

# **Graduate Quality of Life at Stanford**

## Executive Summary

Report of the  
**Graduate Student Council**  
and the  
**Student Task Force**  
on the Quality of Life Survey

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## **Authors and Acknowledgements**

This report was produced by a student task force composed of representatives from the Graduate Student Council (GSC), Graduate Housing Advisory Committee (GHAC), and other University Committees.

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# Graduate Quality of Life Survey – Executive Summary

## ***Introduction***

This survey was implemented in response to the growing feeling among graduate students that their quality of life at Stanford has deteriorated in recent years. In the past five years, the cost of living in the Bay Area has grown much more rapidly than the average student stipend and income. The shortage of on-campus housing since 1997 has placed additional pressure on the financial conditions and stability of graduate students. In addition, rising health care costs over the past two years and the lack of affordable childcare facilities have created even more difficulties for graduate students with spouses/partners and children.

Previous surveys undertaken by graduate student representatives in 1998 and 2000 focused predominantly on housing issues. While the largest component of this survey is the housing situation, other aspects of graduate life, such as graduate students' overall financial situation, health care, and social life, were also investigated. We consider all these issues to be mutually interconnected and we wish to provide the University with a holistic view of graduate students' life conditions. Our hope is that this report, based on the data and comments provided by the 2091 students that responded to the survey, will assist the University administration in devising policies and implementing measures that will improve the life of graduate students.

This executive summary provides an overview of the main findings and policy recommendations from the survey. Detailed analysis can be found in the text of each respective chapter. The chapters also include in appendices all the student comments pertaining to the topic of the chapter.

The full survey report is available at <http://gsc.stanford.edu>. Comments and suggestions are welcome and can be directed to [gsc@assu.stanford.edu](mailto:gsc@assu.stanford.edu).

## ***Chapter 1: Methodology***

Chapter 1 discusses the methodology and implementation of the Quality of Life Survey. The survey was implemented in November of 2001 and received 2091 responses, representing approximately 28% of the graduate student population. The respondents are organized into 10 categories according to their family status (singles, couple, and family with children) and their housing situation (on-campus, off-campus subsidized apartments, housing stipend program, and no housing assistance). The survey and final report represent the joint efforts of a team of twelve graduate student representatives working over a 6-month period.

## ***Chapter 2: Demographics of the Graduate Population***

Chapter 2 presents demographic data about the graduate student population. Efforts to compile data from several University offices pertaining to graduate students revealed to us that no single office had a clear picture of the composition and life conditions of graduate students. In part, this is a reflection of the autonomy of departments and schools in selecting and tracking their graduate students. Nevertheless, it makes the implementation of university wide policies that improve the quality of life of the graduate population more difficult. We recommend that one office or committee in the University should be given the charter and resources to create an annual report profiling the situation of the graduate population at Stanford. This report should focus on demographic characteristics, and on areas that affect the quality of life and the academic progress of students. This document should be widely distributed and discussed internally.

## ***Chapter 3: Financial Situation of the Graduate Student Population***

Chapter 3 presents the financial situation of the graduate student population. Nearly a quarter of the respondents earn less than \$12,000 per year, half have an income of \$12,000 to \$24,000 per year, while the top quarter (26%) earns more than \$24,000. The average single student living on-campus needs to take \$5,700 worth of new debt per year to supplement income, compared to \$6,800 of new debt taken by on-campus couples and \$8000 of new debt taken by on-campus families.

We find that rent and housing related costs, health care, and child-care take between 47% and 83% of the average student income. Singles and couples in the housing stipend program and single students living with no housing support are two particularly disadvantaged groups, spending more than 70% of their income on these expense items.

These data show that Stanford can impact students' quality of life by focusing policy efforts on three priority areas: housing, health care and childcare. In addition, we recommend that the stipends level paid by Stanford be raised 3-5% more than the cost of living for the next 5 years in order to make life in the Bay Area affordable again for Stanford graduate students.

## ***Chapter 4: Housing Demand and Long-Term Housing Policy***

Chapter 4 uses survey data to estimate housing demand for the 2002/03 housing lottery. We predict a lottery demand of 5332 students, representing a 4% growth over the 2001/02 lottery. In addition, we estimate 425 automatic renewals in the off-campus subsidized apartment program and 725 direct applications for the housing stipend program. Thus, total demand for housing support will be 6482 students, representing approximately 86% of the graduate student population. Given that on-campus housing supply for 2002/03 will be 4025 units, 2397 students will need another form of housing support from Stanford.

The immediate consequences of these estimates are a projected housing lottery shortfall of 1247 students, which would rise to 1672 students without the off-campus subsidized apartments renewals. We estimated a total of 2250 students eligible for off-campus housing support from the University. These demand projections, when associated with the delay in construction of new on-campus housing, mean that off-campus support programs will be a key element for stability of the housing system in the coming years. Thus, we recommend that:

- Housing construction of at least 700 new units be accelerated for completion within the next two school years.
- Off-campus programs be designed and budgeted to support 2400 students at a meaningful level until new on-campus housing becomes available.
- The housing assignment process be re-structured no later than 2003/04 by incorporating the existing off-campus housing options into the May housing lottery.

### ***Chapter 5: On-Campus Housing Policy***

Chapter 5 discusses recommendations for on-campus housing policy based on satisfaction data and comments from respondents. The most satisfied single students on campus live in Lyman, Rains 4 bedrooms, Schwab, and the EV studios. The least satisfied students live in “stuffed” spaces, where a private bedroom is not available for each resident. Principal problems are a lack of space, privacy, and flexibility in roommate choice. Couples in the EV high-rises were dissatisfied with their space and kitchen facilities. Families on-campus were generally satisfied with their housing situation.

Students who had decided to not apply to the housing lottery in 2002 were asked to indicate the major factors contributing to their decision. 74% of the respondents did not want the hassle of moving, while 55% feared losing the lottery. However, 67% of the respondents cited specific housing policy issues as significant factors in their reluctance to apply for housing on campus. In summary, we recommend that:

- Additional two bedroom apartments for singles and one bedroom apartments for couples be constructed once the scheduled studios have been completed.
- All graduate students be allowed to apply for off-campus housing assistance if they cannot be assigned a private bedroom in a graduate residence on campus.
- Unfurnished apartments and/or storage space be made available for single students and families on campus.
- Moving dates be made more flexible, particularly for students whose programs’ calendars do not run on the standard academic quarter system.
- The number of priority years for housing be increased in order to be higher than the average time to graduation for a given type of degree.
- Graduate students be encouraged to apply in groups, and mixed gender groups be allowed to apply for two bedroom apartments on campus.

## **Chapter 6: Off-Campus Housing Policy**

Chapter 6 provides a detailed analysis of the off-campus housing situation. In September 2001, approximately 1600 students received support in the form of an off-campus subsidized apartment (OCA) or a housing stipend (HS). Based on survey data, we find that single students off-campus pay on average \$280-\$340 more per month on rent and rent-related expenditures than on-campus students. For couples this amount varies between \$500 and \$700. We also find that there is a large group of singles off-campus with low incomes and high rent, who do not receive any housing assistance. This group spends on average 64% of income on housing-related expenditures, compared to 46% for students living on-campus.

We find that having a stable housing situation is a very high priority for students. Currently, there is too much turnover in the housing system. The average PhD student moves four times during his/her career. Moving is costly, both financially and in terms of degree progress. Most students prefer their current housing situation as their long-run optimal situation.

Students in the HS program are generally more satisfied than students in the OCA program. A new balance towards a larger HS and relatively smaller OCA program seems to address the needs of the graduate student population better. In the long-run, both systems should coexist at a natural balance defined by student demand. Both the OCA and the HS program have their own advantages and disadvantages, and cater to different student profiles and preferences.

In summary, we recommend that:

- The OCA program be reduced in size by natural attrition. If desirable, voluntary moves to the HS program or to another apartment complex closer to campus could speed up the consolidation. Our estimates suggest that the program could be reduced from 1000 to 630 units within one year.
- The HS program be expanded from the current 600 students to help all students eligible for off-campus assistance and not assigned to the OCA program. Given the demand predictions we believe the program needs to be expanded to 1628 students next year.
- The housing stipend amount be enough to make the cost of living off-campus almost the same as living on-campus. According to this principle, and based on the survey data on the cost of living, we suggest a stipend amount of \$250 for singles and \$375 for couples (students with non-student partner). The current stipend levels should be increased to these amounts. In addition, the housing stipend should be automatically renewable to promote stability in the entire housing system.
- The income eligibility requirements take tuition payments into account and adopt the estimate of the Financial Aid office for the cost of living off-campus (\$29,411 for singles and \$44,729 for couples.)

## **Chapter 7: Social Life**

Chapter 7 discusses the social life of graduate students. While 56% of respondents were very satisfied with their social life, 15% of the respondents rated it as poor or very poor. Professional school students were, in general, more satisfied than students from other schools. In terms of

housing situation, respondents in the off-campus subsidized apartments were the least satisfied, given the commuting time and distance from campus. We recommend the creation of a volunteer resident associate program to foster a sense of community among students in the off-campus apartment complexes. The University could provide resources for the organization of activities and e-mail lists for communication between students. Given the difficulty of obtaining information about on-campus social events, we recommend the development of a centralized web-site for posting and searching for social events. Finally, we recommend active fund-raising to build the Graduate Community Center in Escondido Village.

### ***Chapter 8: Health Care***

Chapter 8 discusses the demographics of health insurance enrollment and the level of satisfaction of students with their health care situation. 80% of student respondents were enrolled in the Cardinal Care plan but only 25% of partners and children were enrolled in the Stanford Dependent Plan. Alarming, around 5% of dependents were uninsured. We recommend that Stanford make a commitment to graduate student families of zero uninsured children.

Regarding health care costs, 10% of the respondents reported an annual cost higher than \$2000, including 8% with an annual cost higher than \$3000. We recommend that Stanford create a package of subsidies and services to contain health care costs to within a maximum of 5% of household income.

Respondents were reasonably satisfied with Stanford Cardinal Care plan, except that the plan does not provide any dental or vision coverage. We recommend that future insurance packages include dental and vision options.

Respondents were very dissatisfied with Stanford's Dependent Plan, in terms of cost, coverage and availability of care. Numerous comments from students emphasized serious problems with the dependent plan. We recommend that Stanford revise its dependent plan to make it equitable with the student plan in terms of coverage and cost.

The recent increases in health insurance costs and changes in health care provision, suggest that health care is a primary area of graduate student life on which the University administration should focus its attention, efforts, and resources.

### ***Chapter 9: Child Care***

Chapter 9 provides a summary of the child-care situation. In total, 141 respondents to the survey had one or more children. 80% of these families lived on-campus and 20% lived off-campus. Both groups were satisfied with the quality of childcare provided. Nevertheless, respondents living on-campus complained about the long waiting lists for enrollment. We recommend the expansion of the existing on-campus childcare facilities through the construction of a new child care center in Escondido Village. This center is already planned but lacks funding.

In terms of cost, 18% of on-campus families spent more than 20% of their income on childcare. In addition, the high cost of on-campus family housing and dependent health insurance places on-campus families (who have half the average income of off-campus families) in a particularly disadvantaged financial situation. We recommend that the existing financial aid programs for families in Escondido Village be expanded and better advertised. We also recommend the creation of a child care grant program for graduate students, similar to the program recently implemented by the University to assist faculty and staff.

### ***Chapter 10: Housing Office Satisfaction***

Chapter 10 presents student satisfaction with the University housing offices. The great majority of respondents were satisfied with the services provided by the Housing Assignment Services, Community Housing Services, and Facilities and Maintenance. Nevertheless, a few respondents have had serious difficulties in dealing with these offices and commented on their bad experience. We recommend that the housing services create a more clear process to deal with special cases and exceptions to regulations. In addition, two specific areas that require improvement are clarity in information dissemination and the housing web-site

### ***Chapter 11: Parking Situation***

Chapter 11 summarizes comments from survey respondents about the parking situation on campus. Two main issues were raised. The first was the lack of affordable parking on-campus. A-Permits are very expensive for an average student income, while C-Parking spaces are very difficult to find after 8.30am. We recommend an increase in C-Parking availability, with more spaces allocated in the multi-level parking structures around campus.

The second problem, described as “acute” by several students, is the lack of available parking around Hoskins and Dudley Courts in Escondido Village. This constitutes a serious safety problem for families with children living in the area. The problem may be even worse after the completion of nearby Studios 5 and 6 in the Fall/Winter of 2002/03. We recommend the creation of more parking spaces in that area.

### ***Conclusion***

This report presents a profile of graduate student life at Stanford. It highlights the issues that most directly affects students’ quality of life and recommends policy changes to address these issues. We look forward to discussing these and other policies in more detail with the University administration, through the Graduate Student Council or the graduate representatives in University Committees. In particular we identify on-campus housing construction, housing lottery reform, stipend levels, and health care as the key issues to which both student representatives and the University administration should devote their attention and efforts.

The Survey Task Force  
The Graduate Student Council

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