

August 3, 2018

The Honorable Robert Casey  
United States Senate  
393 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Casey:

On behalf of the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), I write in support of S. 3106, the *Higher Education Mental Health Act of 2018*, and I commend your leadership in addressing the critical issue of student mental health. For more than five decades, the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) has been the only leading national organization dedicated solely to graduate education and research—our membership includes over 500 institutions of higher education in the United States, Canada and internationally. Our institutions award the majority of U.S. doctoral and master's degrees.

CGS believes that establishing a national commission to study and provide recommendations on how colleges and universities can improve mental health services is a vital first step. We are encouraged that S. 3106 seeks to address this important matter and acknowledges the fact that many institutions of higher education lack the resources necessary to provide adequate and timely care for students struggling with mental health issues. We urge you to consider how the work of the national commission can be expanded to be more inclusive of the graduate student population and encourage representation of the graduate education community on the commission.

According to CGS data, there were over 1.8 million graduate students enrolled in the 2015-2016 academic year alone.<sup>1</sup> The academic rigor of graduate school, when coupled with the need to balance other responsibilities, can trigger mental health issues. Many graduate students tend to be older, have families who rely on them, and are working full or part-time jobs. These factors can have a significant impact on their mental health status and the type of services and support they require. Several recent studies have drawn attention to the mental health challenges experienced by graduate students,<sup>2</sup> noting that the prevalence of mental health challenges among PhD students in particular is higher than that of other advanced degree holders, and much higher than in the general population.<sup>3</sup> These studies find that doctoral students are at risk for moderate-to-severe depression, psychological distress, and common psychiatric disorders.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Okahana, H., & Zhou, E. (2017). Graduate enrollment and degrees: 2006 to 2016. Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools.

<sup>2</sup> Flaherty, C. (2018, March 6). Mental Health Crisis for Grad Students. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/03/06/new-study-says-graduate-students-mental-health-crisis>.

<sup>3</sup> Evans, TM., Bira, L., Gastelum, GB, Weiss, LT., and Vanderford, NL. (2018). Evidence for a Mental Health Crisis in Graduate Education. *Nature Biotechnology*, 36(3): 282-284, as well as Table 4 in Leveque, Anseel, De Beuckelaer (2017). Leveque, K., Anseel, F., De Beuckelaer, A., Van der Heyden, J., & Gisle, L. (2017). Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students. *Research Policy*, 46(4), 868–879. doi:10.1016/j.respol.2017.02.008. For reference, 1 in 5 American adults experience mental illness in any given year.

<sup>4</sup> Evans, TM., Bira, L., Gastelum, GB, Weiss, LT., and Vanderford, NL. (2018). Evidence for a Mental Health Crisis in Graduate Education. *Nature Biotechnology*, 36(3): 282-284. Evans, TM., Bira, L., Gastelum, GB, Weiss, LT., and Vanderford, NL. (2018). Evidence for a Mental Health Crisis in Graduate Education. *Nature Biotechnology*, 36(3): 282-284.



Sincerely,

*Suzanne T. Ortega*

Suzanne T. Ortega  
President

CC: The Honorable Richard Blumenthal  
The Honorable Maggie Hassan  
The Honorable Tim Kaine  
The Honorable Amy Klobuchar  
The Honorable Bill Nelson  
The Honorable Tina Smith