracts.
- The Graduate School is working with the Associated Students of the University of Utah (ASUU) and the Academic Senate to establish a Graduate and Professional Student Association to increase advocacy of graduate student concerns with central administration (by Summer 2023).

Recommendations for Further Mitigation of Graduate Student Housing Issues

- Bond for and construct phase 2 of the University Student Apartments' West Village family and graduate housing,
- Increase stipends for students in research assistant (RA) positions to a minimum of \$24,000/9-month contract, or \$32,000 annually for the Fall 2023 Semester across the university,
- Increase minimum stipends for teaching assistants (TAs) and graduate assistants (GAs) to \$20,000/9-month contract,
- Establish guidelines for annual increases in graduate student compensation, informed by cost of living in Salt Lake City,
- Extend the temporary freeze of the new campus graduate housing rates to allow stipend increases to catch up with recent increases in housing costs,

- Incentivize central administration to work in partnership with colleges to implement a 3-year bridge plan to fund TA stipend increases now (commitment rolls off over 3-year period—e.g., 75% subsidy support, 50% subsidy support, 25% subsidy support),
- Evaluate policies and mechanisms to enable graduate students in disciplines without the capacity to offer higher stipend levels to earn additional compensation through outside employment,
- Develop central fellowship funds through donor support to assist or partially assist with summer support for colleges with limited research funding,
- Establish partnerships with local real estate rental industry to create streamlined opportunities for graduate students on stipends to be able to rent housing without waiting to develop a U.S. credit score,
- Establish short-term housing opportunities on campus for incoming out-of-state students, providing a safe landing place for them prior to establishing employment history and credit,
- Establish an ongoing committee bridging The Graduate School, Student Affairs, Administrative Services, ASU Graduate Student and Professional Assembly, and other relevant stakeholders to meet annually to review graduate student housing costs, stipend levels, and graduate student support at the university.

Select Committee Reports

The National Landscape

As part of its due diligence, the task force looked at concerns facing graduate students across the country. Graduate students often experience profound challenges in accessing funding, mentorship, and building meaningful professional relationships (Griffin et. al., 2016). Further, some experience acute levels of trauma, anxiety, and financial stress adjusting to new academic, social, and cultural environments. This can be exacerbated by the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous nature of higher education worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. (Bowen *et al.*, 2019)

Stipends: Across the nation, universities are reckoning with the combined challenges of low graduate stipends and a pervasive lack of affordable housing. Graduate students are protesting and threatening to strike across the nation, especially in areas where the cost of living has far outpaced graduate stipend increases. Strikes and moves to unionize have resulted in concessions made to increase all graduate student and post-doctoral stipends:

- <https://www.chronicle.com/article/a-monthlong-strike-yields-a-big-pay-raise-for-temples-grad-students-but-rifts-remain>
- <https://www.chronicle.com/article/graduate-students-win-pay-raises-as-union-efforts-surge>
- <https://www.chronicle.com/newsletter/daily-briefing/2023-03-13>
- <https://www.chronicle.com/article/grad-students-and-uc-santa-cruz-chancellor-say-strike-will-have-lasting-impact-on-higher-ed-they-disagree-on-what-that-will-be/>
- <https://www.chronicle.com/article/grad-students-win-faculty-support-as-strike-over-stipends-continues-at-santa-cruz/>
- <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/faculty-issues/labor-unionization/2023/04/17/rutgers-unions-suspend-strike-after-big-gains>

Food and Housing Insecurity: Across the nation, graduate students have been experiencing food insecurity (39%), housing insecurity (49%), and homelessness (17%). For students with families, those percentages are even more staggering: food insecurity (53%), housing insecurity (68%), and homelessness (17%). These statistics are from fall of 2019 and are likely higher post-pandemic. Safe, affordable, and consistent

housing are basic support systems that universities should strive to provide to ensure the recruitment and retention of graduate students.

Table 1. “Disparities in basic needs insecurities by enrollment status.” From *#Real College Survey 2020*, C. Baker-Smith, *et al.*

	Number of Students	Food Insecurity, %	Housing Insecurity, %	Homelessness, %
College Enrollment Status				
Full-Time (12+ cds)	100,557	39	43	17
Part-Time (< 12 cd)	43,258	41	54	16
Level of Study				
Undergraduate	114,018	40	45	17
Graduate	17,658	39	49	17
Non-Degree	12,043	35	46	16
Years in College				
< 1	46,270	36	39	17
1-2	49,925	41	47	16
3+	47,585	42	52	17
Parenting Student				
Yes	22,993	53	68	17
No	116,680	37	42	17

Mental Health: Historically, the mental health of college students has received disparate rates of attention. Until very recently, the mental health challenges of undergraduate students received more publicity, institutional response, and resources. The topic of mental health is still largely stigmatized in academia. Graduate students still require mental health support as they report higher rates of stress and mental health issues, including depression, that significantly impact the progress they make in graduate school. Conflicting personal and family lives, greater academic and research demands, and financial concerns all are factors that add stress to the lives of graduate students and can impact their mental health while they complete their degrees.

In national survey data from the American College Health Association conducted in the spring of 2019, 23.9% of graduate students reported that stress had impacted their academic performance, and 41% reported feeling too depressed to function at some point. Additionally, 63% of the graduate students felt overwhelmed, and more than 58% indicated that they felt “very lonely” (Kaler, 2019).

Unique Challenges for Students with Families: Finding affordable childcare, caring for one’s family, managing time constraints, balancing professional and personal lives, and maintaining relationships are all topics that cross the minds of graduate students who have children and/or additional family responsibilities before starting graduate school. To some, it is almost as if these challenging questions multiply after they have begun their studies. The reality is, many graduate students must work full time to be able to care for their loved ones. Despite the amount of work that graduate students have to complete, not every graduate student has the luxury to choose between working and schooling, unfortunately; therefore more has to be done to address these unique challenges that they face (Schlemper, 2011).

International Student Challenges: As the world continues to become increasingly globalized, the demand for international students' education has also increased. During the 2016-17 school year, there were 1.08 million international students studying in the United States, with graduate students making up a good share of this number (Rodriguez, 2019). International graduate students are able to develop critical thinking skills and writing skills, as well as having a multicultural experience from studying in the U.S. However, they also face significant challenges. Apart from the culture shock that is commonly experienced by international students, many face additional challenges such as academic differences, language barriers, lack of support in their department, and also the struggle to find a sense of belonging. All of these contribute to how well they integrate and transition into their new environment, and the outcomes on their mental health and well-being.

Discrimination and Marginalized Identities: Graduate students who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) often face discrimination and oppression during their time in academia. This takes a toll on them emotionally and academically as it adds to the already stressful and demanding nature of graduate education. There are ongoing efforts to increase the enrollment of BIPOC students in graduate school, doctoral programs specifically; however, more work has to be done to understand the daily experiences of these students to ensure that they are not continually discriminated against.

Some of the struggles that those with marginalized identities face include trouble integrating and forming meaningful connections and relationships with professors and peers, trouble being understood as people, dealing with racial micro and macro aggression and bias, and heightened imposter syndrome. Challenges in mental health also exist. Although the data is limited, research shows that graduate students from underrepresented populations experience more mental health challenges than their peers, just as the case is in undergraduate education (Kaler, 2019; Gildersleeve, 2019).

Actionable Items for the University of Utah

The task force recommends that the university increase graduate stipends in a significant way to align with current cost of living expenses within the greater Salt Lake City area. Wherever possible, additional funding sources should not place the financial burden back on students in the form of tuition increases, fees, or the like. At least annually, the U should convene a graduate student stipend committee to assess current funding levels and provide additional recommendations to the Office of the President.

- Focus on prevention, rather than emergency response.
- Increase knowledge of campus and community resources and distribute among graduate advisors and directors of graduate studies.
- Provide affordable on-campus housing to provide real student support and focus on building community across academic cohorts.
- Recognize issues of discrimination for graduate students from marginalized groups and address at the institutional level. Work in collaboration with the [Racist & Bias Incident Response Team \(RBIRT\)](#).
- Support the Graduate Diversity Office in efforts to cultivate a sense of care and relationality with graduate students.
- Explore how The Graduate School can work more closely with the Office of the Dean of Students to educate academic departments about resources.
- Create a centralized list of resources, including the Basic Needs Collective and other food and housing resources.
- Develop a food scholarship on behalf of graduate students who experience food insecurity.

The Student Voice

The goal of the Graduate Student Voices Subcommittee was to recognize, value, and prioritize the “student voice” when considering and determining the actions and recommendations proposed by the task force. Our subcommittee is guided by attention and commitment to the principles of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion, and is premised on the notion of: “*Nothing about us without us.*”

The task force aims to understand the needs of graduate students at the U and to provide recommendations and actions to address those needs. We believe it is imperative to have graduate student representation and to provide opportunities to meaningfully capture and include the voices and perspectives of graduate students themselves. Without including the graduate student voices and perspectives now and moving forward, this task force is at risk of not accomplishing its purpose, by not identifying the most salient issues and proposing solutions that do not meet the needs of graduate students.

Based on the results and findings from the work of this subcommittee, after reviewing the student survey and other sources of input, we recommend that the University of Utah prioritize the following types of actions and supports to improve the status of graduate students at the institution. The first six recommendations are specific actions that can be implemented to ensure that the voices and perspectives of graduate students are included in decision-making processes. We recommend that the University of Utah:

1. *Support the graduate and professional student council and Graduate Student Advisory Committees/Councils (GSACs).*

In April 2023, ASUU, the U’s student government, passed a joint resolution supporting the formation of a graduate student council. Over the summer, the council will convene to determine what the duties and responsibilities of its members will be, how long a term of appointment shall last, and how it will interact with various stakeholders on campus (individual departments/schools’ GSACs, ASUU, etc.).

The council will be comprised of graduate and professional students from all colleges at the U. It will serve as a representative body to advocate on behalf of all graduate students and as a resource for feedback on matters related to graduate students. In the context of this task force and its assignment, advocating for this council and GSACs is relevant. To ensure the success of the committees and elevate their importance, we recommend that the University of Utah:

- a. Recognize the council and GSACs as partners in shared governance that specializes in representing graduate student voices and perspectives. Establish clear mechanisms separate from ASUU and effective processes for the council to engage in decision-making with full voting rights. This includes, but is not limited to, the Academic Senate, graduate and professional student council, and Board of Trustees.
- b. Establish regularly scheduled meetings where the council can consult with and be involved in decision-making with the dean of The Graduate School and university leadership in good faith. The agenda of these meetings should be co-created by student leaders and university leaders so that all parties can share information with one another proactively.
- c. It is expected that ASUU will provide sufficient funding to support the council’s activities. The council will be responsible for meeting the requirements of an ASUU organization and for submitting the required requests for support to ASUU annually.
- d. Provide the council with access to administrative support from The Graduate School, as approved by The Graduate School’s dean.
- e. Recognize that participation on the council is protected. Faculty and administration cannot prevent graduate or professional students from participating in this council or penalize them for

actions the council has taken, so long as these actions abide by university policy and state and federal law.

- f. Colleges and departments, possibly through their graduate studies programs, should regularly consult with their graduate students and GSAC members to solicit feedback on financial matters and other support issues.
- g. Provide web or other media support through The Graduate School so the council has an online platform to share information transparently.

2. *Create and maintain effective communication with and about student-related matters.*

While it is important to actively seek and include the voices of graduate and professional students while doing this work, it is also important that the University of Utah prioritize communication about the progress of the task force and other graduate school matters (i.e., policies, resources, supports, events) with current graduate and professional students.

- a. Provide orientation and clear expectation to students that email (umail) is the primary channel used by the university for communication to and about graduate and professional student-related matters. Students are expected to check their university emails regularly and frequently.
- b. Develop a web form, to be housed on The Graduate School website, where graduate and professional students can ask questions, provide comments, or report issues on an ongoing basis. Monitoring and responding to web form submissions would require some dedicated FTE/responsibility from an administrative staff member within The Graduate School's office. Comments should be reviewed in joint meetings with the graduate and professional student council.
- c. Purchase a subscription that would allow occasional announcements and information to be shared with the graduate student body via text messaging. We recommend that this is in place prior to the start of next academic year in August 2023.
- d. The Graduate School will encourage academic programs to provide detailed communications to their students regarding student support (assistantships, fellowships, etc.) through regular contracts and annual compensation or support update letters that highlight stipends, tuition support, and other benefits.

3. *Foster greater representation of graduate student perspectives at state and federal levels.*

Work together with the university's Government Relations Office to give graduate students the opportunity to include their stories and perspectives, and to advocate at the state/federal level for positive change and opportunities to support graduate education. University-sponsored training and workshops could help interested graduate students both learn about and engage in appropriate mechanisms for communicating with local and state government leaders. This will serve as a mechanism to provide a voice to graduate students, as well as a professional development opportunity.

4. *Ensure graduate student perspectives in housing planning.*

Work together with the University Student Apartments office to include a graduate student representative from the graduate and professional student council who will be included in discussions about on-campus graduate student housing. For example, as the university decides how to alter its master plan with the recent acquisition of more of Fort Douglas, the council should be given an opportunity to provide input and insights on the use of that space for on-campus graduate student housing. The university should:

- a. Assess the demand of housing needs following the opening of new graduate student housing units that are based on the new rental rates.

- b. Investigate potential partnerships between Housing Residential Education or University Student Apartments and private property management companies.
- c. Continue to invest in additional on-campus housing for graduate and professional students.
- d. Invest in resources and services within the new main campus village that are relevant to graduate and professional students, including barber shops and hair salons, childcare, a campus supermarket, social spaces, local/small business restaurant options, etc.
- e. Intentionally use common and green spaces within the Sunnyside University West Village for community-building programming.

5. *Collaborate more effectively with the Division of Student Affairs.*

To understand the needs and perspectives of graduate students, The Graduate School should work closely with the Division of Student Affairs to conduct an end-of-year survey of graduate students. The survey should include metrics such as: graduate student satisfaction, belonging, basic needs, financial and mental well-being (including access to health care on campus and the Graduate Subsidized Health Insurance Plan, or GSHIP). In addition the survey should include questions to assess when and why they are on campus. For example, education and business grad students tend to, by majority, have evening classes as they balance work and school. They also have limited bandwidth to engage in traditional campus programming as a result, and have limited access to student services on an 8-5 M-F model.

This survey should also include qualitative questions focused on understanding graduate students' insights, perceptions, and experiences around their success and well-being. Findings from this survey should be analyzed and visualized into Tableau (or other graphic) dashboards and reports, posted on the task force web page as an ongoing initiative, and tracked from year-to-year to see if progress is being made to improve the status and well-being of graduate students over time. The dean of The Graduate School should maintain regularly planned meetings with the Vice President of Student Affairs (or designees of the dean and VPSA) to discuss alignment of resources and collaboration. Additionally, the task force should:

- a. Continue to analyze the results of the initial survey used to gain insight for the report. These results may not be representative of the entire graduate student population but are a valuable source of data that represents the types of challenges our students face.
- b. Share an executive summary on The Graduate School's website, so students are able to track progress the university is making and high-level recommendations.
- c. Share student engagement data with academic colleges and departments.
- d. The Graduate School and/or the task force should use the survey results themes for the development of any future institution-wide surveys.
- e. The Graduate School will also use survey results to improve customer service and coverage concerns with GSHIP insurers, the Student Health Center, etc., and provide regular communications to students about prescription reimbursements and GSHIP to help make more cost-efficient use of their insurance.
- f. Provide intentional marketing using language specific to graduate and professional students on resources and services provided by Student Affairs. Link to relevant Student Affairs websites from The Graduate School pages.

6. *Prioritize graduate student employees as an essential contributor to the university's mission in state-funded salary allocation decisions.*

Each year, the president's budget letter should include specific language recommending or directing how the state-funded merit pool will be used to support graduate student stipend increases (e.g., the percentage to be used for graduate stipends). The language might recommend that colleges:

- a. Allocate some of the annual merit pool to increase graduate student stipends. The university has too wide a gap between the highest paid and lowest paid employees.
 - b. Include advocacy for state-funded graduate student stipend increases in the annual budget request to the state legislature. The Government Relations Office should work with The Graduate School to include compelling data from the graduate student surveys as evidence to support the requests. These requests should be joint ventures between the Government Relations Office and their equivalent at other Utah universities. These data should also reflect an argument for the potential to retain graduate students in the state of Utah due to their potential for enriching the statewide workforce.
7. *Enhance funding structures and resources that contribute to all graduate and professional students' success.*
- a. University leadership and administrators should consider prioritizing and approving budget requests that enhance stipend support/growth for graduate students. This is especially important for both continuing and new graduates, research, or teaching assistants.
 - b. Increased institutional support to student health insurance that assists with reducing or eliminating medical or health-related reimbursements. This is especially important given the financial decisions graduate and professional students need to make that affect housing, transportation, meals, etc.
 - c. The Graduate School should consider and/or work with ASUU and the Vice President of Research to increase the level of travel assistance to conferences and professional development opportunities. This may not be a blanket allocation per student, but rather a process that they should apply to receive support in the form of grants and awards. The Graduate School should also analyze usage data by student program to address equity issues and empower broader usage of travel and professional development assistance awards. (Note, The Graduate School has a travel grant program, but not all programs leverage these funds. The program currently requires a match from the academic unit.)
 - d. The Graduate School should consider a university-wide Graduate and Professional Student Symposium that highlights students' contributions to the university and their programs of study/fields. Consider providing awards (with funding) for exceptional presentations.
8. *Enhance infrastructure to address graduate students' basic needs. Increase institutional or donor funding support that bolster resources that address graduate students' basic needs.*
- a. Basic Needs Collective. At the end of fall 2022, 55% of students who utilized BNC for support were graduate students. As of April 2023, 45% of students identified as graduate students. The BNC has limited resources, with the primary request by graduate students being financial assistance. Additional resources would allow this need, among others, to be met within specific criteria.
 - b. Financial Wellness Center. Additional investment in this on-campus service can provide graduate students the opportunity to further build their financial literacy skills and receive hands-on counseling and financial planning. An additional certified financial counselor should be assigned to the graduate student population.
 - c. Career Success Initiative. The evolution of the Career Professional Development Center into the Career Success Initiative will be an asset to the career success of all students. The strategic plan should outline strategies for engaging graduate students and include coaches assigned to graduate and professional students. This plan should also include a communications strategy for reaching and supporting students.
 - d. Graduate student mental health counseling. Much has changed since the COVID-19 pandemic including the expansion of services around mental health and the re-imagining of the University

Counseling Center. Student Affairs should increase awareness campaigns that specifically target graduate and professional students. This campaign should address myths and falsehoods being communicated to graduate students by their peers and advisors. Additionally, The Graduate School should promote mental health resources available through GSHIP.

- e. Childcare incentives. The University should work with the Center for Child Care and Family Resources to develop an incentive program for graduate and professional students.

9. *Enhance graduate student support.*

The Graduate School has a chance to enhance student support services and provide holistic student support with other offices on campus through collaboration.

- a. We strongly encourage the university to create a Graduate Student Support Hub that includes a Graduate Student Advocate who meets with graduate students and proactively addresses their concerns. This advocate can also help to escalate concerns that require greater scrutiny and attention. Through a partnership with ISSS, explore the creation of an International Graduate Student Liaison. This individual can meet with international graduate students prior to coming to the U and while they are enrolled at the U to maintain their international status and advise them accordingly. Both positions should be full-time (1.0 FTE) professionals.
- b. Encourage faculty to report graduate students of concern to the Office of the Dean of Students. The Graduate School should partner with the ODOS on an educational program for faculty, program chairs and deans. ODOS may already do so in some ways, but it is important to emphasize that the office supports graduate students. While ODOS does currently employ case managers to serve this function, we recommend that a graduate and professional student-specific case manager be appointed for more efficient connections between students and ODOS and faculty/departments and ODOS.
- c. The Graduate School should provide programming resources and suggestions to academic departments, colleges, and schools that build community among enrolled students.
- d. Develop a strategic plan to address equity, diversity, and inclusion concerns within graduate and professional programs. The Graduate School should consider greater investment in its Diversity Office beyond the existing associate dean position.
- e. Increase intentional messaging to graduate students regarding reporting harassment and discrimination.

Summary

Graduate students at the University of Utah enrich the lives of undergrad students and contribute to the career success of faculty and staff. There is no doubt the university benefits from recruiting and retaining talented graduate students. And these students need a healthy environment so they can graduate on time, be successful, and use their degrees for good in the world. This task force was formed to help find solutions to the growing financial burdens these students face as a result of rising housing and living costs.

To that end, the task force committee reiterates its final recommendations to the University of Utah administration as follows:

- Eliminate the current 20 percent health insurance fee to bolster student take-home pay.
- Create a temporary reduction in rent for graduate students currently living in the Medical Plaza moving to new U graduate housing.
- Beginning fall 2023, grad student stipends will increase to at least \$24,000/9 months. Students on partial student grad student stipends will also receive proportionally scaled increases.

- Improve student insurance plan to cover 90 percent of prescription cost and add university-wide paid graduate student parental leave (implemented fall 2022).
- Colleges or departments will be encouraged to provide one-time payments to help incoming students relocate to the U.

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The following articles have been published about the task force in the University of Utah’s main communications channel, @theU:

March 3, 2023: “University offers flexibility, more affordable options for graduate student and family housing” (<https://attheu.utah.edu/facultystaff/university-offers-flexibility-more-affordable-options-for-graduate-student-and-family-housing/>)

April 13, 2023: “Improving the graduate student experience at the U” (<https://attheu.utah.edu/students/presidential-task-force-on-graduate-student-support/>)

Appendix: Graduate Student Campus Climate Survey

Quantitative Analyses ($n = 520$)

To inform the work and recommendations of the task force, we conducted a brief climate survey of graduate students with a five-item confidential survey. As of April 11, 2023, we received 520 completed responses, representing approximately 6% of the total graduate and professional student body. The survey included both quantitative and qualitative questions. While the results may not be fully representative of all graduate students, given only 6.3% responded, the results provide a snapshot of how our graduate students are (and, in many cases, are not) meeting their basic needs, and how they are (and, in some cases, are not) coping well with the challenges they are facing.

While the survey attempted to address issues directly related to the scope of this task force, it did capture other information and insights. For example, sense of belonging became a priority to align with larger institutional efforts on understanding belonging in five dimensions: feeling understood, social connectedness, academic engagement, post-graduation, and personal connection to the University of Utah. The belonging items in this survey were originally administered to undergraduate students at the University of Utah earlier in Spring 2023. We conducted one independent t-test to explore the differences in mean scores between undergraduate and graduate students. Other analyses included independent t-tests and one-way ANOVAs (analysis of variance), to understand if differences existed based on domestic or international student status, number of dependents, and budget shortfalls in belonging.

Sense of Belonging Between Graduate Students and Undergraduate Students

Our independent samples t-test indicated there were statistically significant differences between graduate students and undergraduate students for their perceptions around sense of belonging. However, based on the threshold for effect sizes (Cohen, 1988), those that were calculated for differences in mean scores were very small, indicating minute differences in sense of belonging between undergraduate and graduate students. Table 2 below shows the difference in sense of belonging mean scores between undergraduate and graduate students.

First, graduate students ($M = 3.17$, $SD = .94$) rated their feelings of being understood by the university slightly lower than undergraduate students ($M = 3.53$, $SD = .97$); $t(1905) = 7.26$, $p \leq .001$, two-tailed, $\eta^2 = .03$ indicating a very small effect size. Second, graduate students ($M = 3.62$, $SD = .93$) rated their feelings of preparedness for life after college slightly higher than undergraduate students ($M = 3.49$, $SD = .99$); $t(1897) = 2.62$, $p < .01$, two-tailed, $\eta^2 = .003$, which is a very small effect size. Finally, graduate students ($M = 3.59$, $SD = .96$) rated their feelings of being accepted at the university slightly lower than undergraduate students ($M = 3.68$, $SD = .99$); $t(1902) = 1.69$, $p \leq .05$, two-tailed, $\eta^2 = .000$, which was a very small effect size.

Table 2. Difference in sense of belonging mean scores between graduate and undergraduate students

Sense of Belonging	Graduate		Undergraduate		t	Sig.	Eta squared
	M	SD	M	SD			
I feel understood by the U.	3.17	.94	3.53	.97	7.26	.001*	0.03
I feel socially connected at the U.	3.20	1.05	3.12	1.11	1.41	.07	.001
I feel academically engaged at the U.	4.09	.84	4.06	.87	.64	.26	.0002

I feel my time at the U has prepared me for life after college.	3.62	.93	3.49	.99	2.62	.01*	.003
I feel accepted at the U.	3.59	.96	3.68	.99	1.69	.05*	.0004

Note. Scale was (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree); *statistically significant; Effect size (.01 = small effect, .06 = moderate effect, .14 = large effect).

Sense of Belonging for Domestic and International Students

As we began work on the task force, a major concern emerged through our initial discussions due to negative experiences by international students prior to engaging in this survey. This concern gave rise to another subcommittee on the task force; however, international graduate student voices and perspectives remained a core point of exploration for our subcommittee. This encouraged an analysis of the differences in sense of belonging between international and domestic graduate students (seen in Table 3). Our independent sample t-tests indicated that there were no statistical differences in graduate students’ perceptions of sense of belonging based on their international or domestic status. Given the lack of significance in this quantitative analysis, we wanted to gain additional insight through our qualitative comments. *We believe it is warranted to pursue qualitative methods for collecting additional insight, perceptions, and experiences of international graduate students to further supplement and bolster our quantitative findings.* As a result, we can reach more targeted conclusions about how to best support international graduate students beyond their sense of belonging at the university.

Table 3. Difference in sense of belonging mean scores between international and domestic graduate students

Sense of Belonging	Domestic		International		t	Sig.	Eta squared
	M	SD	M	SD			
I feel understood by the U.	3.14	.91	3.28	1.01	1.43	.08	.001
I feel socially connected at the U.	3.17	1.06	3.31	.98	1.36	.10	.003
I feel academically engaged at the U.	4.08	.81	4.09	.92	.06	.48	.000
I feel my time at the U has prepared me for life after college.	3.59	.92	3.71	.96	1.09	.14	.002
I feel accepted at the U.	3.55	.97	3.70	.92	1.49	.07	.004

Note. The scale for sense of belonging was (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree); Effect size (.01 = small effect, .06 = moderate effect, .14 = large effect).

Reliability and Overall Sense of Belonging

To generate an overarching mean score for sense of belonging for our ANOVA tests (based on the five questions asked in the pilot survey) a composite measure was created. This composite score was validated through a reliability analysis that confirmed that the five sense of belonging questions had good standards of reliability ($\alpha = .84$). See corresponding Table 4 for confirmatory factor loadings.

Table 4. Item Factor Loadings and Reliability Coefficient for Overall Sense of Belonging Measure

Primary Sense of Belonging Measures	Factor Loadings	Reliability
I feel understood by the University of Utah.	.70	.84
I feel socially connected at the University of Utah.	.59	
I feel academically engaged at the University of Utah.	.60	
I feel my time at the University of Utah has prepared me for life after college.	.63	
I feel accepted by the University of Utah.	.71	

Overall Sense of Belonging and Number of Dependents

Next, we considered another sub-population of concern: graduate students with dependents. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) examining overall sense of belonging for graduate students by number of dependents indicated that there were no statistically significant differences for graduate students by number of dependents. The findings can be seen in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Mean differences in graduate students' sense of belonging by number of dependents

Number of Dependents	Overall Sense of Belonging		
	N	M	SD
0	361	3.55	.71
1	52	3.50	.77
2	49	3.47	.63
3	17	3.67	.68
4+	22	3.60	.87

Note. Sense of belonging scale was (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree).

Overall Sense of Belonging and Budget Shortfalls

We continued our analyses, seen in Table 6, investigating differences between frequency of budget shortfalls with perceptions around sense of belonging. A one-way between groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to explore how graduate students' frequency of budget shortfalls influenced their perceptions around their overall sense of belonging. Participants were divided into five groups according to their frequency of budget shortfalls (Group 1: Weekly; Group 2: Monthly; Group 3: Semesterly; Group 4: Never; Group 5: Other). There was a statistically significant difference at the $p \leq .001$ level in students' sense of belonging in four of the groups representing frequency of budget shortfalls: $F(497, 4) = 5.98$. The effect size calculated using eta squared was .05, which was in between a small to moderate effect (Cohen, 1988). Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that sense of belonging mean scores for Never ($M = 3.75, SD = .61$) were significantly higher for graduate students than mean scores for Weekly ($M = 3.27, SD = .76$), Monthly ($M = 3.54, SD = .68$), and Semesterly ($M = 3.62, SD = .72$).

Table 6. Mean differences in graduate students’ sense of belonging by frequency of budget shortfalls.

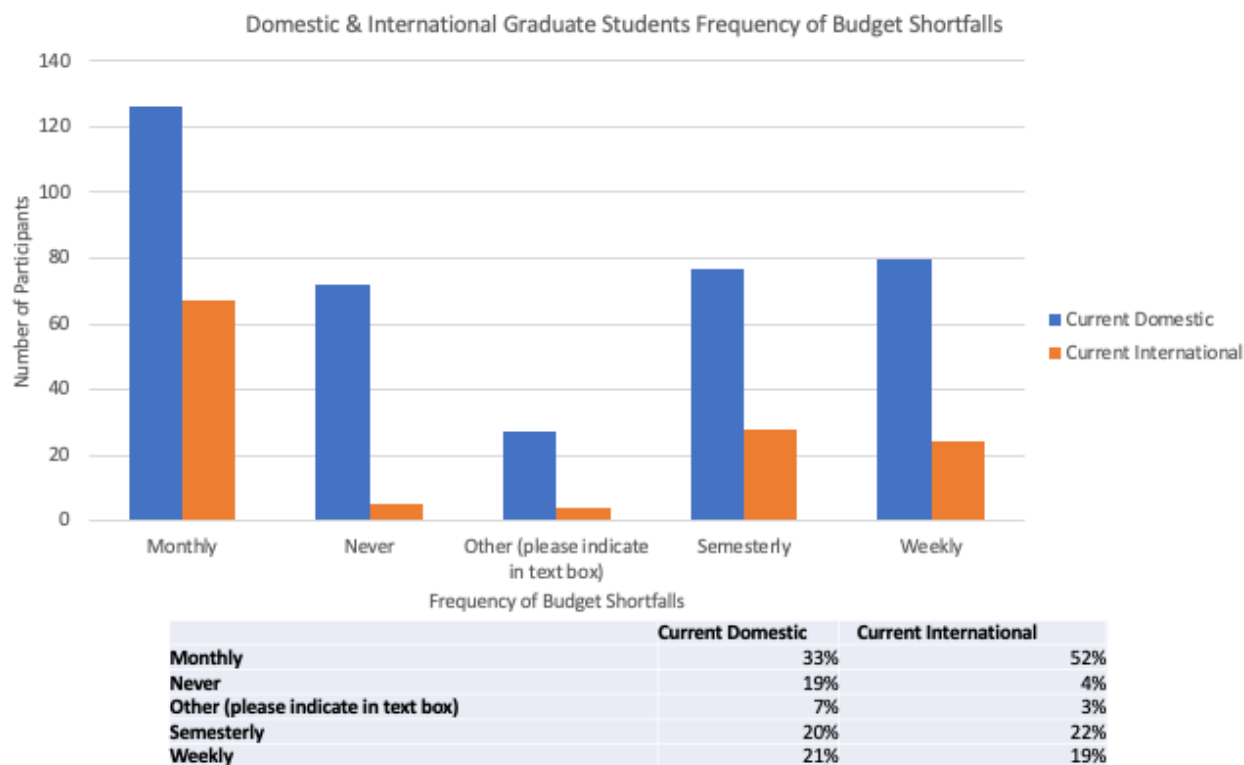
Frequency of Budget Shortfalls	Overall Sense of Belonging		
	N	M	SD
Weekly	103	3.27*	.76
Monthly	188	3.54*	.68
Semesterly	104	3.62*	.72
Never	76	3.75*	.61
Other	31	3.58	.81

Note. Sense of belonging scale was (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree); * $p \leq .05$

Budget Shortfalls and Differences between International and Domestic Students

The previous analysis brought us to revisit differences between international and domestic graduate students. We used a bar graph to visually capture and describe each group’s perceptions around the frequencies of budget shortfalls (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Bar Graph of Domestic and International Graduate Students’ Frequency of Budget Shortfalls.



Overall, most students who took the survey expressed experiencing budget shortfalls in some way, with 38% doing so monthly: 33% of domestic students and over half of international students who took the survey expressed that this occurred on a monthly basis. Many students who selected “Other” stated that they had to do so annually or every other month.

To further understand the differences displayed by the bar graph, we conducted an independent samples t-test to identify the difference in the frequency of budget shortfalls between domestic and international graduate students.

Table 7. Difference mean scores in the frequency of budget shortfalls between international and domestic graduate students

Frequency of Budget Shortfalls	Domestic		International		<i>t</i>	Sig.	Eta squared
	M	SD	M	SD			
<i>Please indicate how frequently you experience budget shortfalls.</i>	2.40	1.05	2.12	.77	3.15	.002*	.02

Note. Budget shortfall scale was (1 = Weekly, 2 = Monthly, 3 = Semesterly, 4 =Never); * $p \leq .01$

A scale for frequency of budget shortfalls was established to highlight lower mean scores for graduate students reporting a higher rate of frequency with experiencing budget shortfalls. Therefore, a *lower mean score* indicated *greater financial hardship* experienced by graduate students. Results indicated statistically significant differences between domestic graduate students ($M = 2.40, SD = 1.05$) and international graduate students ($M = 2.12, SD = .77$); $t(487) = 3.15, p \leq .01, \eta^2 = .02$, which indicates a small effect size (Cohen, 1988). In conclusion, international graduate students were found to experience a higher frequency of budget shortfalls than domestic graduate students.

These sacrifices are not a new theme for graduate students at the University of Utah. A 2021 statewide Food Insecurity Survey reflected that of the graduate students who ran out of money or didn't have money to buy food, 47% cut the sizes or skipped their meals and 40% experienced hunger. 480 graduate students at the University of Utah participated in the survey and were randomly selected, with 20% identifying as non-U.S. citizens. Among the total number of graduate students who cut the size of meals or skipped meals, 29% did so almost every month, and 45% did so some months but not every month.

In regard to other basic needs, 37.2% of graduate students who were a part of the statewide survey were not able to afford medicine or health care, with 30% not being able to afford some other need. The Financial Wellness Center has also reported that over 88% of graduate students visiting their center are experiencing financial stress and 45% of graduate students counseled in the center feel comfortable managing their finances. What follows in this document is the presentation of the qualitative findings. Concluding the document is a brief summary of the findings.

Qualitative Analyses

We conducted a qualitative analysis of a segment of the responses to two open-ended questions. Initial responses from the survey were chosen to produce this report with a due date of April 15 (the survey closed on April 21, 2023).

Noted below are the major themes, along with select examples describing individual student experiences, providing an outline of the most pressing concerns of our graduate students to date. It is clear, from these examples, that many of our students are experiencing pretty dire financial circumstances, and also that these challenges are impacting their ability to be students, in general, and their overall well-being.

Overview

We wanted to highlight five important points before presenting the challenges expressed by graduate students who completed the survey. First, some students offered positive experiences with the University of Utah. The nature of the survey question particularly invited students to comment on their challenges, so it is noteworthy that some students chose to highlight positive aspects of their experiences at the U. We should keep in mind that there are many positives about graduate school at the U that are not included in this survey. However, this survey question's purpose was to get a picture of the challenges our students face. In line with the charge of our task force to make recommendations on the stipend and housing crises facing students, focusing on challenges with this question allows the task force to make recommendations that are informed by student experiences.

Here are some examples of positive responses:

- “Experience is awesome at U!”
- “So far, everything went well for me.”
- “The professors of the [redacted] program have done an excellent job preparing us for life after graduation.”
- “Thank you for listening to us. That has made me feel valued and shows that you care. The stipend increase will help my family immensely!”
- “In general, my time here has been great. I’ve gotten to learn a lot and grow as a researcher and a person.”

Second, a small portion of the respondents indicated that they did not feel safe sharing their experiences in this survey. For example, one respondent wrote: “As a student, it just doesn't feel comfortable or safe to share.” While this is such a small portion that it did not merit inclusion as a theme, we do feel it is important to mention these comments. It is possible that some students did not respond to the survey because of this.

Third, many of the answers provided by our graduate students to this open-ended question included multiple themes. Per qualitative analysis protocols, we coded each theme in each response. In other words, if a comment mentioned financial challenges, housing challenges, and COVID challenges, we coded each section of the response according to the theme. In the explanation of the themes below, some of the example quotations are excerpted from the larger comment. At the end of this section, we have included some full comments that covered multiple themes to give a sense of how graduate students are connecting multiple themes in their responses.

Fourth, as this is a qualitative analysis of open-ended questions, the focus here is not to present the data quantitatively. Rather, the focus is to provide rich details about graduate student experience in their own words. In doing so, it is valuable to divide these into themes that can lead to recommendations that reflect the broad array of concerns beyond stipends and housing. While the focus of this analysis is not quantitative, we did track occurrence of themes in the comments. By far the most common themes were financial challenges and housing challenges, which may be a result of the design of the survey and the focus of the task force on stipends and housing. And fifth, we redacted names of specific people and programs in the quotes provided. The following summarizes student responses to the following question and themes.

Question: What Challenges and Experiences Do You Want to Share?

The qualitative analyses found the following themes:

- Financial Challenges

- Housing Challenges
- Health Challenges
 - Insurance
 - Mental Health
- Transportation Challenges
- Workload Challenges
- Experiential Challenges
 - Challenges Based in Systemic Forms of oppression
 - Unique Challenges for International Students
 - Unique Challenges for Parents and Caregivers
 - Unique Challenges for Graduate Students Working Full-time Jobs
 - Unique Challenges for First-Generation Students
- COVID-19 Challenges
- Other Negative Experiences

Financial Challenges (most frequently expressed theme)

Responses in this theme highlighted the many ways that graduate students at the U experience forms of financial insecurity. Students noted challenges about the low amount of stipend pay, the rapid rate of inflation and increase in living expenses, difficulties in accessing the Tuition Benefit Program, lack of travel and professional development funding needed to succeed, needing to take student loans and/or lack of access to student loans, and drastic increases in the cost of rent (also discussed in the Housing Challenges theme). Here are some examples of student comments:

- “I struggle with my limited budget to afford food, rent, gas, etc. despite taking max amount of loans.”
- “Again, might be a department-specific issue, but my first year in the PhD here it took almost a month into the fall semester before I got my first fellowship payment deposited into my account--this is after finances were already tight after a cross-country move. Speaking of moving, I didn't have any financial assistance from the U to make that move, which would have been seriously helpful. Planning to live over the summer is a real challenge, especially when you can't count on summer teaching or have to somehow find a part-time gig (time away from reading or research) to stretch out finances.”
- “As the primary provider for my family (spouse and child), the stipend helped a lot but wasn't really even close to enough. The living stipend didn't cover rent and daycare costs. While I really appreciated the stipend, the amount needs to be reevaluated as it is not livable at all. (Especially being a full stipend that restricts students from getting other work. Even with my husband working, it still didn't add up to be enough as I would make working elsewhere too.)”
- “Even with the emergency funds, I struggle between eating enough food and paying rent. How will the raise in stipends over the next few years outpace inflation? I worry that we will be buried in debt because we cannot reasonably survive in slc valley.”
- “I am comfortable on my stipend because my life is subsidized by my domestic partner. If it were not for him, I would financially struggle much more.”
- “I cannot stress enough how the university needs to increase the graduate student stipend. Even \$20,000 is well below where it needs to be for students to survive. My rent increased by over 50% in the two years of my graduate program. I stayed in the same apartment, which is still below the average rent price. At this time, I would not recommend anyone to do graduate work here because this simply is unlivable. I hope the college stops offering low-grade solutions and takes the livelihood of graduate students more seriously.”
- “In my two years as a graduate student at the U, I had less than \$50 in my bank account after paying bills each month. I ended up getting a part time job during my last semester because I did

not even have a savings account and was only living paycheck to paycheck. Stipends need to be higher to reflect the changing costs of living. I know firsthand how difficult it is to be a full-time student, have a university job, and an outside job just to afford to live.”

- “We do not receive enough money to account for emergencies. I came to graduate school at the U a few weeks after graduating college, so I had no chance to build up savings. The first week of grad school, my roommate died in a hiking accident and I needed to pay all of the rent for my apartment, which I could not afford. Over half of my paycheck each month goes to my rent. Increasing our stipends would make going to graduate school much more feasible and would not leave me questioning is it was a sane decision to go in the first place. There is never a day I am not worried about money, and it is a tremendous source of anxiety for myself and my peers.”
- “Health Insurance, Financial in general. Being a non-traditional student is extremely difficult financially as I have a mortgage, bills etc., and the graduate program I am in does not allow for full time work (I work 10 hours a week and that's barely doable).”

Housing Challenges (second most frequently expressed theme)

Graduate students reported a series of challenges in securing safe and affordable housing both on-campus and in the broader community. Students also expressed challenges with the increase in cost of university graduate student housing, the challenges for international students in securing housing, the drastic increases in rent, and transportation issues from living far from campus (also discussed in the transportation theme).

In terms of campus housing, there is clear and high demand for on-campus graduate student housing. Regarding off-campus housing, graduate students highlight the high cost of rent that has become particularly acute in the last several years, long distances from campus, and difficulty in securing housing in a competitive market. Here are some examples of student comments:

General Comments on Campus Housing

- “Every year the rent we pay for campus apartments goes up by 5% whilst we haven't had that much increase in the salaries.”
- “I would like to see subsidized housing for graduate students, particularly since the market rate for housing is outpacing graduate student stipends. I would like to see moving assistance available. I have to move every year since every year my rent goes up by over \$300. Each time I move I am spending at least \$300 on moving costs to hire movers and a truck.”
- “As a single international student, I cannot go to old Cedar apartments, whose price is good for me. It's only for families and IDK why? Based on what they have decided to give these apartments only to families. Some of these families are US citizens or have green cards, their spouses are working and have no budget issues, while an international single student like me is not allowed to work and have another source of income except his student stipend from U, and thanks to authorities' decision, I have to pay \$900 of it as the cheapest option to a 3-bedroom apartment in Spruce ones and live with two other guys. I wanna live alone and have my own space but the USA wanna ruin my peace.”
- “I am living on campus now. But when I leave my current housing in August, I will encounter financial difficulties as my monthly rent will surge from 500 dollars to 1000+ dollars.”
- “I have been on the wait list for almost one year now with University Students Apartments without any progress. Also, the new apartments price is not commensurate with my stipends. They are just too high for students.”
- “I simply think that the new rents for the grad house are outrageous. I am a first-year grad student and I could not secure grad housing since they did not accept anyone so I need to live

with a senior student. Now I learn that I cannot even benefit from the temporary reduction. It costs 300 dollars more!”

- “It was hard to get a spot in these apartments on campus.”

Off-Campus Housing

- “Housing is untenable right now based on current stipends, and was untenable when I started. Most graduate students in my program have multiple side hustles to be able to pay rent.”
- “Affordable housing is very difficult to find.”
- “Rent and living expenses have increased at an unprecedented rate, and our stipends cannot keep up. I know of students in my department who have taken jobs outside of the university, against mentor advice and contract agreements, to cover expenses. This is unacceptable, as students should be able to focus on advancing their skills in their field, rather than using their time on hourly positions.”
- “I’m hoping I can find some way to decrease the price of my rent to keep my debt at a minimum.”
- “Even 20,000 for rent/expenses is barely anything if you expect it to cover the cost of living in this area.”
- “My current salary cannot cover our living expenses as I have to pay around 1300\$ for rent and utility, \$450 for tuition/month.”

Health Challenges (third-most frequently expressed theme)

Challenges surrounding health can be further divided into two subthemes. First, students highlighted the flaws in the current health insurance plan for graduate students. Even with The Graduate School’s recent decision to cover the 20% payment that had been charged to students in the past, these comments highlight problems with the insurance itself.

Second, students highlighted challenges in receiving appropriate care for mental health issues while also noting that the experience of being in graduate school has contributed to or intensified mental health issues. Following are examples of student comments.

Insurance

- “If I did not have parental support, I would have been financially devastated by health care costs and am only able to stay in graduate school because I have outside support.”
- “I had wrist swelling due to bike fall early last Aug. I made a virtual appointment using "healthiest you" telehealth app (it's free) but it took them more than an hour to allocate a doctor for me. And all they did was advise me to go to urgent care to do x-rays. I went to university hospital without any referrals from the student health center. I sat there for around 4 hours for an x-ray. And cost me around \$3,000 dollars. (\$2,000 insured and I paid \$1,000). After 2 weeks, I went to the student health center for another assessment, they did the same x-ray. It cost me \$15. My current definition of urgent is changed now. "If you are not dying or critical, it's not urgent" And btw, for dental care even with insurance i paid around \$2,900.”
- “The health insurance is subpar as is the student health center. Trying to get scheduled at the health center is increasingly difficult as they have no online system to schedule and everything falls during a normal work day, making it difficult to actually go to appointments. When you do finally make an appointment, the walls are so thin you can hear other people's appointments too. Our health insurance doesn't allow us to feasibly find better health services and we can't use many of the health services on campus (like the Moran for example).”

Mental Health Challenges and Support

- “My mental health has suffered immensely over the past year due to economic, social, and personal factors and it is challenging to find low-cost providers in the community.”
- “My department is highly non-inclusive, and now I have a lot of trauma coming from that, which led me to develop depression. When I bring things up, people don't take it seriously, imply that what I'm saying I have experienced is false, and even make fun of me for stating that I have faced certain types of discrimination since, according to them, that's impossible. Being part of my department has made it so that there are many times when I want to quit grad school. What's way worse, there are times when I want to cease existing. I came here to do research, but most of my time so far has gone toward recovering from terrible experiences and trying to build a space for myself in this nightmare-ish place.”
- “When I got accepted into the U for [redacted] and was considering whether to enroll, it was advertised that the law school had a specifically designated mental health counselor. However, after I enrolled, when I tried to access her services, I was told that she was not taking on new clients. Law school is notoriously bad for mental health, and I wish there were more services available, especially since it was advertised as a priority to the U.”
- “It would also be nice to have mental health resources that are easier to access. I could've really used some help, but it seemed like resources were saturated. The only thing that felt easily accessible without a long wait time was crisis support. I'm not at that point yet so I've been struggling somewhere in the middle.”

The remainder of the themes occurred less frequently compared to those above. Regardless, we include them here because they offer important insight into graduate student experiences.

Transportation Challenges

Transportation challenges are related to housing challenges, regarding students living far from campus due to high housing costs. While transportation is related to housing for many students, it is important to note the other ways that transportation can negatively impact a student's experience. Following are some examples of student comments.

- “I take UTA transit to school and really appreciate the school's investment to make that a free option. But it's hard that driving takes 45 minutes and taking the train takes 2 hours. It makes me drive on more days than I would otherwise.”
- “My dept does not include cost of transportation into our stipend but in order to find cheaper rent, I live too far from campus for public transit to be a feasible or reliable option. So transportation should be included. I have to pay for gas every day and a parking pass twice a year.”
- “I have been late trying to find parking for a very expensive parking pass. If I can't use the parking pass when I need it, why did I waste my money? Walking uphill is a stress as well. I feel like we would be improved by having a train go around/through campus.”
- “Parking on campus is crazy. Luckily many of my classes were online/hybrid. Where I used to live riding the bus was easier but not now I avoid going onto campus. I would have liked to have used the rec center more. I would have come more if it wasn't such a hassle.”
- “Public transportation is the worst even when compared with other not 'first world' countries.”

Workload Challenges

Comments in this theme highlighted challenges with the workload and work experience for graduate student employees, sometimes compared to the faculty with whom they work, and also sometimes overlapping with financial concerns. Following are some examples of student comments.

- “Biggest challenges as a PhD student are feeling overburdened with work and expectations, while constantly feeling financially insecure. 20hrs of work for stipend at poverty level is very burdening. Yet there is no option for us to take on a real job to compensate because there is not enough time.”
- “Having half the teaching workload of a faculty member (instructor of record for 2-3 classes/semester) and getting paid a quarter of what they do.”
- “The grad students are overworked and it limits the quality of education we receive and that we're able to provide for the undergraduates.”
- “TA/RA assignment for grad students are the worst at [redacted] department. Professors hire and fire grad students at their will. There is no sense of security at Grad level study here.”

Experiential Challenges

Some students used this survey question to note how their identities impacted their experiences in graduate school. This ranged from students highlighting experiences of racism, ableism, and other forms of oppression to students speaking to the unique challenges they faced as parents, international students, and full-time working students. Although not included in the below examples because of their small occurrence, there was one comment from a politically conservative student and a couple of comments from students who are members of the LDS religion about feeling uncomfortable sharing conservative or religious beliefs on campus. More often, students spoke about the following experiences. Following are some examples of student comments.

Challenges Based in Systemic Forms of Oppression

- “As a POC the constant microaggression and lack of general awareness of the diverse population from both our peers and even staff at times is concerning.”
- “I have experience racism and discrimination throughout my academic career at the University of Utah. I have had faculty and clinical staff members treat me unfairly compared to other cohort members. I was assaulted by a clinical staff member who was later promoted to a hire position within the program.”
- “The activities that the EDI office organizes are great. Still, my department is far from understanding what to do to make our community more diverse, and the challenges that BIPOC people face are something they do not get.”
- “Language barrier in some way with socializing. I am using sign language and the outstanding CDA department that provides interpreters in class and events. Anything outside the classroom or events. I have no one to talk to or to make new friends.”
- “Personally, as a master's student, I have had a pretty good experience as a graduate research assistant. However, I know many others who have faced micro-aggressions and invalidation on a daily basis at their graduate assistantship sites. I think there should be a more thorough review process if an office wants to hire a graduate assistant and ongoing training on what it takes to be an effective supervisor for those who are supervising graduate students.”
- “This campus is largely inaccessible to students with certain disabilities.”

Unique Challenges for International Students

- “As an international student, I face challenges in paying tuition fees of around \$1,300-1,400 every semester. Also, in the new student housing, the rent reduction is only for studio apartments, not for shared apartments which makes it not affordable for me.”
- “When I arrived here, I did not have a credit score. Students from some countries like Iran have this problem. That was a big problem because the university did not assign me a house (I was in the queue for about 7 months!), and for renting a house many landlords wanted a credit score.”
- “As an international, who moved to Utah and then decided to study, I got minimal support financially. I'm ineligible for Student loans for example.”
- “[Redacted] has some rules that don't make sense to international students. One to mention is that the school doesn't accept any scholarships awarded by other departments of the university. Though the student obtains a scholarship to reduce the burden of fees, the [redacted] denies (under the name of the rule) accepting the hard work and eligibility of the international student in accepting that scholarship. This should be changed and everyone should be recognized for their abilities and achievements.”
- “I feel as an international student, I face additional barriers which are ignored most of the time by my dept. Often information sessions are organized which are tailored towards the US citizens. I have attended many such sessions which I didn't find useful or where my questions were not answered. I had an experience where I reached out to my academic advisor regarding the timeline of when my master's degree will be awarded. It has been 3 months since, and I haven't received a reply from them. I have now asked the same question multiple times with no definitive answer. Experiences like this, make me feel unwanted and not belonging to the dept. And I have come to a point where I am seriously thinking about quitting my PhD.”

Unique Challenges for Parents and Caregivers

- “As a single mom, I am stuck living in the location I am in for financial and custodial reasons. Consequently, I have to travel several hours to get to campus; it is challenging for me to be on campus weekly, especially during months when adverse weather is prevalent. I have received little compassion and no accommodation or flexibility in allowing me to access available online classes because I am not in an online cohort. This is disheartening, especially when my well-being is at risk.”
- “As a single mother, it can be tricky to juggle everything. But that is just part of life!”
- “I feel like families are being targeted by aiding individuals but not those with children. Additionally, for those of us that do not receive a stipend and are 100% dependent on student loans, in order to even afford living we have to undergo an appeals process to get more funds, which is not a guaranteed process. The estimated cost of attendance needs to be reevaluated to aid in this regard!”
- “I pay for student health insurance for my 4 kids and husband. I just paid \$7k out of pocket for the spring and summer semesters but can't get a student health appointment for acute illnesses. I waited 3 weeks with strep throat that they refused to diagnose in person and insisted they would "just know" over the phone. I take my kids to their same pediatricians they have always gone to though they are out of network and I pay 100% of the cost. Why is the health insurance so bad?”
- “I take care of my grandma so she is my primary source of budget shortcomings the past few years. Also cost of living is going up around here like crazy so it's difficult to manage. I think a raise for TAs and GIs would be helpful.”

- “I was speaking with one PhD program on campus asking if it was feasible/supported to be a mother and a PhD student and was told no. This was extremely discouraging and made me feel like I am not important.”

Unique Challenges for Graduate Students Working Full-Time Jobs

- “For students who work full-time because the graduate stipend is insufficient and does not meet the cost of living, extended graduation timelines should be made available. Departmental supports, travel support, scholarships, etc. are also only available for full-time graduate students, which severely limits the professional development opportunity our working graduate students can participate in. This effectively limits the career possibilities for those of us pursuing a graduate degree while working.”
- “My challenges are lot different from most students. I work full-time just to support myself through college.”
- “I do not qualify for funding because I work a full-time job, but it would be impractical to quit my full-time job to receive funding. I would not make enough from the university to cover myself and my dependent.”
- “This is an expensive degree. The few times I’ve been alerted about scholarship opportunities for school, I’ve been given very little notice. With working full time and doing this program, I need more notice to be able to work on scholarship applications to see if I can relieve some of my financial burden for this degree and minimize the loans being taken out”

Unique Challenges for First-Generation Students

- “It feels like my department doesn't give a shit if I succeed or not. Everyone is in their own little bubble and I receive so much conflicting information all the time. I'm a first-gen student, so all this is new to me. I thought getting my master's (on the way to the PhD) was a huge deal, but the department doesn't even celebrate it or seem to know what the process is.”

COVID-19 Challenges

A small number of students noted the way that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their experience in graduate school, in terms of community building and support. Following are some examples of student comments.

- “Community building among and for graduate students is very difficult when faculty/departments themselves are still struggling to recover and rebuild their own social ties that disintegrated due to Covid. Graduate students are bearing an undue share of the burden this has caused, because graduate students are the ones most in need of community, guidance, and connectedness but should not be the group most responsible for rebuilding these ties--concerted faculty and departmental effort is needed, and I'm not sure if sincere and timely steps are being taken to mend the social connections that Covid weakened. For students, it creates a very isolating environment and this is particularly true for first-gen and international students and thus contributes to inequity concerns.”
- “I came in right before Covid happened so I had a unique experience. My first year was good, I was able to make friends with doc students in other programs, but as soon as Covid hit and everything went online I lost pretty much all of my connections except for my advisor. My advisor was busy on sabbatical and doing other things so he was unavailable a lot of time. If I had more support (socially and academically) my experience would have been so much better and I could

have graduated much faster. Half of my last 2 years has been trying to figure things out (IRB, dissertation requirements, expectations etc.) when I could have easily done my project a few times by now if I didn't have to figure out step by step every single hurdle.”

Other Negative Experiences

While these comments did not fit one of the themes listed above, we want to highlight some of the additional challenges faced by graduate students regarding feelings of connection, being valued, and more. Following are some examples of student comments.

- “I feel like I'm just going through the motions of a graduate program. I don't feel supported by the university. The only people who seem to care are my professors, but that's about it. I feel disposable.”
- “The loneliness that I feel being part of this huge university. It's insane to me the lack of networking opportunities with other departments or even within my home department. It feels rather neoliberal in the sense of the university is a business before a research university and creating scholars that can and will surpass other tier-1 universities in the United States. I feel they care more about image alone with no regard to the mediocrity of the programs they are instructing.”
- “The U has many amazing ways to be connected socially, but unfortunately these aren't very accessible or advertised to graduate students. It is expected that graduate students either don't need to socialize, or will do so within their own programs. My program had small, close groups of friends but wasn't very open to people not in those social groups. More ways for graduate students to become socially connected with others outside of their program would be beneficial.”
- “I don't know if this is specific to my program, but I feel as a grad student that I have had a complete lack of guidance on just about everything. It seems that after we got in administration decided to not give us any help with anything any longer and expects us to figure out everything on our own.”
- “I have personally had to leave a lab. Our department has known "problem" faculty members, but graduate students are actively discouraged from sharing information with each other.”
- “I'm about to graduate and I can't wait to leave my department behind me. I hear constantly that the focus is on grad student well-being but EVERY concern raised by Grad students is considered by the department as not relevant, subjective, or not worth considering. Grad students should be treated like every other employee at the U, with the same benefits.”
- “It could be beneficial to have resources available to graduate students that advise them in ways of preparing for careers post-graduation and particularly developing interdisciplinary skills that can be applied to many fields/areas. My experience overall was a positive one, but this is an important aspect that I feel I could have been advised in more thoroughly.”

Comments Expressing Multiple Themes

We have included a few of the longer responses here to give a sense of how graduate students connected several of the themes into one answer. Following are some examples of student comments.

- “Here's the thing—I'm in my second year as a PhD student at the U. I finally feel like I'm getting a handle on the direction of my research and am becoming comfortable in the department. Despite those things, I'm thinking very strongly of ending my studies prematurely after completing the requirements to earn a master's degree.”

“There are a few reasons, but a primary driving force behind this is that the graduate student stipend is too low to live on in Salt Lake City. My current rent costs more than half of my stipend income a month. I'm moving to a place with roommates this month to save on rent, but I think overall it may only save me \$200 a month. Believe me--I have TRIED for more than 8 months to find safe, affordable housing anywhere in Salt Lake or Utah counties, and for the most part it doesn't exist. \$700/month plus \$200 in utilities with a roommate is a 'good' deal in Salt Lake. Additionally, I think it's taken me maybe longer to find something because I'm 36, and many younger people with roommates don't want to room with me. I'm also unmarried, so all of the 'people' in my household are students. That means I don't qualify for housing assistance from the government because they think I'm too unstable.

“I thought that maybe I could get housing in the university apartments and was astounded and dismayed to learn that they also start at \$900/month for a shared housing situation, and can cost as much as \$1,500. I'm sorry, but who are you going to rent to when many graduate stipends at the U are \$18,000 for spring and fall? Are you only interested in enrolling students who are generationally wealthy?

“Housing/rent is my number one concern, but inflation has also increased my grocery, gas, and utility bills. I've taken out the maximum allowable government-subsidized loan for this year, but it's still a stretch to make things work. I'm also not looking forward to graduating with a degree in EDUCATION with a mountain of debt.

Something has got to change at the U.”

- “I am one of the students affected by the graduate family housing updates/closures of old buildings. I was thrilled last year when my partner and I were able to move into the grad housing because it was much closer to affordable than my non-student housing, however with the destruction of the older buildings and extreme rent increase in the new ones, I am now fearful we will have to move again.”
- “My stipend is set at the minimum required for tuition benefit, and I spend approximately 3,000 of that 16,000 on differential and credits required of me to take that go over the 12 covered credits. I have had to take out loans, and as I am in a 6-year program I have a lot of fear over how much I will be facing when I graduate.”
- “Money is a constant source of anxiety for me, and it impacts my ability to focus on my work. If the tuition stipend was raised to realistically reflect the costs of SLC, and if tuition benefit covered more than 12 credits/semester, and if the student health insurance did not require an out-of-pocket payment for prescriptions, this would be a huge help in my ability to thrive as a student, instructor, clinician, and researcher.”
- “I feel oddly conflicted about my time at the U. I do not feel comfortable sharing a significant amount in this medium. To be very brief, I am in a department that brings in a significant amount of federal funding for the U. We, as students, are what actually do the research and the work that brings in that money. The PIs are not running experiments. The PIs are not worried about their next meal or making rent. The PIs are not concerned about a hospital visit. If the graduate students stop working, the PIs stop publishing, and the money will dry up. I feel insulted that the person I am training is making more money than I do as a year-1 graduate student. Terrible mismanagement and policy. I feel insulted that my work is directly contributing to millions of dollars of funding for the university, but it is my boss who will be getting the

congratulation call and recognition. I do not feel recognized. I do not feel appreciated. The graduate student housing piece really was the nail in the coffin.”

- “This Christmas I almost dropped out of the program. The reason was simply that I couldn't find a place to live in Salt Lake. I applied to all kinds of absolutely terrible studio apartments in the city, and I was rejected from every single one because I simply did not make enough money. I make \$20,000 a year, the amount the university is raising the floor to. Again, I grew up lower class. I'm used to a low standard of living. But literally no rental company here would rent to me.

“I had to find an individual who owned a property that wouldn't automatically reject me for making so little money. My current apartment has broken windows, no heat, and a roof that leaks into my room when it rains or snows. And I'm so grateful to have it and only pay \$900 a month. Other grad students tell me I've won the lottery to be living in this place for such a low rent.

“I'm going into debt to do so (actually living off my savings) because I simply can't afford to live here. Add to that the reality that I also don't have any space to work on campus ... and it feels like a real true insult.

“This has added up to an ongoing sense of disconnect from the university among my graduate student colleagues; and has really harmed our sense of community among ourselves. I recently had to cancel an event... People feel like there's no reason to come to campus or near campus. People feel the university doesn't care about them. And they don't want to give anything back to the community...Honestly, it's become a toxic environment ... and not because of the Department, but because of the university's complete lack of support for graduate students.

“In addition to this, I'd like to add that every single one of my graduate colleagues, every single one, has had some problem getting paid or receiving benefits at some point in their time at the U. Many of us simply haven't gotten checks on time, or had weird inexplicable bureaucratic SNAFUs when it came time to receive our insurance. Personally, I had the situation this fall where I was supposed to be paid my fellowship amount (\$10k) to start the semester, but instead received a check for \$600. That's right. Only \$600 dollars. I panicked. I contacted the fellowship office. I talked to my classmates. Other people were similarly shorted. We have to pay rent (we can't afford). The Department and Fellowship offices just told us to wait a week or two because the university can't process tuition benefit on time so instead it just charges us full tuition and automatically takes it out of our checks. Imagine telling that to students who don't get paid over the summer and then are budgeting just to make it to fall that suddenly they only have \$600, which for many of them wouldn't even cover half of a month's rent.”

Question: Outside of Stipend and Housing Assistance, What Resources Would You Like or Need to Improve Your Experience?

A qualitative review of responses to this question revealed 11 themes around which graduate student commentary consolidated. Those themes, in order of frequency, included:

- Health Care Resources
- Community Resources
- Professional Development Resources
- Institutional Resources/Benefits
- Transportation Resources
- Resources for Specific Circumstances
 - Childcare

- International Student Needs
- Food Insecurity/Access
- Academic Resources
 - Curricular Support
 - Tuition Support
 - Advising Support

Before focusing on these specific themes, it is important to note that the same caveats apply to the analysis of this question as the last. First, it is important to note that a limited number of respondents skipped this question, offered positive feedback, or referred survey reviewers back to previous discussions of housing and stipend support as the primary needs they face. In order to focus attention on additional needs, the analysis below does not consider those responses unless they also highlighted needs outside housing and stipends. Second, as with the previous question, several responses identified more than one of the above themes. In those instances, responses were coded for all themes represented in the student feedback. Third, several respondents expressed skepticism that the survey or current efforts at the university would result in *real* change for graduate students. As one respondent, reflective of this group of responses, noted, “I feel they should do what they know is right for graduate students not just having discussions or meetings about them. We need actions.” Fourth, as with the previous question, names of specific departments, personnel, etc., have been redacted but remain available for review by the dean of The Graduate School.

Health Care Resources

Setting aside comments that reflect that the decision by The Graduate School to fully subsidize health care premiums has not reached all graduate students on campus, feedback overwhelmingly (at nearly twice the rate of the next most common theme) focused on health care as a primary need of graduate students, with particular attention given to both the costs of prescription drugs, access to health care specialists, and (perceived limitations) to mental health care resources. Here are some examples of student commentary:

- “Academic and psychological counseling, because as international graduate students, we will encounter many problems like being stuck in research, feeling homesick, etc. and if not receiving proper help, this will only lead our problems to snowball.”
- “Access to more mental health resources and office space as a graduate instructor required to hold in-person office hours.”
- “Greater access to mental health resources. The cap on 12 sessions per year is very limiting. Additionally, the conditional scholarships are stressful.”
- “I think there should be more than 10 free therapy sessions available for graduate students at the counseling center or at least the option to continue therapy with the same therapist after the 10 sessions. I have purposefully had to go without therapy because of the fear of running out of sessions and I feel that the system is unsustainable in that way.”
- “I would love the health insurance to be more consistent and helpful for students facing long-term medical issues. The referral system can make it confusing as to what specialists one can see and how to get access to care under the same referral. Also, sometimes there's a lack of clarity until after an appointment what one will have to pay. Having more consistent information and support would be very helpful.”
- “I would really like increased mental health resources for graduate students. I am also a full-time staff member, and have not found even the staff mental health resources to be helpful.”
- “Better health and dental/vision insurance. They don't cover enough. We cannot afford \$200-500 bill each time we visit a doctor. For example, I had to get my vision checked. With EMI through Univ of Utah there are 3 copays one must pay - one for general eye health part of the

exam; one for glasses and also a separate one for contacts. So, the once-a-year exam ends up being close to \$300. That does not include cost of contacts or glasses. So, for example, this year I am wearing my old glasses that I don't see well with because I could not afford to update my lenses.”

- “Better health insurance. Under the current policy, it's prohibitively expensive to see any care provider outside of the student health clinic. A very simple visit for preventive care can result in a \$600-1000 bill and that's too much of a burden to consider some care.”
- “Better health care coverage would be wonderful. Currently, the health care offered to Graduate students does not cover enough and reimbursements for prescriptions take a long time.”
- “Graduate student health insurance should be on par with the insurance staff and faculty receive.”
- “Health insurance is a big need/problem. As a non-traditional student, I'm realizing that it's not a problem for younger students that are on their parents' insurance. The student insurance offered is NOT affordable, nor is it appropriate coverage and it does not cover medications :(”
- “Health insurance options for urgent care or any care outside of the student health center covered at 100%.”
- “I think beyond those, the only challenge can come from the way there is no up-front prescription coverage. As a result of moving to salt lake I am now having to take daily medications for asthma and lung functionality and based on stipend, having to make sure I have the cash available up front to afford my medications can be challenging, although the reimbursement rate is great, it's just challenging to have to set aside a good chunk of money each month for that knowing it will come back to me at a later time.”
- “Improvements to the health insurance plan. I have rationed and put off treatments/prescriptions out of fear that I won't be able to pay the co-pay. Likewise, I experience disabilities for which I require regular mental health therapy, and have had to ration this because the free counseling through the U doesn't support my case. It would be nice if the U could subsidize mental health cases that are not covered by their counselors.”
- “PLEASE find a health care plan that is not run by United. They are the WORST. Don't think that this isn't happening at the U too: <https://www.propublica.org/article/unitedhealth-healthcare-insurance-denial-ulcerative-colitis>.”
- “Prescription drug insurance that doesn't require paying out of pocket initially and then waiting for reimbursement, vision insurance.”

Community Resources

A number of students noted a profound lack of community on campus, citing a lack of spaces that cater to the needs of graduate students (e.g., spaces to work after hours/overnight), programming that helps graduate students find community within, and outside, their specific academic unit, and attending to community in ways that account for the diversity of students participating in graduate programs across campus. Some representative comments noted:

- “Affordable hangout places with friends.”
- “Better ways to meet people and socialize. I feel like that's very difficult in grad school.”
- “Community building opportunities. The only people I know on campus are my classmates and coworkers. I would love to feel more connected to the campus community.”
- “Departments should receive guidance and support in learning how to create inclusive environments and learning communities so that graduate students feel like the departments want them there. I didn't feel part of a community.”
- “For departments to have dedicated funds, separate and beyond current budgets, for graduate student community building. Example: departments could have \$500/semester devoted towards veteran grad students mentoring newly admitted grad students. An example of this in practice, if a

grad student mentor takes new students out to lunch, that could be reimbursed by 'community-building' funds.”

- “For me, a cohort would have made a big difference. I came in at a funny time which meant I was the only doc student for a long time and it was very lonely. My advisor was on sabbatical, and I did not feel like I was very supported and was left to figure out a lot of things on my own.”
- “Grad student meetup groups, including both academics or outdoor recreation.”
- “Graduate student overnight lounges for students who can't get home.”
- “Graduate student-specific social opportunities. There is the get involved tabling event at the start of the semester, but it feels very targeted towards undergrad students.”
- "Graduation events or benefits that distance learning students are able to partake in. I have been attending the U in a distance learning capacity for the past three years at this point. The entirety of that time I have had to accomplish several trainings for sexual harassment, provide proof of vaccination status, and received notification after notification for events that are in-person only. However when the time arrives for me to actually do something in-person (attend my own graduation), there is no support at all for any distance learning individual willing to make the trip to Salt Lake and attend in-person. I only get a link to order my regalia and go on my way. The least that can be done is to provide some kind of discount code to order diploma frames or something of the like, similar to people that are able to attend school in a more traditional capacity."
- “I would love to see a dedicated workspaces for the graduate students as sometimes I find difficulty in finding a quiet place to sit and study and even sometimes I find hard to find a place for hosting TA hours.”
- “I'd like to see the University of Utah advocate for student safety politically in the state of Utah. As a queer woman, it's been disappointing to not see the university take action on ensuring abortion and gender affirming health care access. It further marginalizes me as a graduate student at the University of Utah and future students who are minors in the state of Utah who want access to higher education. It's nice to have small Women's & LGBT resource centers on campus but it would be a much better approach if the University of Utah as a whole modernized its structure to serve all students in an ethical & equitable fashion through better funding social justice oriented resource centers and academic programs, recruitment and retention of a diverse student body and faculty.”
- “More comfortable workspaces. Event spaces that only grad students can reserve.”
- “More socializing across departments. I have no idea what’s going on anywhere else in the university, and all of the events/activities/resources are very obviously aimed at undergraduates.”
- “Positive academic environment, more diversity in leadership/mentors/faculty.”
- “Social connections of international students, mental health guidance, interdisciplinary communication.”
- “Specific support from the graduate school for queer students, especially given the volatile environment the Utah legislature has created for queer folks.”

Professional Development Resources

The third most common theme focused on gaps and additional needs related to professional development resources. Needed resources identified by respondents run the gamut from additional support onboarding as graduate students and support for academic/teaching success to conference funding and better preparation for academic and non-academic job markets. Comments included:

- “Academic and psychological counseling, because as international graduate students, we will encounter many problems like being stuck in research, feeling homesick, etc. and if not receiving proper help, this will only lead our problems to snowball.”

- “Academic writing and presentation skills.”
- “Accessible assistance to scholarship applications.”
- “Allow non-thesis masters students to be TAs/RAs. I would have liked to have been one but not allowed. More classes that involved collaboration or a team environment. Many were undergrad/grad combined. 90%+ of the time grad students worked on projects/assignments by ourselves.”
- “Alt-ac and job market preparation.”
- “Career development mentoring.”
- “Consultations with professional PhDs. More opportunities to network with individuals inside and outside the U. I am in a professional PhD program, which makes it hard to connect with my cohort outside of classes, and as we continue in our program, we have less classes together.”
- “Help finding/applying for jobs.”
- “I would appreciate some seminars talking about life outside of graduate school and transitioning from academia to the workforce.”
- “I would like a better orientation process when I was an incoming student.”
- “Improved career counseling.”
- “Increased funding for conference travel would be great. The current opportunities for funding through the graduate school are limited and are small amounts. Going to conferences is a really important part of being an academic, building out a CV, getting relevant experience for the academic job market, so it would be really nice to have at least \$1,000 per year to go to one conference a year. “
- “Many of us cannot find a job within our discipline. Give us resources to join the workforce. Our departments are not designed to facilitate this because our advisors and the rest of the department are academic success stories. This means that they have not had to go outside of academia and are ill-equipped to help us.”
- “More funding opportunities for academic/professional work (research grants, travel assistance, scholarships, etc.), more resources or assistance for preparing & securing job opportunities after graduation.”
- “More job exploration opportunities for paths outside of academia.”
- “More training that is pertinent to our actual job duties. We go through a lot of mandatory training and then are expected to pick up our real work as we go. I would appreciate more specified training for what I’ll be doing (i.e. running classes on Canvas).”
- “My advisor has some funding issues and it is sad to see her really trying to find new sources of funding to support her students. Also, we don’t have that much interaction with researchers at other universities. Travel grants could help students to stay in touch with other researchers in their fields.”
- “Proper orientation to understand resources available and how to utilize them.”
- “Travel grants for graduate students.”

Institutional Resources/Benefits

The fourth most common theme developed around institutional benefits, outside of stipend and housing, to which students perceive limited, cost-prohibitive, or no access. For example, student responses consistently highlighted parking benefits, gym access, UTA passes (for themselves and their dependents), and access to U events/spaces (e.g., museums, galleries) as ways to make significant contributions to the lives of graduate students and their families.

- “A free parking pass would go a long way... Honestly, stop paying for speakers to come to the school until graduate students make a living wage. We do not have time to attend their lectures because we are too busy working second jobs.”
- “Access to... office space as a graduate instructor required to hold in-person office hours.”

- “Actual space to work on campus. Office space. Space separate from undergraduates.”
- “Affordable parking.”
- “Better parking and cheaper lunch options on campus, such as a vending machine dispensing sandwiches and similar items.”
- “Better parking or transportation to and throughout campus.”
- “Free parking.”
- “Good parking permits (like A) are very expensive, and we cannot park our cars in most spots even by buying a U permit, while in several campuses it's totally free.”
- “I would love to see dedicated workspaces for the graduate students, as sometimes I find difficulty in finding a quiet place to sit and study, and even sometimes I find hard to find a place for hosting TA hours.”
- “On-campus office space, even if only a cubicle/carrel (that would be a massive improvement).”
- “Parking for commuter students. I need to spend long hours at my lab and cannot afford to spend hundreds on a parking pass or daily parking.”
- “Parking is absurdly expensive and unrealistic for a single person. Any sort of resources to help with applying for government-funded healthcare, as the university plan is too expensive.”
- “Parking... literally just somewhere to park so you don't have to plan to search for a parking spot for 30 minutes then having to walk half a mile or further because the university is completely incapable of providing spots near buildings that house over 100 graduate students who don't live on campus who still pay for parking passes.”
- “Stop ticketing my car.”

Transportation Resources

As with the previous theme which raised parking as a significant challenge for graduate students and the previous question which identified transportation challenges as a major theme, transportation also emerged as an area around which graduate students commented on the need for more resources in this survey item. Both the growing distance for travel required by housing costs in the Salt Lake Valley, as well as the costs related to travel, informed many of the comments within this theme. Some examples of student responses include:

- “Better public transportation and more coverage of the Campus Shuttle.”
- “Easier access to buildings especially during winter months. More frequent bus stops.”
- “Graduate students consistently work weekends and holidays, so improving safety ride and expanding its service hours would be great.”
- “I think it would be really valuable for dependents and/or spouses/partners of graduate students to have access to some of the amenities that are restricted just to students right now. For example, I can ride on UTA for free but my husband has to pay for a UTA pass even though he also lives on campus. That adds an extra burden for transportation.”
- “I would appreciate an easier experience as a commuter. I live outside of the SLC area because of housing expenses, and I wish that there was an express bus to campus like there used to be from a Frontrunner station. An express bus from any of the near stations (Murray, SL Central, North Temple, etc.) would be game-changing.”
- “More sources of transportation.”
- “The shuttle service at the East Village can be improved.”

Resources for Specific Circumstances

As with the prior survey question, some students used this survey question to note how their identities impacted their experiences in graduate school. This ranged from students highlighting experiences of racism, ableism, and other forms of oppression to students speaking to the unique challenges they faced as

parents, international students, and full-time working students. Here are some examples of student comments:

Childcare Resources

- “Subsidized childcare.”
- “As a commuter student, it would be nice if the U partnered with daycares outside of Salt Lake. I live an hour away, using the U's onsite daycare was very difficult and I could only do it for one semester before I was burnt out from so much commuting with an infant.”
- “Can the housing assistance be clarified, because from what has been announced, only single students are receiving assistance and none for families. More childcare facilities would be helpful, especially since the waitlist is 18-24 months. Which means you have to put your child on the waitlist as soon as they are born to get serviced during your time here at the U.”
- “Childcare resources would be important to many (I personally don't have kids), but I think increasing the stipend should be a priority over other resources. If people are paid sufficiently, they can seek out other resources they need on their own.”

International Student Resources

- “As an International Student, I am paying \$600/month just for the rent alone (that too living along with 3 other members in 2B2B apartment). It would be highly helpful If I can get any better Housing accommodation cheaper than this.”
- “Assistance with international students’ specific issues (more fees, less flexibility, no possibility for additional income).”
- “Better service to provide guide and direction in relation to international students and visa process.”
- “Grad students barely get housing options. International students end up paying triple the amount into rents. There should be option for university housing at affordable prices for international students especially Since we work on campus to make our end meets still end up broke. Sometimes it’s hard as we have a lot on plate, I think this would put off little bit strain from our lives if we will be able to save half of rent.”
- “Higher taxes for foreigners challenge life, and the chance to work more hours, especially if you have a family, is needed.”
- “I am working more than 20hrs in a week as an international student.”
- “I don't have any other source of income. I am international student. My wife (she has an F2 dependents status) cannot work legally. I have to support my wife with my stipend so really hard to manage family expenses.”
- “More access to international fellowships.”
- “More support (especially financially) for international grad students.”
- “Not having to pay the \$150 fee per semester for international student.”

Food Insecurity/Access Resources

- “Easier access to food on campus in David Gardner Hall.”
- “Cheap food assistance.”
- “Cheaper lunch options on campus, such as a vending machine dispensing sandwiches and similar items.”
- “Food assistance beyond the U food pantry.”
- “Food bank information, the ability to earn secondary income.”

- “Food resources for grad students.”
- “Food, personal hygiene products.”
- “I think food and clothes coupons for shopping from grocery stores or other stores could help a lot.”

Academic Resources

Setting aside professional development and community resources (included above), several smaller items emerged as significant concerns in the area of academic resources and support. These comments vary from specific (e.g., department-level/disciplinary needs) to broader structural needs (advising/tuition). Collectively, student responses revealed shared concern around issues of curricular, tuition, and advising support. Some representative comments include:

Curricular Support

- “Access to classes through alternative formats, such as Zoom courses or online courses; ability to switch cohorts to provide better access to alternative class formats.”
- “Consider and apply those considerations for the part-time program and actually spell them out in the description before application so students know what the program will actually require for the practicum. Make recordings of panels, presentations, and other offerings available due to scheduling conflicts with full-time employment + practicum + classes. We are not really getting most of the benefits from the college.”
- “I need graduate classes to have less homework/more hands-on learning that will actually be applicable.”
- “Being able to take a few undergrad classes here at the U as a graduate student without having to pay.”
- “More in-depth courses are needed for PhD students. Need to consider the voice of students to offer in-depth courses in few fields like I work theoretical computer science.”
- “I’d like to do a faculty review. Faculty do student reviews. I know course evaluations exist, but many times in grad school, the class size is small enough that the teacher could know who is giving what feedback.”
- “More student input would have been helpful to resolve many issues in our program. There were meetings students were invited to and ‘encouraged’ to share ideas, but student feedback was brushed aside in the meeting and then ignored after.”
- “I would like a tutor’s help for graduate students, if there is one. That way, we have a better understanding on what the professor taught us.”

Tuition Support

- “Differential tuition taken care of so these wouldn't add additional financial burden.”
- “Increased semesters of tuition benefit program.”
- “Full coverage differential tuition...and international fee.”
- “It would be great help if we wouldn't have to worry about differential...[tuition] bills.”
- “Cheaper tuition, or more opportunities to get grad tuition benefit.”
- “[Eliminate] Differential tuition fee.”
- “Differential tuition for international students like me.”
- “I don't get any stipend, but PhD program is only funded for two years and does not include stipend.”
- “I think the differential fee is unreasonable. The students should have equal rights to take any classes, at least in one department.”
- “I would like that the university remove the tuition differential.”

- “In College X, there is a required fee named X differential fee, which make no reason. Most of students in College X have paid this fee for every semester.”
- “The tuition fee and... differentials are very high in X school, which are not mentioned anywhere in the I20. There should be a transparent breakdown of fee structure provided to students to estimate the total costs.”
- “Tuition discount for part time employees.”

Advising Support

- “There is big talk, of diversity, and inclusion. What about equity. How do we get graduate students with families the same outcome, support, and stability as a single person. How do we get provide equitable situations to individuals that have mental health issues. We could imagine a scenario where a person with Bi polar disorder needs extra support, but feels there is no way possible to tell their PI. There is a situation in our department I am aware of and the PI well their doing is illegal, and if the student new better would sue for lack of accommodations. In short, we preach diversity, but when it is actually put in place, mental health wellness and resources.”
- “Sensitivity training and understanding of mental health.”
- “Positive academic environment, more diversity in leadership/mentors/faculty.”
- “Accountability from faculty who choose self-interest over community and department building. I feel as though they expect everyone to be independent, but never provide the framework for the independence.”
- “Actual experienced advisors and teachers.”
- “Better and stronger resources at the university level to mediate conflicts between graduate students and their advisors, and help students switch advisors if they want/need to. Currently these issues are handled at the department level, so the people supposedly helping students often have close personal relationships with the advisor. Also, in my department, when students leave a lab, the burden is entirely on them to find a new mentor or else they are removed from the program. I think more should be done at the university level to help students in good standing find new advisors and remain in their programs if they wish.”
- “More faculty in our department.... There is a shortage of tenured faculty and adjunct faculty, which impacts our classes and learning. As a graduate student, I am not getting as much support from my advisor and core faculty because they are already stretched thin. We have had multiple faculty members leave, and it has been a tedious process to get new ones hired.”
- “Resources on how to deal with difficult situations with PIs. Unfortunately, many of us encounter uncomfortable situations with PIs but do not speak up because of the power dynamics at play. Resources on how to advocate for yourself in these situations would be helpful.”
- “A department chair that works for the students more so than the TBP system that exploits us would also be a resource that improves my experience.”

Summary of Findings

Differences in undergraduate and graduate students indicated that graduate students rated their feelings of being understood and accepted by the University of Utah slightly lower than undergraduate students. However, graduate students reported slightly higher feelings of preparedness for life after college than undergraduate students. Although our analyses of sense of belonging based on international and domestic status did not yield significance, we look to our qualitative analyses to provide much-needed insight. International graduate students reported experiencing greater financial hardships when compared to domestic graduate students. However, most graduate students reported great budget shortfalls.

We encourage the task force to also review a past report reflecting a study of graduate student housing, as these themes have emerged consistently. The qualitative analyses confirmed significant challenges around

finances that were reflected as significant in the quantitative analyses. Some other challenges included but were not limited to housing, health, transportation, and other experiential challenges as outlined in the qualitative section above. Recommendations from this subcommittee may overlap with larger recommendations found in other subcommittees, but we found them noteworthy of highlighting based on student feedback.

Challenges Unique to International Student Support

The Office of International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) provides services to approximately 4,000 international students. The majority of international students participate in programs in engineering, science, business, and liberal arts. Although ISSS has principally been associated with compliance and immigration, it does engage in programming and orientation for international students.

In practice there is a disconnect between ISSS and many departments on campus. Departments routinely refer international students to ISSS, irrespective of the type of issue, which is not necessarily the most optimal option. International students experience many of the same issues as domestic students without the same support systems.

In terms of housing, it is not uncommon for international students to arrive for orientation without a housing option. International students are not assigned priority housing by Housing and Residential Education, and there is insufficient housing to accommodate incoming students. Anecdotal feedback from current graduate students indicated:

1. Incoming students contact students from their same country to find temporary housing for approximately two months, while looking for housing and also waiting for paychecks to pay deposits to secure housing. This was typically in the form of “couch surfing.”
2. The percentage of income spent on housing was much more than expected, suggesting a disconnect between students’ expectations and reality once they arrive on campus.
3. One student mentioned that a family friend from home had just been accepted to the graduate program in linguistics, but due to hurdles in finding affordable housing in relation to the stipend offer, this accepted graduate student is considering offers at other institutions as attending the University of Utah is not financially possible under the current conditions.

ISSS services have largely been made available online since the pandemic, which has added another layer of complexity for international students to navigate. The most common concerns expressed by international students include:

- Being able to access the services they need
- Sense of belonging
- Programming

Some international students also experience challenges with the disbursement of financial aid and scholarships, as the administration is complicated by complex database interfaces. This was specifically reported for master’s students with H1B visas who could not get financial aid for over nine months because the Financial Aid Office did not have access to the SAFE database for the Utah State Government.

Orientation

For Fall 2023, a two-day, in-person orientation is planned and will be preceded by completing visa and documentation online prior to arrival in Utah. Students will also receive more, helpful pre-arrival information about arriving in Salt Lake City and getting from the airport to campus. Day 1 of the orientation will cover topics like compliance with visa requirements, programming, and the Office of the Dean of Students. Day 2 will include a welcome reception, food, and games as well as student clubs.

ISSS Services

Starting in Summer 2023, walk-in hours will be available two days each week and be complemented by virtual appointments. The office has also hired an International Student Experience and Operations Manager to look at ways to help international students feel welcome and build a sense of community.

Housing

Early check-in will be available for international students, from August 10, 2023. ISSS has also worked with two off-campus housing providers (with properties close to campus) to provide a 5% discount for students and rent to them without a credit check since most international students have no credit history in the United States.

Programming

ISSS is planning to develop an orientation course to incrementally provide international students with the programming they need rather than sole reliance on the two-day orientation format. This course would go over a few weeks, with reinforcement of concepts presented to ensure students are aware of all the resources available to them.

Sense of Belonging

Initial discussion has taken place about creating an International Student Life Center that can potentially align with the possibility of expanding the scope of the Graduate School to include spaces to enhance belonging.

Recommendations Unique to International Students

- Encourage departments who have significant numbers of international students to engage more with ISSS. ISSS is very willing to connect with faculty and staff in departments and colleges to raise awareness of international student issues and available services.
- Explore feasibility of developing relationships with more off-campus housing providers
- The Graduate School should explore feasibility of developing a network of International Student Liaisons to capture student voice and concerns.
- Resources should be made available to address database issues impacting financial aid and scholarship disbursements.
- Encourage departments to create initiatives that help create a sense of community within their own student cohorts to complement efforts underway university-wide.