

Barriers to Completion for UC Graduate and Professional Students

January 2016 Report



The **UC Student Association** is the official voice of over 240,000 undergraduate, graduate, and professional students from all ten UC campuses. It is our mission to advocate on behalf of current and future students for the accessibility, affordability, and quality of the UC system. Learn more about our work at www.ucsa.org.



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The University of California (UC) prides itself on being a world-class public research university. The success of the UC graduate student population, which generates and performs a good deal of this research work, is vital to UC meeting its mission statement. Despite the rank of many UC campuses among top national research universities, many barriers prevent the successful completion of postgraduate degrees. This should be of utmost concern to the university, given the vital role these students play in producing research and providing critical undergraduate instruction. Among other issues that affect student success, the length of time to degree, particularly for PhD students, and particularly in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (non-STEM degrees), should be seen as a high-priority issue that the UC can and should improve.

The following report highlights some of the major barriers to graduate student completion. These recommendations will improve the quality, access and affordability of graduate degrees. Secure pathways to completion through funding guarantees; housing and food security; positive advising; and investing in creative ways to support the dissertation process, are all issues that must be simultaneously addressed in order to improve research quality, quality of life, and future professional prospects of PhD students.

Further, because many of these items are felt most by historically marginalized individuals, who often have less support and mentorship, the UC must be sure to give attention to populations who have been historically excluded from the academic sphere, particularly in the area of mentorship and advising. As we advocate for increased and improved completion rates, we also caution against pushing PhD students to complete degrees on an artificially expedited timeline, which might paradoxically harm reputation, quality of education, quality of life and research production.

Precarity of Funding for PhD Students

There is insufficient secure financial support for all graduate students working toward terminal degrees. This situation is compounded by a lack of consistent transparent guidelines for normative progress. Students cannot plan, save, or foresee their future in a system where funding is granted year-to-year. This problem could be solved by



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creating department-specific guidelines for normative progress that are founded on good research into best practices. Such research should be funded and conducted by UCOP. This should be coupled with systemwide and campus-specific admissions contracts that are transparent and consistent. These contracts need to stipulate estimated time to degree, number of years of funding, form of such funding, and expected cost of living in the area. There should also be campus-wide contingency funds to be used in the event that departments risk default on their contractual obligations. Additionally, we call upon UCOP to create a contingency fund that would serve to offset the risk of campus funded guarantees.

Housing Security

We applaud the UC's renewed attention to housing as a major concern that appends the new growth initiative, and urge the consideration of graduate housing availability, affordability, and dignity in this process. Many campuses provide little or no graduate housing, or options that are absolutely unaffordable considering the average Teaching Assistant (TA) or Graduate Researcher salary.

UC San Francisco's provision of \$4,000 stipends to incoming students is a commendable practice we would like to see implemented on all campuses. This would increase first-year retention as well as recruitment, and would provide some relief for students on campuses with exorbitant costs of living. We further recommend that the UC conduct graduate-specific cost of living surveys regularly, alongside the undergraduate survey, since there is little to no institutional research on this topic at the moment. The UC should offset the disparities of costs on campuses by providing, or urging campuses to provide, regular annual cost of living offset stipends based on a shared assessment of housing, food and gas prices in UC locations. Many graduate students are living below the poverty line in their areas, which leads to mental anguish, quality decrease, delays, and dropout.



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Importance of Mentorship and Advising

The primary advisor often controls the success and timeline of doctoral education and progress. A negative relationship could very easily lead to artificially prolonged or terminated degrees, regardless of academic performance or research. The lines of communication between advisors and graduate students can be easily broken when the proper avenues for creating and maintaining a healthy rhythm are ruptured, or nonexistent to begin with. Since one of the top ten predictors of graduate student depression at UC Berkeley is advisor relationships (Panger et al., 2014), we may deduce that current methods to create and maintain positive communication channels are not sufficient. The challenges of graduate student-advisor relationships are made invisible by the expectations that graduate students are solely responsible to prevent and resolve conflict with advisors without proper guidelines nor a shared language, or by primarily relying on the Ombuds office - official channel for anonymous reporting (lacks record keeping for repeated offenses) - UC counselors who defend faculty, or fellow peers who are also untrained in conflict resolution.

We recommend increased or new training for junior faculty in appropriate and productive advisor-advisee relationships, clear resources for conflict resolution and/or changing advisors (UC Berkeley currently provides a semester of funding for students in this situation to ensure their successful transition). We also urge the consideration of programs that provide secondary advisors outside students' departments in order to provide cultural and professional mentorship to graduate students from underrepresented and historically marginalized backgrounds.

All But Dissertation - The Tuition Trap

While pre-qualification examination time should certainly be studied, and departments should ensure clear and attainable timelines and guidelines, much of a PhD student's time is spent in the university after coursework has ended. Unlike many universities, the UC charges fairly high fees of PhD students who have completed all but dissertation (ABD), despite the fact that many students outside STEM could easily produce dissertation work from outside the university. This is likely an artifact from the days when tuition was so low that students could easily pay fees while working outside the



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university; this is, of course, no longer the case. Currently, students have three options available to them; work as TAs in order to receive health insurance and tuition remissions, take a “leave of absence,” which in many circles implies a personal tragedy or failure to perform; or they may work “in absentia,” which implies field research and requires the student to live out-of-state. A new tier, which implies that research being performed but allows students access to university resources (libraries, possibly campus health and wellness insurance and resources, specialized equipment, eligibility for university and departmental grants, “student” status) while charging a nominal fee (under \$1000 a quarter) would enable students to perform research while unclogging the availability of TAs and making way for newer students. This may also provide relief for impacted UC locations that expect large influxes of undergraduate students.

We simultaneously recommend a robust reinvigoration of dissertation funding to enable students to begin, develop and complete dissertations without taking a TAs, which simultaneously provides little professional development after a point, and takes up a great deal of time and affective labor.

We also advise attention to Graduate Student Instructorships for ABD students, who require professional development, particularly at this stage. Attention must be paid to this second, post-coursework phase of the PhD, which is often where students become trapped. Summer stipends and mentorship programs are also necessary for the financial and academic stability of graduate students, who could easily perform research during the summer months, but often work outside jobs to offset the low pay they receive during the academic year.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Graduate students of the UC Student Association look forward to the opportunity to discuss these policy recommendations with administrators and faculty alike. We welcome an open dialog to reach mutually agreeable solutions that will allow more PhD candidates to complete their degree in a timely manner and create a diverse pipeline of future faculty members and industry leaders.



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Summary of Recommendations:

1. Creation of a UCOP administered fund that would serve as a backstop for funding guarantees extended by any UC. Participating campuses could be required to establish their own fund over the next five years.
2. Regular institutional research on Graduate wellbeing and cost of living
3. Incentivize high quality mentorship and advising, including the training and support of faculty in this capacity as well as resources for students
4. Focus on mentorship and retention of marginalized students, provide these students with additional support to ensure completion
5. Creation of new options for dissertation work outside the university
6. Robust funding for non-STEM dissertation research
7. Summer research support