

Federal Financial Support for U.S. Graduate Students During COVID-19

July 2020

On March 13, the U.S. entered a state of public emergency due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. To abide by public health safety measures, many universities transitioned to online education and on-campus laboratories temporarily closed. Institutions worked swiftly to ensure that graduate students continued to receive support in the immediate, and now need to address the anticipation of long-term effects due to the nation's economic financial insecurity and uncertainty.

A May 2020 flash survey of CGS members revealed that 87% of responding graduate deans had recorded or anticipated budget shortfalls due to the public health crisis.[1] Surveyed deans pinpointed protecting funds for grant aid, assistantships, fellowships, and other financial support for graduate students among their top priorities. The survey also identified broad support for allocating aid for graduate students' basic needs and mental health services. [1]



Typically, graduate students are at a more advanced stage of life compared to undergraduate students and face unique challenges during COVID-19.

In 2018, the average ages of master's and doctoral students were 32 and 35, respectively, and 32% of master's and 33% of doctoral students had dependent children.[2] COVID-19 poses unique challenges for these individuals and their families, including needs for child care, health care, home and food security, and more.



In addition to financial hardships onset by the COVID-19 pandemic, the mental health and wellbeing of the graduate student community must also be recognized. From increased stress and anxiety to substance abuse disorders, underlying mental and behavioral health conditions may be exacerbated by social distancing and feelings of uncertainty. CGS advocates for Congress and the Administration to provide support through adequate provisions to address mental and behavior health in future relief legislation.

[1] Okahana, H. (2020). The Impact of COVID-19 on Graduate Education. Retrieved from https://cgsnet.org/ckfinder/userfiles/files/CGS_ResearchInBrief_COVID19_June_2020_For_Web.pdf

[2] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2018). National postsecondary student aid study, for 2007-08 and 2015-16 cohorts. Retrieved from: <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/npsas/>.



On March 27, the CARES Act (P.L. 116-136) was signed into law and created financial assistance provisions that benefit certain groups of graduate students.

Higher Education Emergency Aid

Stipulated in the CARES Act, the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) provides emergency grant aid to eligible master's and doctoral students to cover expenses for housing, food, technology, health care, and child care. The Department of Education later ruled that student eligibility for HEERF refers to students who are or could be eligible to participate in programs under Section 484 in Title IV of the Higher Education Act (HEA).[3] Unfortunately, international students and undocumented students are excluded.

Student Loan Repayment

The CARES Act also includes temporary provisions to alleviate student loan burdens for student and graduated borrowers. The Adjustment of Subsidized Loan Usage Limits excludes the amount of loans borrowed from counting towards a student's annual and lifetime limits if the borrower is unable to complete the academic term due to COVID-19. The Temporary Relief for Federal Student Borrowers suspends payments on federal Direct Loans through September 30, 2020. The law also temporarily suspends interest on loans setting the interest rate to 0% through September 30.[4]

Research Funding

Many graduate students rely on federal funding to complete their research. The White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has extended grant flexibilities for funding agencies, including the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation, in a series of two memos, first on March 19[6] and again on June 18[7]. OMB provides certain administrative flexibilities to grantees in light of COVID-19, including use of grants for operational costs and salary pay.

Unemployment Benefits

The CARES Act expanded certain unemployment insurance provision that may benefit some graduate students. The Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program provides unemployment benefits to individuals who do not qualify for regular unemployment compensation and are unable to continue working as a result of COVID-19. Those who qualify may also receive an additional \$600 per week through July 2020.[5]

CGS Online Resources

(Hover & click to activate hyperlinks)

Financial Assistance Provisions in the CARES Act that May Impact Graduate Students as of April 13, 2020.

Summary of Unemployment Insurance Benefits Provisions in the CARES Act (P.L. 116-136) as of May 7, 2020.

How Graduate Students Finance Their Education as of July 2020.

CGS Summary of Select Provisions of the HEALS Act as of July 28, 2020

[3] Department of Education (2020). CARES Act: Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/caresact.html>

[4] Federal Student Aid (2020). Coronavirus and Forbearance Info for Students, Borrowers, and Parents. Retrieved from: <https://studentaid.gov/announcements-events/coronavirus>

[5] Department of Labor (2020). Coronavirus Resources. Retrieved from: <https://www.dol.gov/coronavirus>

[6] Office of Management and Budget (2020). March 19, 2020 Memorandum To The Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies. Retrieved from: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/M-20-17.pdf>

[7] Office of Management and Budget (2020). June 18, 2020 Memorandum To The Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies. Retrieved from: https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/M-20-26.pdf?utm_source=sfmc&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=adhoc&utm_content=newsletter