Graduate and Professional Student Federation (GPSF)
Research Assistant (RA) / Teaching Assistant (TA) Survey – Spring 2012
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Introduction
This report details common criticisms and experiences of RA/TA experiences at UNC-Chapel Hill that were reported to the GPSF in a survey conducted in Spring 2012. In total, 756 graduate and professional students responded to the survey, predominately from the College of Arts and Sciences, the School of Medicine, and the School of Public Health.

The data and comments highlighted differences that exist between graduate or professional students’ expectations compared to the reality they face. The major critiques of survey respondents dealt with circumstances that went against their expectations, especially in terms of employment or finances.

Finances
1. Stipends and fees were a primary concern for respondents. GPSF continues to work with the Graduate School to discuss these issues. With pre-tax stipends ranging between $14,000 and $27,500 for respondents, student fees represent 6.8% to 13.4% of annual income.
2. A less budget-dependent concern of students, however, was that students feel they are not receiving clear financial details about payroll, benefits, tuition, and fees. One solution might include a push to have departments give annual reports on expected financial situations for each student and provide clear details as to the financial accommodation and burden for each student who enrolls in a UNC department.
3. Summer funding was another prominent concern. There is a deficit of income opportunity during the summer months, especially for programs that only pay stipend for 9 months. Suggested solutions include a central location to advertise summer funding opportunities and positions.
4. Residency, and how applications for residency impacts individuals, was mentioned. While many of these students may have applied for residency before the policy change from a few years ago, it was still an important issue, especially for those who are individually responsible for their tuition. A secondary consideration is how residency decisions affect student loans.
5. Departments whose programs require extensive time abroad are extremely sensitive to decisions about continuous enrollment. For example, one student noted that if students are abroad and not teaching, their tuition and fees are not covered, and they might find themselves without health insurance.
6. We conclude that financial expectations are a key factor in student satisfaction. This is especially worth considering due to the high percentage of income required for student fees and the expectation that many students do not always know what questions to ask about their anticipated financial situation prior to enrollment. Students play a critical role in recruitment, and the murky water surrounding a student’s financial obligations hinders UNC’s ability to attract the absolute best candidates to the many important research and endeavors of the university.
Employment

1. Those in TA positions commented on unclear expectations from their supervising faculty member; common concerns included insufficient guidance on the TA’s responsibility separate from the instructor’s, policies related to grading, time commitment, and method of communication, and the way a department assigns graduate or professional students to a TA. Suggestions might include working with the Center for Faculty Excellence about best practices for supervising faculty or how to be an effective TA (which might be different from other teaching duties). Another suggestion might include job descriptions for each TA assignment, with necessary skills, to be written and provided by the department and signed by both instructor and TA. This solution might emphasize the contracting nature of holding such a position and be good practice even for those serving as Teaching Fellows.

2. Students in certain departments reported levels of disapproval and strong disapproval of their treatment as employees; some departments were more vocal and unanimous than others.

3. In addition, some students reported untimeliness of their TA/RA assignments, but this seemed to be isolated to specific departments.

How to Resolve Issues

1. Far and away, talking to other students, especially senior graduate or professional students within one’s department, was the most relied upon and beneficial resource for students to resolve issues.

2. Another reported concern is how various individuals/offices/organizations fit various functional roles. Clarification of points of contact for various issues would be a helpful general resource (i.e., when to bring an issue to the Chair vs. Dean vs. Ombuds).

3. Certain students described difficulties with resolving grievances, specifically where to go with issues that may have professional ramifications. Suggestions include a clear description of how to use the Dean of Students Office, the Deans in one’s School, Student Affairs, and the Ombuds office.

Professional Development

1. Mentorship is a much-desired feature of one’s graduate experience, both as a mentee and mentor. Primarily, students wished to ensure that faculty prioritize mentorship, especially non-tenure faculty; secondarily, students desired the opportunity to develop and hone their own mentorship skills.

2. Students do not have a say in what assignment best suits their career preparation: TA, RA, etc. One suggestion (though admittedly difficult) would be to allow graduate students to serve in capacities that appropriately align with their career goals; for example, some students want to be trained to teach, and others want to be trained to research.

Miscellanea

1. Older students requested more representation by the GPSF: 17% of the graduate and professional federation is older than 35; 5% is over 44.

2. Covered dental insurance was an oft-repeated hope of many of the respondents.