



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
GRADUATE-PROFESSIONAL
STUDENTS

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July 19, 2019

The Honorable Robert P. Casey Jr.
Member, United States Senate
393 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Casey,

On behalf of the National Association of Graduate-Professional Students (NAGPS), and graduate and professional students nationwide, we would like to express our gratitude for your continued support for higher education. You have championed improvement of mental health support and infrastructure at institutes of higher education, and we appreciate your efforts to ensure that students are provided the care they need to complete their education without the added roadblocks of excessive stress and anxiety.

The NAGPS has represented the graduate student voice and brought to the fore many conversations by advocating for graduate students nationwide at all levels of government. Graduate students hold a multitude of responsibilities, as they conduct research, attend classes, and also teach undergraduate students. Hence, the mental health concerns faced by these students affect them not just personally but also the students they teach and mentor - it reverberates throughout the campus climate. We are grateful for your reintroduction of the **Higher Education Mental Health Act (S.1204)** and your call for the establishment of the Advisory Commission on Serving and Supporting Students with Mental Health Disabilities in Institutions of Higher Education, and **we hope to see this legislation enacted.**

Graduate students face an ever-growing mental health crisis, a crisis being driven primarily by poor advisor-advisee relationships as well as a poor work-life balance. The brutal climate of graduate school has been called "academic hazing," and in consequence, between 39 and 41% of graduate students suffer from anxiety and/or depression, facing serious mental health problems six times the rate of the general population and twice that of undergraduate students. These problems compound as universities face budget cuts that compromise the quality of medical and mental health services and availability of financial support for graduate students. In consequence, half of doctoral students leave school without finishing their degrees, as there are few resources or protections for graduate students. For more information on the state of graduate student life and references for these figures, we would be happy to share our policy brief on Graduate Student Life.

Few incoming graduate students are aware of the climate of graduate school, with many institutions, departments, programs, and research labs having great incentive to hide this information from applicants. They need students in their programs to conduct research and teach courses, and to receive research funding. As the national advocacy organization for graduate students, it is our job to speak for the students who are unable to speak for themselves. The quality of the advisor-advisee relationship is the number one predictor of success in graduate school and after, and there is nothing to guarantee that a student be protected from abusive and toxic behavior.

We ask that you include graduate student-specific needs in the Higher Education Mental Health Act by including the following provisions:

- Require institutions to monitor and report the mental health of their students through tools such as surveys regarding campus climate, as well as advising and mentorship,
- Require institutions with graduate programs to provide applicants with information about their attrition rates (for research advisors and programs) and provide accurate information on current placement of former students

We are grateful for the efforts that you have undertaken to improve higher education and support graduate students. We are interested in pursuing other avenues to address this crisis, including working with federal agencies to request evidence of quality mentorship for researchers applying for grants, working with stakeholders towards expanding support for mental health services at institutions, advocating for requesting a GAO report, and more. If there is any way we can be of assistance to your office in these efforts to better the lives of graduate students, please let us know.

Sincerely,



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Senator Tina Smith

Senator Richard Blumenthal

Senator Amy Klobuchar