

Survey on Graduate Employee Compensation

Coalition of Graduate Employees

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*“Even though I--
judging by the options
presented here--am in
the upper echelon of
Graduate TAs at
\$25k, I would make
nearly twice as much,
with equivalent
benefits, in an entry-
level position, for which
I'd put in maybe half
of the time at ~36
hours a week. How on
earth is that possible?”*

Executive Summary

Methodology

In August 2016, the Coalition of Graduate Employees distributed a survey to gather information about the financial support received by graduate workers across Penn State. The survey yielded 199 responses from 12 colleges.

Findings

Graduate employees at the Pennsylvania State University report wide ranges of stipends and long hours worked for them. Although contracts require 20 hours of work, a plurality of graduate students work more than 20 hours a week, and many reported that this was expected. Although they might work long hours, 20% of graduate employees made below a living wage. **Indeed, 63% of those who made below a living wage also reported working more than 20 hours a week.**

Looking Ahead

The issues and concerns revealed through this survey strengthen the resolve of the Coalition of Graduate Employees to better the position of graduate employees at the Pennsylvania State University. We look to live up to Penn State's Values of respect, integrity responsibility and excellence by ensuring that all graduate employees find dignity and respect in their work.¹ To this end we will continue to monitor the situation of graduate employees and fight to improve them.

The Coalition of Graduate Employees

August 18, 2016

¹ <http://universityethics.psu.edu/penn-state-values>

Methodology

*“Thank you for
collecting this data. I
hope you share it
widely.”*

The CGE Graduate Employee Compensation survey was first fielded as a pilot survey on June 27, 2016 to the political science department. After receiving feedback from the survey respondents and adjusting the survey to accommodate the responses of graduate employees across Penn State, the survey was sent out again the morning of August 1, 2016 and closed August 9, 2016.

The survey, created in Google Forms, was sent out through the following channels:

- CGE’s email list (approximately 800 emails)
- Posted on CGE’s Facebook page (333 members as of August 14, 2016)
- Posted on various graduate student organizations’ Facebook pages (e.g. Eberly College of Science GSA, Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies)
- Tweeted via CGE’s Twitter account (67 followers as of August 14, 2016)
- Shared via email, on personal Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts

We recognize that this method of distribution does not produce a random sample and skews in favor of graduate employees in support of CGE’s work. Given the unavailability of contact information for all graduate employees, however, we aimed to reach as many graduate employees as possible. We received 199 responses.

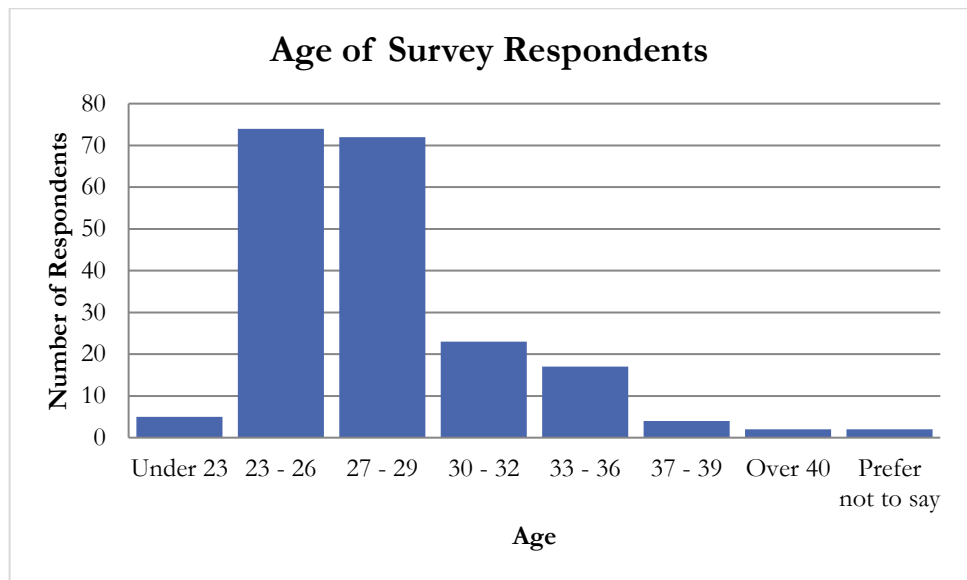
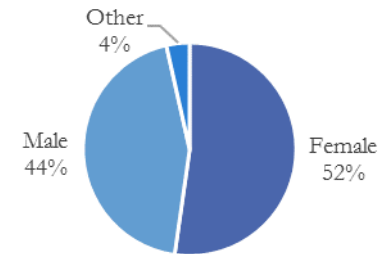
Findings

“The stipend is not enough to cover cost of living, neither for a single person nor for a couple, let alone with children.”

Demographics of the Sample

- 52% of respondents were women
- 19% of respondents were international students
- 26% of respondents were non-white
- Over 70% of respondents were between 23 and 29 years old

Gender of Respondents

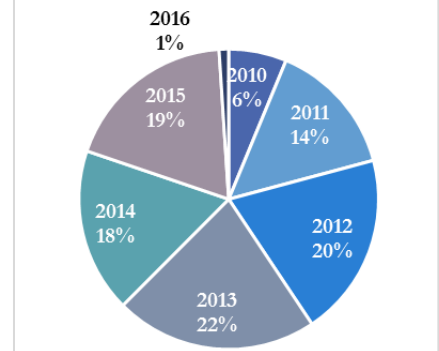


“There is a significant difference even within our department of stipends, which the department has never been clear about. I would like this policy of stipend allotment to different graduate students to be made clear.”

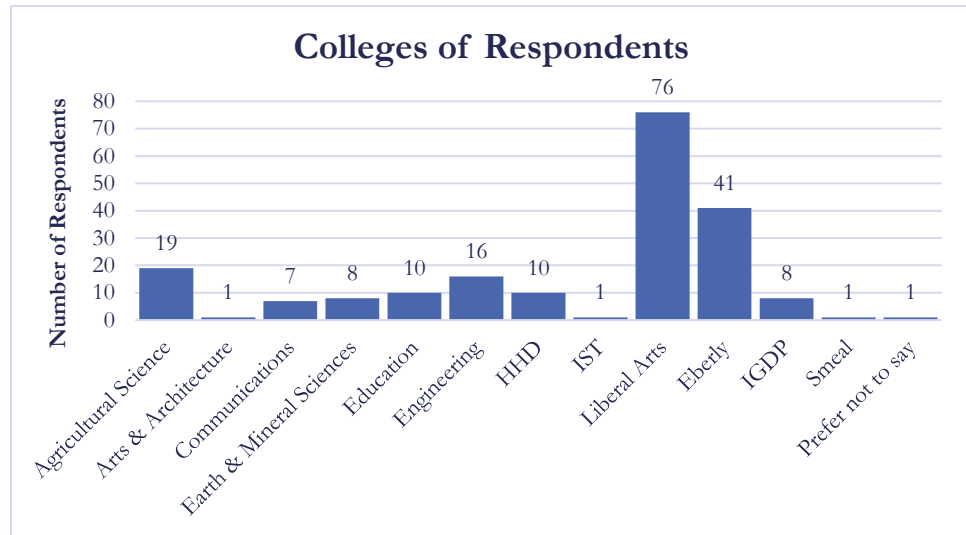
Academic Profile of the Sample

- The sample was almost evenly split among graduate employees who started at Penn State in 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015.
- Liberal Arts graduate employees made up the plurality of respondents (35%). An additional 21% of respondents were in the Eberly College of Science. We had respondents from every college/school except the College of Medicine, College of Nursing, and School of International Affairs.

When Respondents Started at PSU



- The three departments with the most respondents were:
 1. Sociology: 18
 2. English: 17
 3. Chemistry: 12



“I’m being paid, it seems, well above the “average” for graduate students, at least in part because I was urged by advisors to heavily negotiate my position when I was applying to schools.”

Stipends

- Nearly 80% of respondents received offers from more than one graduate program, and about 92% of those offers came with a fellowship or assistantship.
- Less than 20% of respondents negotiated with Penn State for a better offer, but out of those that did negotiate more than 75% of respondents saw an increase in their compensation level. A comment from one respondent provides some insight into why some students do not negotiate:

Penn State’s original offer was actually significantly greater than offers I received from other schools, and I’ve found the stipend very adequate.

- In the 2015 – 2016 academic year, 6% of respondents reported earning less than \$16,000 a year, and 15% reported earning between 16 and 18 thousand. The estimated living wage in State College for one adult is \$19,186, *after taxes*.² **One in**

² <http://livingwage.mit.edu/metros/44300>

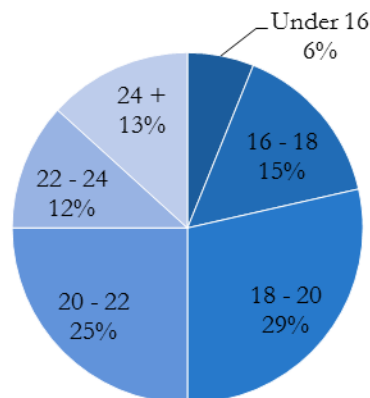
five respondents is not earning enough money to cover basic living expenses. Graduate employees are feeling the effects:

GAs ought to receive a basic stipend that covers essential cost of living expenses. Rent + Utilities + Insurance + Food. And rent ought to be factored for "single" living, not a group home or sub-par basement dwelling. Being paid within a narrow margin of poverty (but not yet qualifying) ought not be considered a "right of passage" as a grad student. To help make ends meet as a half-time GA, outside work requires departmental approval. If GAs were adequately compensated from the outset, outside work wouldn't be sought so as to not exist at borderline poverty!

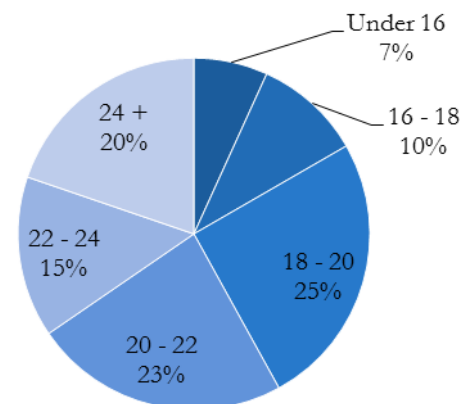
Not being allowed to work any other part time jobs at all makes it extremely difficult to make ends meet even when everything goes smoothly. When problems arise (medical bills and car repairs are the two biggest I see), it causes financial disaster that cannot be caught up from. I understand not allowing a lot of extra work so as to maintain focus on research, but 10 to 15 hours per week somewhere will make a huge difference in finances and not impact work.

- The 2016 – 2017 stipend levels show a marginal improvement. Out of 162 respondents reporting their stipend levels for the upcoming year, 17% will be making less than \$18,000 a year and more than half of students will be receiving more than \$20,000. Given that graduate employee contracts are provided only on a yearly basis, however, there is no guarantee that this trend will continue.

**2015 - 2016 Stipend Levels
(in thousands of dollars)**



**2016 - 2017 Stipend Levels
(in thousands of dollars)**



- Stipend levels are expected to vary across the university as a whole but responses also indicated that there are large discrepancies within colleges and departments. Although we do not have a large enough sample to examine all colleges and departments, of those with an adequate number of responses we found that in

many cases stipends varied across almost the entire range of possible stipend levels. For example, within the English Department there were respondents who reported stipends at the very highest and the very lowest range possible.

Range of Stipends Within Colleges

	Agricultural			Liberal	
	Sciences	Engineering	HHD	Arts	Eberly
Minimum stipend level (2015-2016)	\$16,000 to \$18,000	Under \$16,000	Under \$16,000	Under \$16,000	\$16,000 to \$18,000
Maximum stipend level (2015-2016)	\$22,000 to \$24,000	\$24,000+	\$22,000 to \$24,000	\$24,000+	\$24,000+

Range of Stipends Within Departments

	Sociology	Chemistry	English
Minimum stipend level (2015-2016)	\$16,000 to \$18,000	\$16,000 to \$18,000	Under \$16,000
Maximum stipend level (2015-2016)	\$24,000+	\$24,000+	\$24,000+

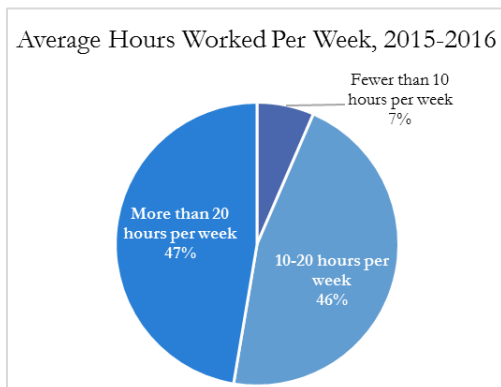
Work Load

“I have a split assistantship assignment (multiple concurrent assistantships) for next year, which typically means the student will end up exceeding their allotted assistantship hours.”

- During the 2015-2016 school year, 85% of respondents were either a teaching assistant, research assistant, or instructor. **Nearly a quarter of those reported fulfilling multiple roles during the year (e.g. serving as a TA one semester and an RA the other semester).** The remainder of the respondents were on fellowships without assistantships, or received funding from outside the university.
- While the vast majority of respondents (94%) reported that their assistantships were half-time (20 hours per week), 47% said that they worked, on average, more than 20 hours per week.
- Working more than 20 hours per week spans colleges, pay grades, and assignments.
- **63% of respondents receiving stipends of less than \$18,000 a year report working more than 20 hours per week on average.** Half of respondents receiving stipends between \$20,000 and \$22,000 an academic year – just above

the average stipend level reported by the Graduate School – report working more than 20 hours per week on average.³

- More than half of respondents from the following colleges/program report working more than an average of 20 hours per week: Agricultural Sciences, Communications, Education, Engineering, Eberly, and the Intercollege Graduate Degree Program.
- Two-thirds of graduate employees serving in multiple roles during the course of the academic year reported working more than 20 hours per week on average for their assistantship. More than half of research assistants also report working more than 20 hours per week for their assignment.
- **Many respondents expressed concerns about the discrepancy between the 20 hours per week most graduate employees are supposed to be working, and the amount of time they actually put into their assistantships:**



It's an absolute insult that my contract says I work 20 hours... I've been very explicitly told by people in power that it needs to be over 40 hours a week. How is that legal? And why are we all pretending that graduate students only work 20 hours a week. I live in this lab. Honestly, even if they didn't change anything I would want them to take off the 20 hours a week thing just so that some Penn State bureaucrat isn't using this completely inaccurate number to make policies about us and paint us as lazy, part-time workers.

Half time? What a joke. I'm in the lab 50 plus hours a week.

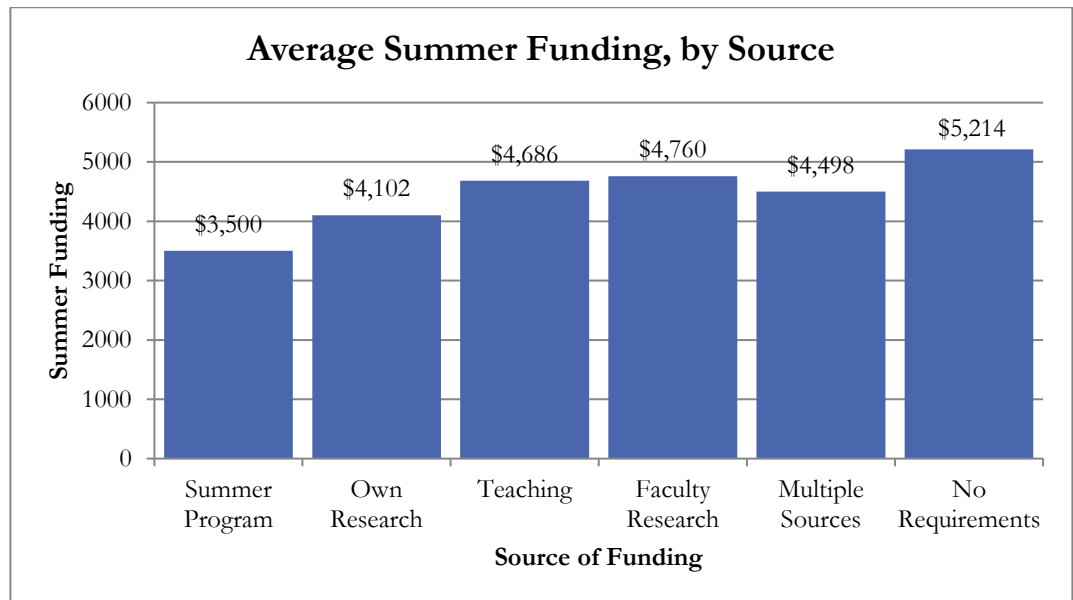
I am funded as an appointment for 20 hours per week and paid accordingly. However, I am required to work a minimum of 50 and frowned on below 60-70. I have a half-time assignment to a full-time requirement. PhDs live this way for 5, 6, 7 years and it causes real financial ruin, health problems, long term effects for years into the future. Plus the stress actually does severely negatively impact research and work productivity and quality, so it's not even cost effective. I wouldn't expect a cushy life, but

³ <http://www.gradschool.psu.edu/graduate-funding/infoga/>

being able to do more than break even while eating beans out of a can and hoping my 13 year old car won't break would make me much more successful.

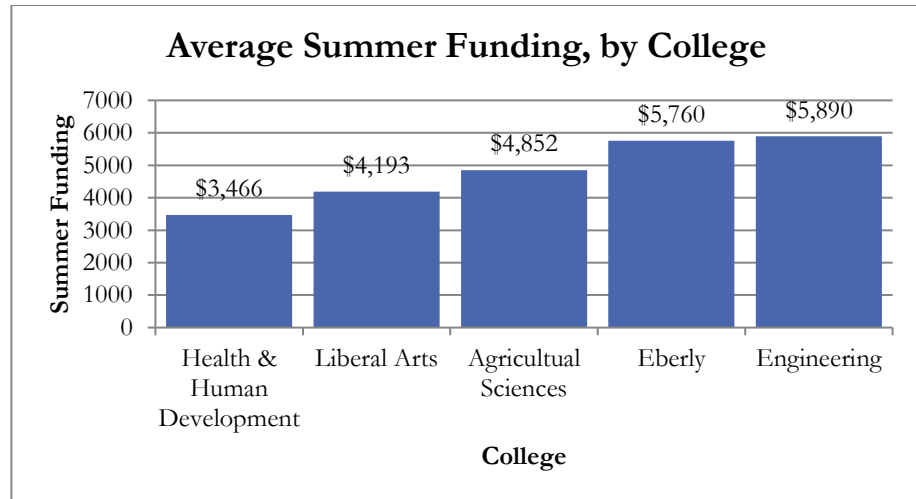
Summer Funding

- 87% of respondents received summer funding in some capacity. Students received funding for teaching summer courses and working on faculty research projects. Students also received funding to conduct their own research or to attend summer programs, such as language courses or statistical training.
- On average, students whose summer funding came with no requirements attached (e.g. awards) received the greatest amount of funding. As might be expected, those who received funding from multiple sources received the second-highest level of funding.
- Graduate employees who taught in the summer received nearly as much funding as those who worked with faculty. This figure does not take into account the number of courses taught by the graduate employee. A graduate employee teaching one class typically makes \$3,000 – significantly less than if he or she were conducting research.

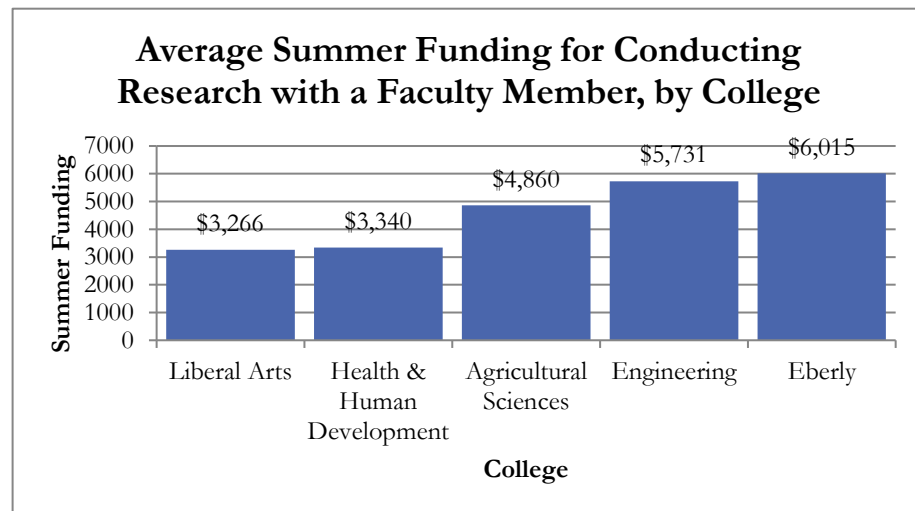


- The amount of summer funding received by a graduate employee also varies by college. In five colleges, there were more than 10 respondents who reported receiving summer funding: Agricultural Sciences, Engineering, Eberly College of Science, Health and Human Development (HHD), and Liberal Arts.

- In HHD, the average amount of summer funding was less than \$3,500.
- The average amount of summer funding in Eberly and Engineering was more than \$2,000 higher, at \$5,760 and \$5,890, respectively.

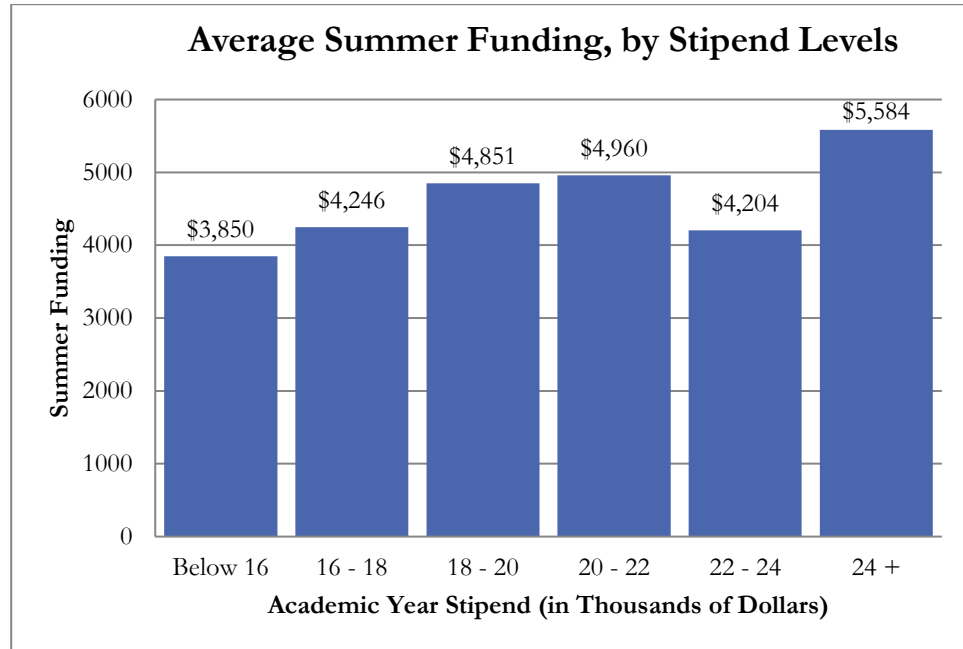


- Some of this difference may be attributed to different funding sources (Liberal Arts respondents teach more courses, which pay less than research). Even comparing the average amount received among graduate employees who worked with a faculty member on a research project, however, there are significant differences.



- The amount of summer funding generally co-varied along with the amount of total stipend. Those with higher stipends tended to get more funding over the summer. The lack of sizeable summer funding opportunities meant that those making below

\$16,000 were, on average, only able to garner another \$4,000 over the summer months, making their 12-month salary less than \$20,000.



Conclusions

Our programs help graduate students learn to work as team members, improve their writing skills, and understand research commercialization and career options in industry. We emphasize engaged scholarship such as internships and externally funded fellowships for stipends and research. – Agricultural Sciences Strategic Plan⁴

Although the research programs of our faculty members and our departmental and intercollege graduate programs rank among the very best in the world, we must continue to improve our ability to attract the best, the brightest, and the most motivated students from around the world to our graduate programs. – Eberly Strategic Plan⁵

At the graduate level, the new model for student recruitment and retention along with curriculum development and coordination will lead to more coherent and deliberate efforts to recruit and retain the top graduate students to the programs at Penn State. – Education Strategic Plan⁶

[We will] enhance our graduate programs and the quality and competitiveness of our graduate students by: [...] Tasking the associate dean for research and graduate education with conducting a thorough examination of the competitiveness of our graduate assistantship stipend levels and an analysis of how academic units have been using their assistantships. – Health & Human Development Strategic Plan⁷

[A]ttracting top graduate students continues to be critical to our attempts to improve undergraduate education. Moreover, our ability to attract and retain top faculty, who value the opportunity to work with excellent graduate students, depends directly on our ability to make Penn State a “first-choice” institution for the best applicants to graduate school from across the world. – Liberal Arts Strategic Plan⁸

As evidenced by the excerpts above, colleges across the University recognize the importance of graduate students to their departments. Recruiting the best and brightest is a top priority, but graduates should not be forgotten once they arrive at Penn State. Many graduate workers find themselves in an unsustainable environment where they feel ignored, over-worked and under-served.

⁴ <http://agsci.psu.edu/about/strategic/2014-2019/psu-agsci-strategic-plan-2014-19.pdf>

⁵ <http://science.psu.edu/about/eberly-college-of-science-strategic-plan-2015-2020>

⁶ <https://ed.psu.edu/internal/strategic-plan-2014/strategic-plan-ten-page-summary>

⁷ <http://hhd.psu.edu/strategicplan/docs/HHD-Strategic-Plan-2014-2019.pdf>

⁸ http://www.opia.psu.edu/sites/default/files/unit_sp/CollegeOfTheLiberalArts.docx

Penn State's most recent Strategic Plan lays out a series of admirable goals: inclusion, sustainability, and enhancing student and global engagement. We believe that the situation of graduate workers outlined above does not living up to these goals. Moreover, the current situation for graduate workers leaves them without a voice, even though they are one of the key stakeholders who conduct the research, teach the courses, and perform the service that makes Penn State a top University.

Contact Information

- Website: <http://cge-psu.com>
- Email: gta.s.psu@gmail.com
- Twitter: [@CGE_PSU](https://twitter.com/CGE_PSU)

Appendix: Survey Questions

The Coalition of Graduate Employees (CGE) seeks to gather information on the compensation being offered to graduate employees across Penn State. It is our hope that through this survey we can begin to identify which departments are paying their graduate workers less than a living wage and open up a dialogue with the administration about the issue of graduate employee compensation.

The first section of this survey asks for some basic demographic information. The second section asks about the offers you received prior coming to Penn State and any negotiations you may have made prior to coming to Penn State. The third section asks for information about compensation received in the 2015-2016 school year, 2016 summer funding, and offers made for the 2016-2017 school year.

You may be assured of complete confidentiality. Only the co-presidents of the CGE will have access to the raw data. The data will be reported only in the aggregate and no individual will be identified. Thank you for your participation!

* Required

Basic Demographics

Q. What is your gender identity? *

- A. Female Not sure
- Male Prefer not to say

Q. How old are you?

- A. Under 23 33 - 36
- 23 -26 37 - 39
- 27 - 29 40 years of age or older
- 30 - 32

Q. Are you an international or domestic student? *

- A. International
- Domestic
- Prefer not to say

Q. What is your race or origin? *

- A. African American
- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Prefer not to say

Q. What year did you start at Penn State?

- A. _____

Q. What is your college? *

- A. College of Agricultural Sciences
- College of Arts and Architecture
- College of Communications
- College of Earth and Mineral Sciences
- College of Education
- College of Engineering
- College of Health and Human Development
- College of Information Sciences and Technology
- College of Medicine
- College of Nursing
- College of the Liberal Arts
- Eberly College of Science
- Intercollege Graduate Degree Program
- School of International Affairs
- Smeal School of Business
- Other
- Prefer not to say

Q. What is your department/program?

- A. _____

Graduate Programs Offers

Q. When you were accepted to Penn State, did you have offers from other graduate programs? *

- A. Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

Q. If you had offers from other graduate programs, did the offer(s) include a stipend? *

- A. Yes
- No
- NA - Had no other offers
- Prefer not to say

Q. Did you negotiate with Penn State for a better offer? *

- A. Yes
- No
- I don't remember
- Prefer not to say

Q. Did this negotiation lead to an increase in your stipend? *

- A. Yes
- No
- N/A
- I don't remember
- Prefer not to say

Stipends

In this section you will be asked about your gross monthly stipend during the 2015-2016 school year. To access your gross monthly stipend, you can visit: <https://app3.obr.psu.edu/essic/> Go to PAYROLL at the top right of the page, and then select "Pay Check Inquiry" in the left-hand menu. You may also refer back to your offer letter for the 2015-2016 and provide the ten-month total. For the 2016-2017 stipend, you should refer to the most recent offer letter.

Q. In the 2015-2016 school year, were you a TA, instructor, or RA with funding from your program/department? *

- A. Yes, a Teaching Assistant
 - Yes, an instructor
 - Yes, a Research Assistant
 - Yes, some combination of the three
- No
- Unsure
- Prefer not to say

Q. For 2015-2016, did you have a half-time assignment (20 hours per week)? *

- A. Yes
 - No
 - Prefer not to say

Q. On average, approximately how many hours per week did you work on your assignment?

- A. Less than 10 hours per week
 - 10 - 20 hours per week
 - Over 20 hours per week
 - Prefer not to say

Q. What was your gross -- pre-tax -- monthly stipend during the 2015-2016 school year? Or, what was the total of your 10-month stipend (in parentheses)? *

- A. Below \$1,500 (< \$15,000)
 - \$1,500 - 1,599 (\$15,000 - 15,999)
 - \$1,600 - 1,699 (\$16,000 - 16,999)
 - \$1,700 - 1,799 (\$17,000 - 17,999)
 - \$1,800 - 1,899 (\$18,000 - \$18,999)
 - \$1,900 - 1,999 (\$19,000 - \$19,999)
 - \$2,000 - 2,099 (\$20,000 - 20,999)
 - \$2,100 - 2,199 (\$21,000 - 21,999)
 - \$2,200 - 2,299 (\$22,000 - 22,999)
 - \$2,300 - 2,399 (\$23,000 - 23,999)
 - \$2,400 - 2,499 (\$24,000 - 24,999)
 - \$2,500 + (\$25,000 +)
 - Prefer not to say
 - N/A - did not receive funding

Q. Did you receive summer funding for 2016, and for what purpose? (Check all that apply.) *

- A. Yes, to work on a research project with a faculty member
 Yes, to complete my own research
 Yes, to attend a summer program (i.e. language courses, statistical training)
 Yes, to teach a course
 Yes, with no requirements attached
 No
 Prefer not to say

Q. If you did receive summer funding, how much did you receive? If you received funding from multiple sources, please enter the total amount.

A. _____

Q. For the 2016-2017 school year, will you be funded by your program/department? *

- A. Yes
 No, my funding comes from an outside source (e.g. fellowships from NSF, NIH)
 No, I am not receiving any funding.
 NA - I am not attending Penn State for the 2016-2017 school year.
 Prefer not to say

Q. For 2016-2017, do you have a half-time assignment (20 hours per week)? *

- A. Yes Prefer not to say
 No NA – Will not be attending Penn State

Q. In your renewal letter for the 2016-2017 school year, what is your total stipend offer (total for all 10 months)? *

- A. Below \$15,000
 \$15,000 - 15,999
 \$16,000 - 16,999
 \$17,000 - 17,999
 \$18,000 - 18,999
 \$19,000 - 19,999
 \$20,000 - 20,999
 \$21,000 - 21,999
 \$22,000 - 22,999
 \$23,000 - 23,999
 \$24,000 - 24,999
 \$25,000 +
 Prefer not to say
 N/A - Will not be attending Penn State
 N/A - Will be attending Penn State, but without funding

Q. Do you have any additional comments or concerns? Let us know!

A. _____