

Dear President Tessier-Lavigne, Provost Persis Drell, and the Faculty Senate:

We write to you today to give voice to the needs of the graduate student community in these difficult times during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We admire the speed with which Stanford has moved to implement online teaching and learning, as well as the measures taken to quickly and safely help undergraduate and graduate students move out of their campus residences. However, **we do not feel that these measures have sufficiently addressed the very real impact this crisis has and will continue to have on graduate students' work, health, family life, and employment prospects.**

The pandemic is affecting all areas of **graduate research** for students in every PhD program. We cannot access labs, secure data, archives, or libraries. We have been forced to halt all fieldwork and travel with no indication of when normal work will resume. We are all facing a **decimated employment market** both within and outside of academia. Many of us are now responsible for **full-time care** of children or other relatives with no chance of respite; many of us are stranded in environments not at all conducive to work. Our **timelines to milestones and graduation** are thus significantly delayed, throwing our professional and financial futures into question. These delays put us at increased risk of losing access to a steady source of **income, health insurance, and affordable housing**. **International students** are at risk of losing our legal status in the U.S. and, by extension, our ability to continue with our scholarship. Both domestic and international students are more vulnerable than ever to instances of **abuse of power** in our research settings. We are all suffering through the anxiety of isolation, of falling ill, of watching loved ones fall ill: regardless of geographic location, our need for **mental health support** has never been greater.

We are calling on the University to mitigate the potentially disastrous consequences of the pandemic on our scholarship and basic quality of life, and thus submit this list of measures not as demands but as recommendations, with the hope that Stanford will honor its commitment to the success and well-being of its graduate students. With this petition, we express our support for such measures as disclosed below and offer testimony as to their necessity, directing these requests to all relevant decision making bodies at Stanford: administrators, departments, the faculty senate, and the Academic Continuity Group.

We also wish to state that we stand in solidarity with masters and professional degree students in their demands for a discount in tuition, as well as with contracted workers, including custodians and childcare workers, as [they and their allies demand](#) that Stanford extend the pay continuity policy to all workers.

**As of 04/04/2020 some of these demands have been met. We have marked these "Addressed."**

We call on Stanford to:

## **1. Extend graduate student timelines and funding, by:**

- Guaranteeing that university and department financial support for graduate students for this summer and the next academic year will not be reduced and will match any increases in rent, insurance premiums, and inflation
- Matching external funding sources that are cancelled due to disruptions surrounding the pandemic
- Ensuring summer funding for all PhD students equal to funding during fall, winter, and spring quarters
- Extending guaranteed funding for all PhD students by one year

While we have been assured of our assistantships and fellowships for the spring quarter, many of us are looking to the summer and year ahead, and are concerned about the future sources of funding that we depend on. In a recent email addressed to the Stanford community, Provost Persis Drell stated Stanford's commitment to the "continuation of support for graduate students." We ask that Stanford both guarantee graduate student funding internal to the university, whether in the form of jobs, fellowships, stipends, or financial aid, and match funding that has been cancelled due to COVID-19. Additionally, Provost Drell's email cited a new policy to freeze salary increases for faculty and staff, leaving room for uncertainty about graduate student pay. As graduate students narrowly afford our basic living expenses each year, we ask the University to commit to match our pay rates to any increases in rent, health care insurance premiums, and inflation.

Graduate students are particularly worried about our summer funding. Many of us do not receive summer funding from our departments, but rely on research grants and fellowships that are in jeopardy due to present circumstances. Others of us make ends meet through side jobs wherever available, jobs that are just not there anymore. We ask that Stanford provide funding for this summer equal to funding for other quarters so that we can pay our rent, buy food, and provide ourselves with the basic necessities.

As explained above, many research projects have been put on hold due to COVID-19, and this has affected concerns for publication, promotion, and progression in one's academic career. Faculty who are taking on additional childcare tasks are less able to offer us advising during this time. In addition, the cancellation of hundreds of conferences and colloquia has extensively curtailed opportunities for PhD students to present research, get feedback, and establish ourselves as scholars in our respective fields. Lastly, many universities and other organizations have already begun to publicly announce that they will have 'hiring freezes' for the upcoming year. As the global economy heads towards a recession, students near the job market must confront a profoundly challenging hiring landscape. Guaranteed funding equal to the baseline funding that all PhD students received this year as well as extending tenure in our programs for

a full additional year (including fall, winter, spring, and summer) will give us the time and the resources we need to do the research we came to Stanford to accomplish.

Furthermore, the current public health crisis has affected the research of PhD students in very similar ways that it has affected the research of faculty members. By granting junior faculty an extension on their tenure clock, Stanford has acknowledged the full severity of the effects that the current public health crisis has had and will continue to have on all forms of academic research. Just as this tenure clock extension has been granted to all junior faculty, so should this additional year of guaranteed funding be extended to all matriculated PhD students. If tenure clocks are frozen and faculty hiring is likewise put on hold, there's no way to reasonably expect that graduate students are going to be able to complete all graduate responsibilities and find success in a job market where the aforementioned difficulties will continue to present unprecedented challenges. This is an opportunity for Stanford to lead other universities in demonstrating its support for its PhD students in this time of unprecedented disruption to the normal operations of academia and the world.

## **2. Amend graduate student housing policies and rent rates, by:**

- Extending graduate student housing priority by one year, and **[addressed]** allowing students who have moved in response to COVID-19 to maintain their priority
- Maintaining rent at 2019/20 rates

Along with academic extensions and an additional year of funding, extending all PhD students' housing priority for an additional year (7 years total) is a critical component of timeline extensions for PhD students. If students will require an additional year to complete qualifying exams and other program requirements, we must have the ability to stay in university housing for the same amount of time. Graduate students at Stanford are in a socioeconomically precarious position: we fall within the "very low" to "extremely low" income brackets in Santa Clara County and we pay high portions of our salaries in rent. Forcing us to either finish our PhDs early or move into non-university housing places undue pressure on already rent-burdened students. Many of us do not have the finances to pay higher rent, handle moving costs, or put down a deposit for an apartment in the community. Additionally, many of the affordable apartments available in the community are of poor housing standards and come with many roommates, cramped spaces, or long commutes. Students who move into these locations out of necessity may experience negative impacts on their academic success during the most important and stressful time of their PhD. We must protect students who have been set back by COVID-19 from the pressure to sacrifice their research and learning opportunities in order to finish their degree programs before their housing priority runs out.

**[Addressed 04/04/2020: see [RDE FAQs](#)]** A related housing concern is Stanford's policy that students who leave university housing forfeit their priority. In response to the current health crisis, many students have had to rapidly relocate for their own health and well-being. Many

would wish to return to campus when it is safe, but are concerned that their housing priority has been forfeited or decreased. Ensuring those who moved off campus due to coronavirus-related concerns are able to move back when it is safe is a reasonable request that will provide stability for students who will need to work hard to restart their research activities when they are allowed.

Finally, next year the University plans to increase rent by 2-7% for students renewing their existing contracts. This is not factoring in overall increases in rent due to the opening of EVGR which is markedly more expensive than the currently available university housing. Meanwhile, due to COVID-19, graduate students have been losing opportunities to do paid work, work that many of us rely on to supplement our stipends. Those of us who have small reservoirs of emergency savings have experienced significant reductions to those funds due to the market collapse and new expenses associated with COVID-19. Graduate students simply are not in financial positions to adjust to rate hikes in September. We ask Stanford to maintain rent at the 2019/20 rates as these new rent levels have now become not simply unaffordable, but unbearable.

### **3. Install an official channel to report power abuse issues stemming from COVID-19-related policies and pressures**

Due to COVID-19, there is a tremendous amount of new pressure on faculty and graduate students alike. Because of the hierarchies between professors and trainees, these pressures have led to new avenues for abuse of power, including pressure to violate shelter-in-place, orders to conduct non-essential research, and pressure to accelerate PhD timelines because of a lack of funding. Creating a formal, responsive reporting mechanism for issues around power abuse will ensure compliance with guidelines provided by the University. This will also allow students to be comfortable making decisions about our own health, livelihood, and academic success that are in line with stated university policy, including in gray area situations. In several instances guidelines put forth by the University have resulted in a wide range of interpretations from faculty members. Moreover, the University's mechanisms of reporting covid-associated misconduct are vague and do not protect students from retribution (e.g. In the March 18th statement from [Guidance regarding on-campus work](#), "Research is an essential function of the University so research can be preserved or, in some cases, continue, especially certain medical research" vs older guidance from March 17th in [Statements to on-campus researchers](#), "No student or postdoctoral scholar should be required to go into the laboratory. Students with concerns should contact their department chair, student services staff, or the associate dean for student affairs in their School"). A standardized reporting mechanism that operates independent of departments will allow students more equitable protection from power abuse and will alleviate the uncertainties and political intricacies that make the University's current suggested method of reporting unreasonable and ineffectual.

### **4. Provide robust support for mental health by:**

- Removing limits on number of CAPS visits, and let students see a CAPS therapist via telemedicine as often as they need
- Compensating students for the cost of out-of-network mental healthcare if a CAPS clinician cannot be found
- Providing full compensation for the cost of mental healthcare for students currently outside of California; or **[addressed]** allow out-of-state students to see CAPS clinicians via telemedicine

The mental health burden of COVID-19 is enormous. Not only must we all contend with the anxiety intrinsic to a pandemic—particularly those of us who have at-risk partners, family members, and friends—but we must do so while being isolated from our support networks. Even at the best of times, remaining inside and seeing no one would have a catastrophic impact on mental health. For graduate students, this situation is particularly dire. As it is, graduate students suffer from depression and anxiety at astronomical rates. The 40% of us with anxiety and/or depression can expect to see our symptoms worsen the longer this crisis continues; those of us who have never before dealt with mental health issues may find ourselves in need of psychological support for the first time in our lives.

Fortunately, Stanford has the resources to deal with this crisis head-on. With a large fraction of the student body now absent from campus, CAPS clinicians should be available for every student. Given that we have no idea how long this crisis will last, and its mental health effects will likely persist long into the future, it is imperative that Stanford explicitly allow for students to access indefinite care through CAPS. If demand for CAPS therapists does become high as more students take advantage of telemedicine, Stanford must hire more clinicians or pay for students to see out-of-network mental healthcare providers, since it is nearly impossible to obtain an appointment with an in-network therapist on any reasonable timescale.

Finally, many students have now left California because of the crisis, but they are no less in need of mental healthcare. However, if they are covered by Cardinal Care, they will be unable to find in-network therapists where they are. Therefore, Stanford must provide for these students by compensating them for the cost of mental healthcare or find a way to allow out-of-state students to use CAPS via telemedicine. These services for out-of-state students must be of the same quality as services for in-state students (i.e., *not* brief phone consultations) to ensure their health and safety. **[Addressed 04/05/2020: Out-of-state students are able to access full-length phone (not Zoom) appointments.]**

## 5. Support graduate student families through:

- An emergency enrollment period for the dependent health care plan, with the aim of ensuring that all Stanford families have access to quality health care at this time
- Further subsidies of dependent health care costs for spouses, and 100% subsidized coverage for children

- Disbursing Graduate Family Grant funds to compensate parents for the additional childcare labor they must now perform

The challenges of confronting a global pandemic in our day-to-day lives have been difficult for all members of the Stanford community, but they have been especially burdensome on students with families. Many students with children or spouses are especially worried about the health of their family members. Corporate lay-offs and rising unemployment mean that many students' spouses may lose not only their jobs, but health insurance for themselves and their children. We must ensure that all students' families have access to affordable dependent health care, especially given growing financial uncertainty. For this reason, we ask that the enrollment period for the dependent health care plan be given an emergency extension and that the University offer further subsidies for dependent health care for students' spouses and 100% subsidized dependent health care for students' children.

School and day care closures have also placed significant burdens on students with children, who no longer have "time off" from childcare on weekdays to complete their coursework, research, or other responsibilities as graduate students. The COVID pandemic will likely slow time to completion for many students, but will likely slow time to completion even more for students with families, who must provide full-time childcare on top of their academic and research responsibilities. The Graduate Family Grant is typically available to students with families in order to assist them with childcare costs: we ask that these funds be made available to student parents now performing this labor of care at home, who will also need to pay for further childcare in the future given their delayed completion timelines.

## **6. Provide emergency COVID-19 funding grants of up to \$2500 per student, made available on a need basis**

The COVID-19 crisis, in addition to the pressures and uncertainties it has caused for research progress, has led to a wide range of unexpected financial difficulties that cannot be easily accounted for: expenses that arise from moving and storage, dependent health care premiums, and physical and mental health care expenses, materials for research inaccessible due to library closures.

We ask for grants of up to \$2500 to be made available on a per-student basis to help mitigate these costs for students facing financial pressures. It is unclear whether the Emergency Grant-in-Aid fund can or will accommodate the types of needs emerging as a result of the pandemic, so we ask that a flexible and accessible grant funding mechanism be dedicated to covering a broad range of covid-related expenses, including moving, standard living expenses for those who have lost jobs and savings, and medical expenses. These funds should be clearly identified and widely communicated to lower the barriers to entry for students in need of aid.

## **7. Increase financial and legal assistance for international students**

The COVID-19 pandemic has serious financial implications for international students who need to show proper funding to DHS in order to keep their legal visa status. Since many Stanford programs do not offer summer funding to their students, students rely on internships or on-campus summer jobs to fund their stay at Stanford during the summer. COVID-19 has affected the availability of the few internships and jobs that international students can legally pursue. There are substantial skillset, location, and duration restrictions on the types of employment international students can take on, making it even more difficult for us to find alternatives in the current climate that may satisfy the DHS' stipend requirements. Therefore, we request that Stanford guarantees full summer funding for all international graduate students to ensure they can keep their visas.

A leave of absence requires the student to leave the country, which is a particularly fraught concept at this time given the uncertainty around travel arrangements relating to both the availability of flights and the prospects of travel bans implemented at short notice. In addition, international students are only permitted to take a leave of absence for one quarter at a time, following which they are required to apply for new forms that reset their visa clock and in turn impact upon their ability to take on internships in the future. This suggests that international students who take a leave of absence during the spring will be required to re-enroll full-time at Stanford during the summer quarter to maintain their existing visas, which may not be practical depending on the courses offered by their departments.

In the specific cases where international students need to extend their visa status due to delays in fulfillment of degree and research requirements, Stanford should provide free legal counsel on issues related to immigration and access to funding sources or government programs that international students may be eligible for. Additionally, since international students are not eligible for the \$1,200 Federal Coronavirus Relief, Stanford should provide this stimulus package to international students. Without this relief, international students will be at a disadvantage compared to their US counterparts.

[Here](#) is the link to the anonymous testimonies. It is updated daily.