

# Graduate Financial Aid Priorities for FY 2020-21

Prepared by the Graduate Leadership Council

December 21, 2018

## 1. Introduction

The Graduate Leadership Council (GLC) is the representative body for the more than 3,800 graduate students at American University (AU). The GLC brings together the leaders of the five Graduate Student Councils (GSCs) at AU to mobilize issues that are relevant to graduate students and the AU community. Our mission is to serve as the primary and unified voice of the graduate population to AU's administration, faculty, staff, trustees, alumni and undergraduate leaders; to represent the needs of all graduate-level students at AU; and to improve graduate students' academic, social and professional experiences.

Graduate students are an integral part of American University. They carry out research and innovation that permeate beyond AU campus, and their research and teaching enrich the undergraduate curriculum and experience. Thus, maintaining a competitive edge and attracting new talents to graduate programs is crucial as AU develops its strategic planning and budget cycle for the next five years. For current and prospective graduate students, financial affordability and institutional support play a primary role in shaping their graduate experience and expectations. In an effort to develop a unified voice across all graduate schools and graduate organizations as AU approaches its budget cycle for FY 2020-21, the GLC has formed a task force to consider how current graduate students' financial and institutional needs are met. This reports identifies the strengths and weaknesses in the current system, and make recommendations for meeting graduate students' needs for FY 2020-21.<sup>1</sup>

This year's task force has set out to address three subtopics: the global and national trends of graduate enrollment; areas of advocacy for graduate experience at AU; and limitations and further advocacy.

## 2. Global and National Trends of Graduate Enrollment

There is an increasing demand for specialized skills globally - with about 2.5 million jobs are projected to require a master's, doctoral, or advanced degree between 2008 and 2018.<sup>2</sup> However, in recent years, the growth in first-time graduate enrollment remains flat, according to its most recent data, while the number of graduate applications to U.S. universities has decreased.<sup>3</sup> Between Fall 2016 and Fall 2017, first-time graduate enrollment dropped by -0.1 percent and the number of applications for admission to U.S. graduate schools decreased -1.8 percent.<sup>4</sup> There are number of factors for this negative shift in national graduate enrollment.

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<sup>1</sup> This report represents the voices of all masters and doctoral students at AU and not law students at WCL. However, we recognize the importance of the needs of law students and are in strong support of WCL Student Bar Association advocacy for law student financial aid priorities.

<sup>2</sup> Wendler, Cathy, Brent Bridgeman, et al. n.d. "The Path Forward: The Future of Graduate Education in the United States". The Commission on the Future of Graduate Education in the United States. Accessed December 21, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Okahana, H., & Zhou, E. (2018). *Graduate enrollment and degrees: 2007 to 2017*. Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools. Link: [https://cgsnet.org/ckfinder/userfiles/files/CGS\\_GED17\\_Report.pdf](https://cgsnet.org/ckfinder/userfiles/files/CGS_GED17_Report.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

### *Decrease in international enrollment*

First-time graduate enrollment for U.S. citizens and permanent residents increased 1.1 percent between Fall 2016 and Fall 2017. In contrast, first-time graduate enrollment of international students decreased -3.7 percent even though the five-year (4.7 percent) and ten-year average annual increase (5.6 percent) rates remain strong.<sup>4</sup>

### *Enrollment trends by broad fields*

The largest one-year gains in first-time enrollment by broad field of study were in mathematics and computer sciences (3.8 percent) and business (3.7 percent) between Fall 2016 and Fall 2017. On the other hand, the largest one-year decrease in first-time graduate enrollment was engineering with -3.8 percent, compared to -0.9 percent between Fall 2015-2016; engineering also posted the biggest application decline in the one-year period (-7.3 percent), which may be explained by the large decline in international graduate enrollment as they comprise a large share of enrollment in engineering.<sup>5</sup>

### *Trends by degree level*

A large majority of all first-time graduate students in Fall 2017 were enrolled in programs leading to a master's degree or a graduate certificate (83.4 percent). The number of doctoral degrees awarded increased 1.7 percent and the number of master's degrees awarded increased 4.6 percent between 2015-16 and 2016-17. The largest one-year percent increases in master's degrees were in mathematics and computer sciences (13.6 percent), health sciences (4.7 percent), and "other fields" (4.7 percent).<sup>6</sup>

### *Enrollment by demographics*

In Fall 2017, approximately 23.9 percent of all first-time U.S. citizens and permanent resident enrollees were underrepresented minorities. American Indian/Alaska Native, Black/African American, and Hispanic/Latino first-time graduate students remain particularly underrepresented in STEM fields. In Fall 2017, the majority of first-time graduate students at all degree levels were women – 59.2 percent at the master's degree and certificate level and 53.5 percent at the doctoral level.

Among first-time graduate enrollment, 79.7 percent were U.S. citizens and permanent resident graduate students in the Fall of 2017 and about 20.3 percent were international. International students comprised the largest share of first-time graduate students in mathematics and computer sciences (56.3 percent), followed closely by engineering (52.9 percent).

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

### 3. Areas of Advocacy for Graduate Students at AU

Upon examining the global and national trends in graduate enrollment and current graduate experience at AU, the GLC task force to develop graduate financial aid priorities for FY 2020-21 propose the following six areas of advocacy for graduate students at AU.

#### *Initiatives to increase retention and completion rates for graduate students*

Between Fall 2015 and Fall 2018, the graduate enrollment and graduate credit hours have substantially decreased for School of International Service and School of Communication, which led to those schools not being able to meet their projected enrollment for FY 2018.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the aggregate enrollment data is partially driven by an increase in online graduate enrollment as face-to-face enrollment decreased for many graduate programs<sup>8</sup>. The GLC strongly supports the current AU strategic plan to maintain and increase retention and completion rates. However, most of the discussions and initiatives around these issues tend to focus heavily on undergraduate students and not on graduate students.

To this end, it is critical to both the GLC and AU administration to improve feedback channels to hear from graduate students about their experience and concerns at AU. The GLC is working towards developing graduate-specific questions as part of the next Campus Climate Survey and is encouraged to not only bring graduate students' voices to the administration but also help bridge the gap between the administration's initiatives and students' knowledge of those decisions. For example, in the 2017 Campus Climate Survey, only 64 percent of graduate students said they have at least one staff member that they can go to if they need support. The GLC recognizes the standard operating hours of the university is between 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. while the majority of graduate courses occur after normal business hours when administrative offices are no longer available. We have identified this as a gap in services and support between undergraduate and graduate populations based on the course scheduling. AU must make an authentic commitment to improve the student experience by extending the hours of the Office of Advising, Student Accounts, Financial Aid, and other student services to support its graduate students.

Additionally, the latest national data suggest that increasingly more former Pell recipients—thus, students from low-income backgrounds—are pursuing graduate and professional programs.<sup>9</sup> However, the data also suggest that many of them begin their advanced education with sizeable undergraduate debt and continue to rely on student loans to finance their education. Graduate schools should proactively help these students make informed financial aid decisions and manage and reduce their borrowing and debt. At AU, only 77 percent of graduate students have

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<sup>7</sup> Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. 2018. "Census Data". American University. Lnk: <https://www.american.edu/provost/oira/upload/Academic-Data-Reference-Book-Fall-2018.pdf>

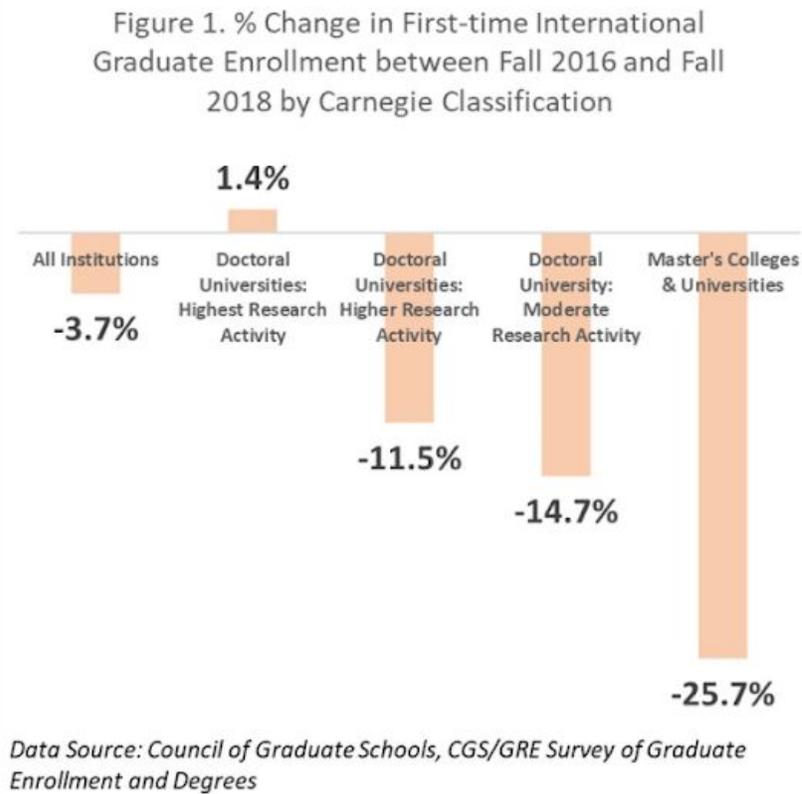
<sup>8</sup> Presentation by Doug Kudravetz. Fall 2018. Graduate Student Budget Forum

<sup>9</sup> Okahana, H., & Zhou, E. (2018). *Graduate enrollment and degrees: 2007 to 2017*. Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools.

indicated they have a long-term plan for financing each year of their education.<sup>10</sup> AU has a responsibility to educate students about the cost of attendance through educational seminars and resources with admission and awarding of their financial aid packages.

*Maintaining Carnegie R2 classification*

The GLC supports the AU strategic plan to enhance research and bringing in more external research grants. Thus, it is imperative that AU maintains Carnegie R2 classification as a higher research activity institution. The reasons are multifold. First, the status as a higher research institution enables access to more external funding opportunities for faculty and graduate students. Second, it affects the quality of prospective graduate students as institutional research ranking is important for graduate students in choosing which graduate program to attend. Third, it plays a role in attracting more international students. Figure 1 shows that universities with an R1 Carnegie Classification, or highest research doctoral institutions, saw no negative impacts of decreasing national trend of international student enrollment, posting a 1.4 percent increase between Fall 2016 and Fall 2018. The negative enrollment of international students, however, increases in magnitude as institutions are categorized as higher research to moderate to master’s universities.<sup>11</sup>



<sup>10</sup> Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. 2017. “2017 Campus Climate Survey”. American University. Link: [https://cgsnet.org/ckfinder/userfiles/files/CGS\\_GED17\\_Report.pdf](https://cgsnet.org/ckfinder/userfiles/files/CGS_GED17_Report.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Okahana, Hironao, and Enyu Zhou. 2018. “Trends in International First-Time Graduate Enrollment”. Council of Graduate Schools.

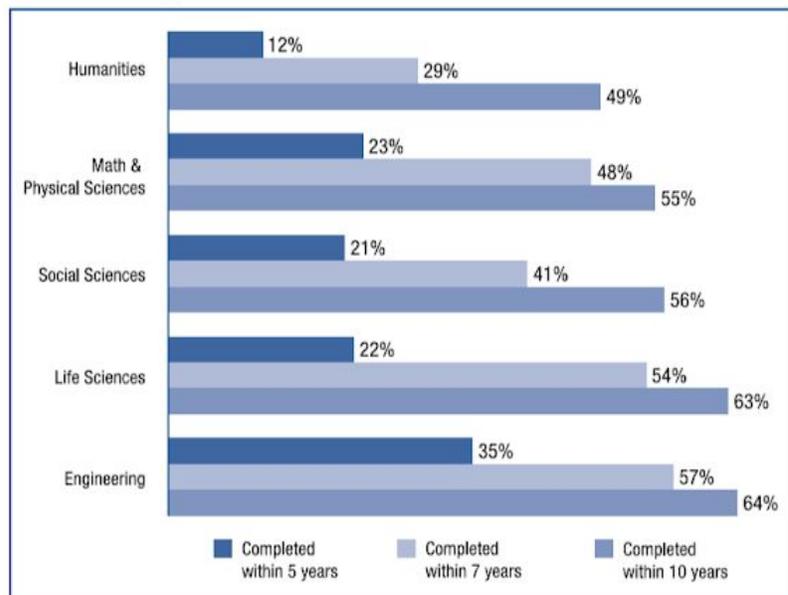
*Increasing competitiveness for master's graduate assistantship*

The maximum full award package for masters students is \$9,000 per academic year at AU.<sup>12</sup> In comparison, George Washington University offers maximum of \$16,000 in stipend to masters students<sup>13</sup> while Georgetown university offers the highest level of support up to \$29,000 per academic year.<sup>14</sup> Many masters students are awarded the full package with research assistantship at AU; however, due to employment opportunities off-campus, students tend to reject the master's stipend since it's too low in comparison to compensation from off-campus employment. In many cases, the stipend amount is included in their award package but it's not enough monetary incentive to employ those qualified students in research assistantship. Moreover, increasing this package can impact international students' decision to choose AU for masters programs since financial aid plays a crucial role in their choice and they are not allowed to work off-campus due to visa regulation while in school.

*Encouraging degree completion and quality dissertation experience for doctoral students*

Despite the rigorous selection processes used for admissions into graduate schools and the high achievement level of those pursuing a graduate degree, some studies indicate that the attrition rate in doctoral education is as low as 40-50 percent. Figure 2 demonstrates doctoral completion rates broken down by field and numbers of years. It demonstrates that less than 25 percent of students completed degrees within 5 years, and only about 45 percent completed within seven years. There are many factors influencing the doctoral completion rates including a changes in family status, full or part-time enrollment status, job commitments, needing to work or dissatisfaction with the particular program. Currently, AU graduate assistantship for doctoral students is renewable up to a maximum of four (4)

**Figure 2. Doctoral completion rate, by field and number of years.**



Source: Council of Graduate Schools. (2008). *Ph.D. completion and attrition: Analysis of baseline program data from the Ph.D. Completion Project*. Washington, DC: Author.

<sup>12</sup> Office of the Provost. n.d. "Maximum Award Levels for Merit Award Recipients". American University. Accessed December 21, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> The George Washington University. 2008. "Taxable & Non-Taxable Payments to Students". January 14, 2008. <http://stipends.gwu.edu/policy/policy.cfm>

<sup>14</sup> College of Arts and Sciences. n.d. "Merit Based Financial Aid, Fellowships". Georgetown University. <https://grad.georgetown.edu/financial-support/merit-based-financial-aid/fellowships#>.

years, contingent on maintenance of satisfactory academic progress and availability of funds.<sup>15</sup> Given the already existing factors for low doctoral completion rates and the average length to finish a doctoral degree nationally, the fact that doctoral students run out of funding after their fourth year at AU deserves serious consideration by the university budget committee. Furthermore, this lack of funding after the fourth year not only affects AU's doctoral completion rate but also influences the quality of doctoral dissertations, which is an essential indicator of AU's reputation as a research institution.

#### *Maintaining investment in tenure and tenure-track faculty*

The GLC strongly supports the focus of the current AU strategic plan on research and learning and further highlights the importance of improving the quality of research, learning and teaching for graduate students. First, we recognize that investing more in tenure and tenure-track faculty is crucial in the quality of learning experience for all students. Many institutions of higher education have increasingly become reliant on part and full-time term faculty. While reliance on term faculty is cost-saving in terms of instructional expenses, this can lead to lower quality of learning and research experiences for students if the cost-savings are not directed to areas enriching student's academic experiences.<sup>16</sup> Second, maintaining investment in tenure and tenure-track faculty enriches the student-faculty collaboration in research and innovation. Third, if relying on term faculty is an economic decision by the administration, allocating more of those opportunities to doctoral students is a mutually beneficial alternative, especially during the summer sessions. This enables doctoral students to gain hands-on teaching experience for their future career and can be fulfilling for undergraduate learning experience as well.<sup>17</sup>

#### *Institutional Support for Creating a Flexible Graduate Student Space*

The GLC has worked with the appropriate staff to identify the best possible area to provide graduate students with a permanent flexible space. After being shuffled around the past few years, the council is dedicated to finding a long-term solution to this issue. While working to craft a proposal to University Librarian Nancy Davenport on the feasibility of Graduate Research Center room B56, the council found a similar proposal from a previous GLC term in 1989. This goal is not only imperative in helping graduate students find a sense of belonging on campus but long overdue. The council has identified Mary Graydon Center and the Graduate Research Center as the only viable, neutral locations and crafted a proposal on the importance of a graduate student space to the Office of Campus Life and Inclusive Excellence. This proposal is in line with the AU strategic plan

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<sup>15</sup> Office of the Provost. 2013. "University Policy: Graduate Financial Aid Policy". American University. October 3, 2013.

[https://www.american.edu/loader.cfm?csModule=security/getfile&pageid=3611121&\\_ga=2.35656416.1974426956.1545264945-920225251.1545264945](https://www.american.edu/loader.cfm?csModule=security/getfile&pageid=3611121&_ga=2.35656416.1974426956.1545264945-920225251.1545264945).

<sup>16</sup> Hurlburt, Steven, and Michael McGarrh. 2016. "The Shifting Academic Workforce: Where Are the Contingent Faculty?". American Institutes for Research.

<https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/Shifting-Academic-Workforce-November-2016.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Bettinger, Eric, and Bridget Long. 2016. "When Inputs Are Outputs: The Case of Graduate Student Instructors" 52 (January), 63-76.

in terms of providing a sense of belonging to all students and we ask that the budget committee ensures institutional support for this initiative.

#### **4. Limitations and Further Advocacy**

This report is produced by the GLC in its trusteeship. Additionally, we collaborated with and included inputs and data from Graduate Worker Union as both organizations have related missions to advocate for graduate students. The report acknowledges limitations in terms of data availability for AU's current graduate financial aid. The GLC reached out to the Office of Graduate Studies & Research for financial aid data for graduate students; however, the data is kept as confidential and requires a formal permission from the university administration for the GLC to use it for the purpose of the report. Thus, given the urgency of the report, we utilized Campus Climate Survey 2017 information and graduate workers' survey by the Graduate Workers Union in addition to external data and resources in producing the report.

The GLC is committed to continue its advocacy for graduate students' needs as part of the budget cycle for FY 2020-21 and help bridge gaps between the AU administration and graduate population. This report is a crucial starting point for this continued advocacy. For further advocacy, the GLC considers the following as next steps:

- To ensure graduate representation at the University Budget Committee for future fiscal years, the GLC is to codify the process to follow in even years and include it as part of the bylaws of the GLC constitution.
- To improve future advocacy, the GLC is to lay out a standardized process and timeline to write graduate aid priorities and budget recommendations within the budget cycles.
- As for this and future budget cycles, the GLC is to discuss ways to improve the transparency of the budget process and to engage more graduate students in the graduate aid advocacy.

## **Contributors**

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Additionally, we would like to thank Nana An from the University Budget and Finance Resource Center, Michael Keynes from the Office of Graduate Studies & Research, and Dr. Fanta Aw from the Office of Campus Life and Inclusive Excellence for their input and feedback in the production of this report.