

A Call to Action for Graduate Deans

Supporting Mental Health and Well-being for Graduate Students: A Statement of Principles and Commitments of Graduate Deans, results from an iterative process drawing from the perspectives of a broad range of groups and experts. The vision, values and principles outlined below describe the foundational aspirations and beliefs that our commitments are designed to support.

Supporting Mental Health and Well-being for Graduate Students

A Statement of Principles and Commitments of Graduate Deans

Vision: As graduate deans, we are committed to building a graduate education system that supports the academic success and well-being of all students.

Values: We believe in . . .

1. **Student-centered education.** Graduate programs succeed when they provide opportunities for students to explore pathways and learning experiences that align with their interests and goals.
2. **Educational environments that support the whole student.** Students are most likely to succeed when graduate programs recognize that physical, social, and emotional experiences—in addition to academics—are important aspects of any student's life.
3. **Diversity, equity, and inclusion.** Diversity, equity and inclusiveness are at the core of graduate schools and programs where students from all backgrounds flourish.
4. **Transparency.** Graduate programs best support students when they offer clear program guidelines, policies and expectations that help students understand what is required for success.

Principles: We also believe that we, as graduate deans, play a key role in supporting graduate student mental health and well-being by leading graduate education at our respective institutions with the following principles:

1. **Well-being is a foundation of student success.** Graduate schools and programs that nurture a positive and inclusive learning environment allow graduate students to optimize personal, academic and professional growth.
2. **Thriving, not surviving, is the goal.** Some stresses and challenges are part of the learning process. Graduate schools and programs that balance these inherent stress points with safety, respect, and effective mentoring increase the likelihood that students will thrive.

3. The challenges experienced by graduate students vary widely and differ in important ways from the experiences of undergraduates. Universities must understand and act on the specific nature of the challenges graduate students face.

4. Faculty, staff, and administrators who work with graduate students may also themselves experience significant stress. The ability of graduate schools and programs to serve their students effectively also depends on the mental health and well-being of all of their community members.

Commitments: As graduate deans, we are committed to exercising our leadership in . . .

1. Involving students in the development and revision of programming to support mental health and well-being on our campuses. We recognize that graduate students have an important role to play in maintaining their own mental health, and their experiences and challenges in doing so should be well understood.

2. Recognizing and amplifying the roles of different groups in supporting graduate student mental health. We recognize that it “takes a village” to create the conditions of thriving for graduate students, and the village includes, but is not limited to: student support services, faculty, directors of graduate study, the graduate school, and graduate students themselves. We also recognize that the village extends beyond the campus boundary and includes friends and family of students, as well as community spaces and resources.

3. Working across campus offices to develop a comprehensive approach to mental health and well-being. Graduate deans have a key role to play in bringing relevant campus offices together to formulate these approaches that support graduate students.

4. Ensuring that mental health and well-being programs on our campuses are tailored to the needs of different groups of graduate students. We must recognize commonalities and differences among and between students from different backgrounds, for example students of color, LBGTQ+ students, international students, first-generation college and graduate students, and student parents. Programming and resources should also reflect the fact that sources of stress may vary across the graduate student life cycle.

5. Developing and using evidence-based strategies that are designed to improve graduate student mental health and well-being. Collecting baseline information and assessing outcomes of campus interventions is a key part of this work. In addition, we must engage and rely on subject matter experts in counseling psychology, student development, and other areas to inform the design of campus efforts.

6. Investing in strong mentor and supervisor training on our campuses. It is critical to provide advisors with the preparation needed to appropriately support their students’ intellectual and personal growth, to recognize signs of distress that may require outside support, and to refer students to resources and services that can help.

7. Increasing the collective capacity of the graduate dean community to better support graduate students. It is critical to exchange ideas and lessons learned with peers in order for the graduate education community to make progress toward our vision.

8. Incorporating training on social and emotional skills into curricula and/or professional development for graduate students and faculty.

Social and emotional skills such as collaboration, communication, cultural awareness, and building resilience, as well as other related topics, play an important role in the success of individuals and in the health of university communities.

Accountability: As graduate deans, each of us is committed to working with campus partners and our respective institutions to meet the following goals by the end of 2021. By this time, we will have pursued the following outcomes, in ways that reflect the context and circumstances of our own campus communities:

1. Supported the creation and institutionalization of a campus-wide consultative body that works on strategy and planning related to mental health and/or well-being of graduate students with a robust representation of various campus stakeholders.
2. Included explicit reference of support for graduate student mental health and well-being in the campus student health framework.
3. Developed and implemented a process to periodically assess graduate students' support needs or assured that any existing surveys address these issues.
4. Developed and implemented a plan to communicate to graduate program directors and graduate faculty about available campus resources and policies at the beginning of each academic term or assured that existing communication strategies include this information.
5. Developed and implemented a plan to communicate to all graduate students about graduate student mental health and well-being and information about available campus resources and policies at least once during each academic term or assured that existing communication strategies include this information.

Furthermore, we will know that we are making meaningful progress toward our vision when we see . . .

1. Fewer cases of attrition from master's and doctoral degree programs due to psychological and emotional distress.
2. Increased graduate degree attainment rates for both majority and traditionally underrepresented student groups.
3. More graduate students and alumni reporting satisfaction with the supportiveness of the graduate program environment.

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