



**PennState**

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**FROM:** Nicholas P. Jones, Executive Vice President and Provost  
Regina Vasilatos-Younken, Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of the Graduate School

**TO:** Members of the Task Force to Assess the Climate for Graduate Assistants at Penn State

**SUBJECT:** Report from the Task Force

We would like to thank the members of the Task Force to Assess the Climate for Graduate Assistants at Penn State for their efforts to examine the climate and conditions related to graduate students who are supported by graduate assistantships across the University.

The Task Force was appointed in December 2016 as a continuation of the work of The Graduate School's Strategic Plan, particularly the priority goal of Advancing Strategies in Support of Graduate Education Quality, including improving graduate student support and conducting regular graduate program reviews. Members of the Task Force included faculty members and graduate students from a variety of academic units across Penn State, as well as several administrators whose roles focus on climate and diversity. As a group, you provided a broad set of perspectives on the student experience at Penn State.

The task force was charged to explore student-centered factors that impact graduate program quality, which include examining the current environment within which graduate students fulfill their academic requirements, research and/or teaching activities associated with assistantship opportunities, and the relationship with their advisors. We note that the group reviewed results from the Graduate School Exit Survey, which is disseminated every semester to all students who have filed an intent to graduate for that semester, as a starting point for discussion. The committee then decided to develop a more comprehensive survey focused on climate issues to be given to all graduate assistants (GAs) at the university, not only those ready to graduate. Focus group interviews with various populations of students were also planned to provide qualitative data about the experiences of graduate assistants.

The task force's plans were necessarily altered as a result of the February 22, 2017 filing of a petition by the Coalition of Graduate Employees (CGE)/Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA) with the Pennsylvania Labor Relations Board (PLRB) seeking an election to represent a group of graduate students. In light of the legal restrictions imposed on the University as a result of the petition filed by PSEA/CGE, a decision was made to **halt** efforts to conduct a revised survey and

instead revisit the Graduate School Exit Survey data to determine whether relevant information about the experiences of graduate students who received assistantship packages could be gathered from the responses.

Given these constraints, we appreciate the committee's efforts to analyze the Graduate School Exit Survey data from the point of view of GAs. The review of Exit Survey responses from Spring 2013-Spring 2017 from 1,973 GAs indicated that GAs were extremely positive about their experiences at the university and that their responses were similar to those of graduate students who did not receive assistantships (non-GAs); for instance 92% of GAs and 93% of non-GAs rated their overall experience at the university either good, very good, or excellent. The areas with the lowest ratings primarily were associated with career development opportunities. The Graduate School has similarly identified career development as an important area of need and is in the process of developing more resources for graduate students in this area. The survey data were also analyzed by race and ethnicity, gender, and citizenship status. While all groups were still positive about the university, some trends of concern were noted. Responses from women and black/African American GAs were slightly less positive than those of their male or peers of other racial/ethnic groups. In addition, although survey responses were largely positive, a subset of GAs (5-15% depending on the question) expressed dissatisfaction with their experience, and their views should not be discounted. These are clearly areas that continue to merit more attention to ensure that the university is truly attending to the needs of all GAs.

We note that additional efforts are underway or are planned to assess the climate for all Penn State graduate students. The Graduate School recently completed a full analysis of the Exit Survey data, which is publicly available on the Graduate School website at <http://gradschool.psu.edu/graduate-school-exit-survey-report/exit-survey/>. We do acknowledge that the Exit Survey data is limited in that it reflects the opinions of students who have successfully completed their degree programs and does not capture feedback from students who step out and fail to complete their respective degrees. However, other surveys should help address this deficit. A university-wide Sexual Misconduct Climate survey was distributed in Fall 2018, and a university-wide climate and diversity survey is to be distributed in Spring 2020. The Graduate Student and Faculty Issues Committee of Graduate Council is also exploring the development of a survey to collect information specifically from graduate students who fail to complete their degrees. Results of the various surveys will be taken into consideration in current programming efforts and in strategic planning for future initiatives on the part of the Graduate School, with a goal of continuous improvement towards making the graduate student experience exemplary in all areas.

Cc: Advisory Committee for Graduate Education