Chancellor's Graduate & Professional Student Advisory Board (CGPSA)
Graduate Student Finances Subcommittee Final Report 2020-2021

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Background and Accomplishments

The Graduate Student Finances subcommittee was started last year as the Student Debt subcommittee with a focus on finances and debt, but was expanded this academic year to incorporate finances as a whole due to COVID. The committee spent most of the 2019-2020 academic year developing a survey to assess student finances and the role of debt, but after the survey was finalized original plans were put on hold until after the pandemic to assess student financial needs. The committee reassembled in the Fall and members realized that the pandemic and its effects on students would be prevalent for some time, especially financially. In fact, the pandemic highlighted pre-existing struggles students faced that needed to be addressed as soon as possible. This led the committee to widen the scope of topics to be investigated in the 2020-2021 academic year. We developed a plan to connect with other stakeholders on campus to learn more about how various issues were being addressed in order to identify collaboration opportunities and gaps where CGPSA could step in and help. The committee was able to gather information on Broketober, Student Parent Resources, Housing, Graduate Student Basic Needs and Food Insecurity. Below, we describe our findings and accomplishments within each of these topics.

Meetings and Information Gathering

Over the course of the academic year, the subcommittee met with Assistant Dean of Graduate Studies Erum Abbasi Syed regarding Broketober, WorkLife Manager Sandy Batchelor and Associate Dean for Graduate Students and Postdoctoral Scholars Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor regarding Student Parent Resources, GSA Liaison Marcela Radke regarding Housing, and Aggie Compass Basic Needs Center Director Leslie Kemp regarding Basic Needs. We also received additional information regarding the history of housing in Davis from Alumnus Don Gibson.

Broketober

Our meeting with Erum Abbasi Syed is summarized as follows:

1. Broketober is a problem that does not have one size fits all solution, so it is being addressed with a three pronged approach. There needs to be multiple solutions and options in order to help the most students. Solutions to two of the prongs are expected to be be piloted in the Fall
2. Part of the issue with Broketober is incoming students being uninformed about it, so there needs to be increased transparency about it so incoming students can have time to prepare over the summer.
3. Communication strategies for Broketober and Fall Pilot
    a. Communication will be different for incoming students, accepted students, international students, incoming TAs
    b. SLATE could be a possible communication solution especially as it's used to communicate with everyone who applies to UC Davis. SLATE is a communication tool for incoming students and everyone who applies.

Student Parents

Our meeting with Sandy Batchelor and Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor is summarized as follows:

1. Student parent programs are distributed across disjoint departments: Worklife, The Women's Resources and Research Center, AUSSC, and Grad Studies. The lack of a clear home from student parent services and staff is a significant hurdle to supporting student parents.
2. Received UC Davis Child and Family Care Administrative Advisory Committee's student parent survey report: "'I'M SO TIRED.' Preliminary Report of the Spring 2019 UC Davis Graduate and Professional Student Parent Survey"
3. Estimated 300-400 student parents on campus
4. Challenges for graduate student parents are a significant threat to diversity and inclusion in higher education, and a leak in the pipeline to academia for women and students of color

Housing

Our meeting with Marcela Radke is summarized as follows:

1. We learned a brief history of Housing in Davis, which is important in contextualizing the Davis housing problem.
    a. Measure R implemented in 2000 severely limited new housing
    b. UC Davis rapidly expanded, a 50% increase in campus population from 2000 to 2017 without significant increase in housing off campus.
    c. Rent in Davis is rising faster than TA Wages. Fellowships and GSRs, which are relatively stagnant in terms of the amount and do not fluctuate with cost of living.

2. As this is a major issue that affects everyone on campus, we learned there are many stakeholders already involved on a wide variety of projects including data collection, information dissemination, advocacy, and community engagement.
3. Advocating for affordable student housing in Davis is a challenging effort given the push back from the wider Davis community. These efforts are often seen as a nuisance, but the pandemic demonstrated the importance of the student population as everything is shut down without the presence of students. Thus, there is silver lining with the pandemic because it is forcing change.
4. With a cost of living adjustment, there would still be a housing crisis.
5. Graduate and professional students can fall through the cracks, so there is a need for graduate and professional student representation.

Basic Needs

Our meeting with Leslie Kemp is summarized as follows:

1. The Aggie Compass Basic Needs Center website contains information about campus and community resources, but the listed information is not exhaustive. Information covers finances, food, housing, mental wellness, and crisis.
2. Graduate students must have a FAFSA on file to qualify for grants because they are need based, but many graduate students do not have a FAFSA on file. Without a FAFSA, students are ineligible for grants.
3. It is challenging for students to know the breadth of services and resources available through Aggie Compass given that the center mainly communicates through social media, student life socials, and their central location in Memorial Union.
    a. For example, we learned that there is support for students experiencing temporary homelessness between leases. This is an extremely common phenomena that many students would benefit from but graduate students are very surprised that such a program exists.
4. Ideas generated from meeting
    a. Designate space in Walker Hall for a basic needs hub
    b. Connect and disseminate information through graduate coordinators and graduate student leaders across departments and colleges
    c. Quarterly or regular meeting with CGPSA to offer fresh eyes and fresh minds on graduate student basic need concerns. Ensure graduate student representation on the Basic Needs campus committee.
    d. Rethink communication and wording to make it clear what programs do and who is eligible, e.g. grad students with a 25% appointment should generally be eligible for Calfresh as the income level is about $2k for one person.

Findings

The committee's investigative work led us to discover that UC Davis has various resources students can be pointed to, but we need to build the infrastructure to accommodate help-seeking behaviors of working-class students, who need more support and clear information. We found that many supports for graduate and professional students are designed for middle-class students that have been trained from a young age to seek help. In addition, the resources available and eligibility to receive them are poorly communicated. Pages on the UC Davis website have shallow information and broken links, or even outdated information. Many resources are hidden behind a "people-wall", where students have to define themselves as "in crisis" and reach out to staff to even understand what is available, let alone eligibility. This crisis mindset is at odds with the graduate student experience of living close to poverty as a general state of affairs, particularly for students without funding or with a 25% appointment. To provide resources for this community is to normalize their use by most of the people in the community. We found that the staff and administrators we met with were motivated and interested in student feedback and guidance in implementing and building their programs. They want to provide excellent service but often seem hampered by bureaucratic hurdles like misguided website evaluations or communication standards, lack of appropriately defined institutional departments and budgets, or challenging technology.

Communication

Communication about resources seems to be ad hoc and via email, which is not a best practice for communicating. Students receive dozens of emails a day, many of which do not pertain to them. Communication about vital resources should be done in many formats with appropriate levels of detail regarding eligibility and programs, including well organized and functioning websites, social media in addition to email, etc. To effectively provide services for the students that need it most we should look to a customer service model in the spirit of LA City College, which reaches out to students instead of requiring students to reach out, while also removing the "people-wall" wherever possible, and providing accurate and thorough information via multiple avenues.

Student Parents

Student parents face significant hurdles in accessing support and utilizing programs they are entitled to. The childcare grant program in particular has substantive issues. The program is very complicated and communication about eligibility and actual grant levels is unclear. The program requires a 12-page handbook and the names of the grants do not make sense. For example, the need-based grant is called 'community based care grant,' and the acronyms GSCCG and CBCG are used extensively throughout the document. The handbook states that the graduate student grant is a "per term flat award," which is not actually true, the grant covers *up to* $1100 of declared childcare expenses. The handbook also mentions "actual" and "documented" childcare expenses, which suggests students need to provide proof of expenses before they occur for the

grant, when they actually only have to declare the expenses and provider and have the provider sign. The program's aim is to cover one-third of childcare costs. For the youngest children the maximum grad student and need-based grant is $1600 a quarter, which suggests a monthly childcare cost of $1600, $1066.67 of which would have to be paid by grad students out of stipends. The actual cost of full time childcare for infants on Davis' campus (Hutchinson center) is $1917 a month, even after a UCD affiliate discount. Students would have to pay $1383 after both grants are applied. Considering this in addition to a $450 monthly insurance premium for a single child makes it clear: the grants are too small. For reference, a 50% TA stipend is $2508, and a 25% TA stipend is $1254.

Student parents also report challenges utilizing leave. Staff and faculty do not understand leave policies and are not communicating appropriately about them. Graduate students reported having their GSR appointments 'not continued' when supervisors know that they are pregnant, and being told about PELP but not paid-leave. The lack of a centralized staff member responsible for student parent programs leaves students to ask around their departments, where staff are struggling to understand leave processes and policies themselves.

One student shared this email they received from a staff member:

> "Please do not tell her I said this, but what we have done in the past is assigned the maternity leave in the summer, when the timing works out better - it is usually six weeks, and summer is six weeks, so it works out well. But I am not supposed to suggest that to you or plan for it, so … you didn't hear it from me."

It's unclear why staff should not be able to speak openly with students about leave, if this is not actually the policy, this demonstrates confusion and fear staff have about the leave policies. Students want to be able to coordinate effectively with their departments when taking leave.

Student Pay Issues

It is also worth noting that an issue was brought to our attention via email from a student who has had issues with 403b deductions with their pay. The student "learned that the UC Path infrastructure doesn't support grad students making 403b deductions," which is "yet another example" of graduate students falling through the cracks. On a similar note, we want to highlight here that though we did not investigate graduate student pay issues, there have been a plethora of issues with UC Path since it was rolled out and the University should demonstrate commitment to graduate students by addressing pay issues quickly as many graduate students have gone unpaid for months at a time. Graduate students being paid incorrectly and/or late seems to be a systemic issue that many graduate students may not know how to address or even devote time to fight. Simply put, the University needs to do better to alleviate pay issues affecting graduate and professional students, and a future CGPSA subcommittee may be needed to further investigate and address this pressing student concern.

Recommendations

Given the lack of effective communication regarding resources available to students, we identified the following strategies:

1. **Fix website issues.** Address broken links and dated information, centralize information rather than repeat it in places it can get out of date, improve search engine optimization so students can find what they are looking for when they need it, and provide clear and adequate information.
2. **Increase transparency** Communicate effectively, make program eligibility requirements excessively clear
3. **Improve community knowledge.** Share information, mobilize partnerships with leaders in graduate programs, institutionalize relationships between CGPSA and these offices to maintain engagement and a line of communication and provide student feedback to administrators
4. **Context.** Contextualize so students can make sense of and understand the why behind issues they may face.

To address the concerns identified above, we propose a Graduate Student Survival guide distributed to all incoming and current graduate and professional students and updated yearly. This would be a digital, living document. The guide would provide information and build on existing resources and serve as a roadmap to guide students as they navigate a variety of issues. All information in the guide should be contextualized, and should provide pathways to systems of support. The following information should be included in the survival guide (not exhaustive):

1. **Broketober:** the University should be upfront about the issue and the solutions that have been put forth to tackle the problem
    a. What is Broketober? What is being done to address it? Information about the three pronged approach and the Fall 2021 pilot
2. **Housing**
    a. Best practices for finding safe and affordable housing
    b. For incoming students: information on how to find housing in Davis and the importance of finding housing immediately after deciding on Davis, rather than waiting till the last minute
3. **Food Insecurity**
    a. Destigmatize and share available resources and how to utilize them
    b. Information on resources to help students have more agency over the food decisions they make (e.g. how to meet with a nutritionist, free cooking classes, etc.). We should not aim to just provide students with the resources, but also to help students make healthy food choices
4. **Student Parent Resources**
    a. Clear directions to resources designated for Student Parents
    b. Tips to navigate the system

To increase exposure to the survival guide, we propose a social media takeover to disseminate vital information and improve engagement with the guide. We propose preparation of the design and content approval of the digital guide to be completed by the end of Summer 2021, followed by dissemination in Fall 2021. Feedback on the guide should be sought and gathered in Winter 2022, followed by the preparation of a sustainable revision model of the guide by the end of Spring 2022. A matching website should be created for students to give feedback on the guide. Mockups of a possible look for the guide can be found in the appendix section.

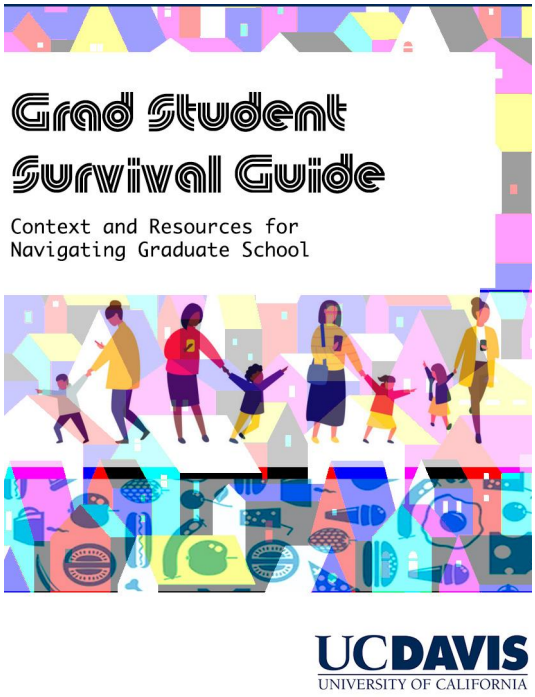
Serving Student Parents

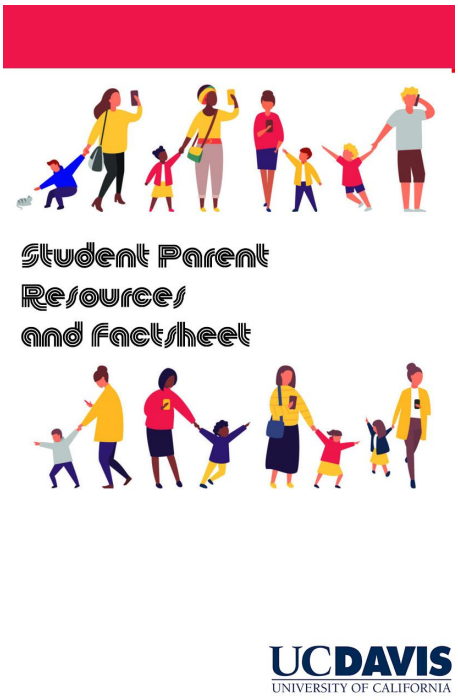
UCD needs a student parent center with staff to support the surprising number (at least 300-400 using childcare grants) of student parents on campus. The Student Parent Working Group has been developing excellent programing and building a better website over the past year. We are impressed with their work and recommend tackling the bureaucratic hurdles that prevent centralizing services and funding staff to support student access and support for processes like leave applications. We also support the findings of the UC Davis Child and Family Care Administrative Advisory Committee that the grant program should be simplified and expanded. Since students have to pay taxes on grant funds for childcare, an even better approach would be to provide the option to use the funds to provide substantial discounts on childcare for students at campus-based childcare centers.

Summary and Future Directions

Communication is key. Information should be consolidated and communal knowledge should be spread to incoming and current graduate and professional students. The use of resources should be normalized in order to address the stigma of resource utilization and address the problem of underutilized resources. Regarding student pay issues, perhaps a future CGPSA committee can help address this issue should problems continue to occur. With regards to COVID-19, the economic effects will likely last much longer than the “end” of the pandemic, so we need to be thinking of this as a long term problem which requires long term solutions. The pandemic has highlighted already existing problems with graduate and professional students over the course of the last year, so long term solutions/changes must be prioritized.

Appendix: Survival Guide Mockups





Basic Needs
Resources and
Fact Sheet
UCDAVIS
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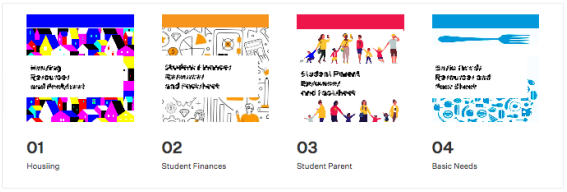
Grad Student Survival Guide
Context and Resources for
Navigating Graduate School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Name
Email
Message
Send Message

Grad Student Survival Guide

Context and Resources for
Navigating Graduate School

01

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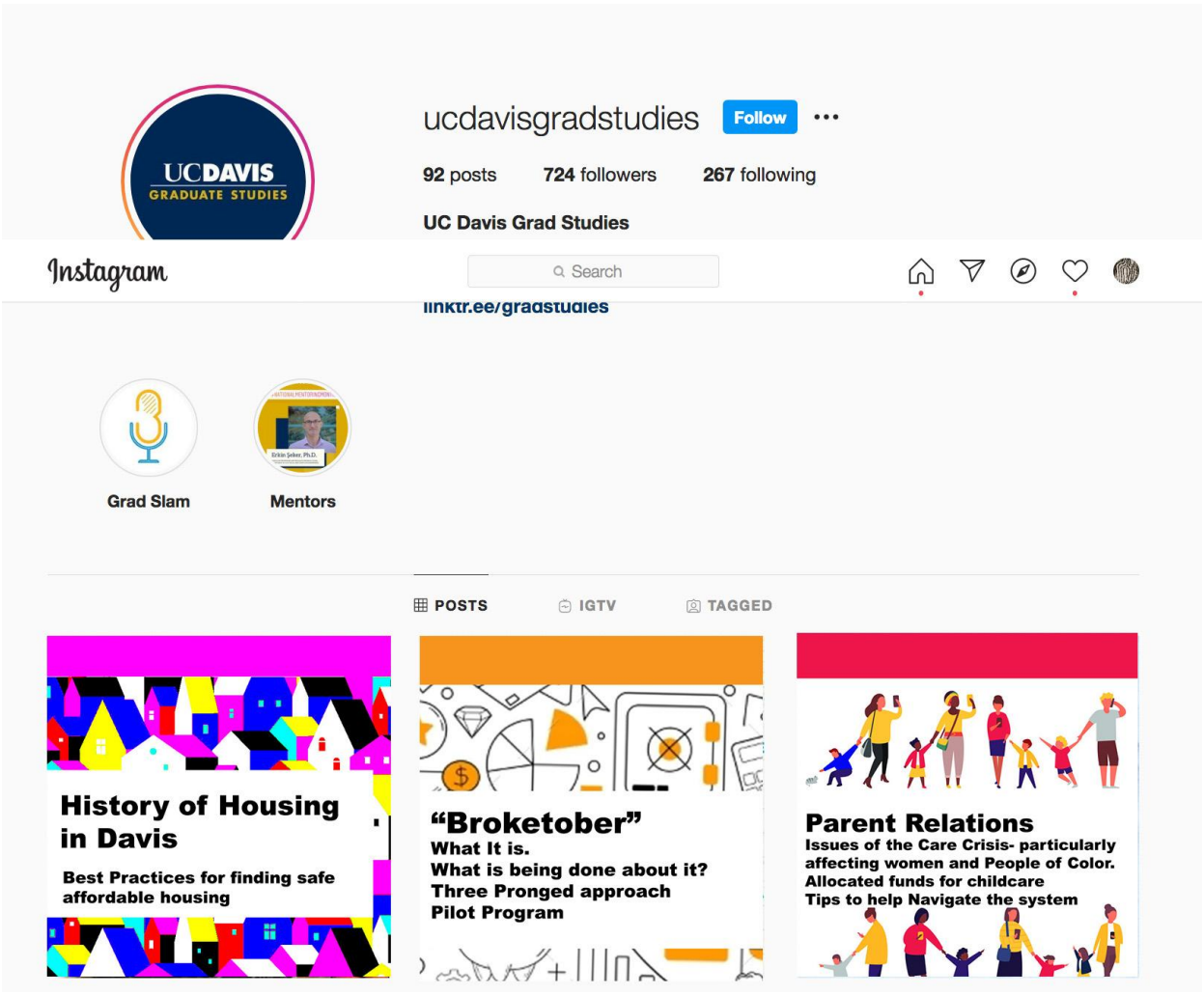
Basic Needs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Grad Slam
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TAGGED
History of Housing in Davis
Best Practices for finding safe affordable housing
"Broketober"
What It is.
What is being done about it?
Three Pronged approach
Pilot Program
Parent Relations
Issues of the Care Crisis- particularly affecting women and People of Color.
Allocated funds for childcare
Tips to help Navigate the system