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. 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, 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. These studies find that doctoral students are at risk for moderate-to-severe depression, psychological distress, and common psychiatric disorders.

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Previous research conducted by CGS also found that underrepresented minority doctoral candidates in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields were more likely to feel isolated from other students and worried about their mental or physical health than their peers.\(^5\) Furthermore, a significant number of graduate students work as research or teaching assistants and are hesitant to seek out campus services where they may cross paths with the undergraduate students they serve. Unfortunately, this often results in these graduate students either postponing or refusing to seek treatment altogether.

As the bill notes, a significant portion of students within the 18 to 24-year-old age range report mental health concerns. Early detection is key to early intervention. While a proportion of graduate students fall within that age range, an even greater proportion are older. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in Academic Year 2015-2016, nearly 32% of students enrolled in a postbaccalaureate program were between the ages of 25 and 29 years, and nearly 38% were between the ages of 30 and 49 years.\(^6\)

Additionally, the profile of the “traditional” undergraduate student at a U.S. institution is also changing. Today, many first-time students are in their mid-to late 20s, and they may also be first-generation college students who are navigating the higher education system with minimal support. Student veterans are another cohort of adult learners within the undergraduate and graduate population whose unique mental/behavioral health needs require attention. According to Student Veterans of America, 90% of veterans utilizing the GI Bill were enlisted and approximately two-thirds are first-generation college students.\(^7\) Veterans can experience difficulty transitioning from a highly-structured military lifestyle where uniformity is fundamental to success, to one that encourages students to engage in healthy debate and challenge prevailing ideas. This transition can prove to be a culture shock that can exacerbate existing mental illness and poor coping mechanisms. For these reasons, we would encourage the commission to consider how it will address prevention, detection, and intervention of students who are more likely to fall outside of the younger age range and are considered “nontraditional” due to their background.

Again, we thank you and your colleagues for your commitment to our nation’s students, their families, and institutions of higher education. Mental health and wellness is a high priority for the graduate education community. CGS is dedicated to advancing the conversation around this issue by launching a series of projects and initiatives that aim to facilitate culture change in academia, destigmatize the seeking of mental health support services, and promote mental wellness among master’s and doctoral students. We are eager to share our findings and to identify opportunities for collaboration. I hope you will consider CGS as a resource as you continue this vital work. If you have further questions, or if CGS can be of assistance, please contact our Vice President of Public Policy and Government Affairs, Lauren Inouye, at Linouye@cgs.nche.edu or (202)-461-3864.

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Sincerely,

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