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After a year of canceled research, funding tribulations and changed plans, grad students are demanding support from the University.

GRADUATE STUDENTS    March 31, 2021

## Grad Students Call Cornell for Increased Funding, Support

By Kayla Riggs

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Material support: That’s what graduate students are calling for the University to provide in an updated set of demands, frustrated with resources that some feel are insufficient after a year of canceled research, funding tribulations and changed plans.

Following the campus shutdown in March 2020, Cornell Graduate Students United released a number of demands for increased graduate support. Now, over a year later, many graduate students claim that the University has not sufficiently addressed these calls for action.

“It has been a year, and it is a long time coming for something to change,” said David Wasser grad.

Wasser, a fourth-year Ph.D. student in the economics department, said though his research has definitely slowed because of the pandemic, he counts himself as being “on the luckier end” of most graduate students. Many grad students, according to Wasser, have lost a year’s worth of research opportunities due to virus-related disruptions.

Kavya Krishnan grad, the vice president of communications for the Graduate and Professional Student Assembly and the treasurer for Graduate Professional Students International was one such student. COVID-related restrictions derailed her research on soil health in India and delayed her graduation by over a year.

President of GPSA David Dunham grad also experienced major ramifications over the past year. After only one semester of work abroad in Berlin, he abruptly left due to potential border closures and the possibility of losing his fellowship stipend.

“For three months in the summer of 2020, I had to continue my work remotely while living with my parents,” Dunham said. “Returning to Ithaca, my research opportunities were much more limited due to campus closures and the inaccessibility of print resources on which my work depends.”

Wasser said the University must address one urgent graduate student union demand in particular: funding.

When the virus first prompted the University to close, Cornell extended the review period for tenure-track faculty by a year, making this policy change three weeks after the campus shutdown.

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Wasser said he wonders why Cornell hasn’t applied this same rapid action to graduate students.

“I think it’s really unfortunate, because we came here wanting to do research,” he said, “and we’re sort of being treated differently than the people we’re supposed to work to emulate.”

In a virtual GPSA meeting held Monday night, Pollack said a universal funding policy for graduate students would be unlikely because of the uniqueness of each student’s circumstance.

“The pandemic hasn’t affected all of our students equally such that a blanket response will be appropriate,” Pollack said. “The graduate school is asking these students to work closely with our advisers, and we are working closely with the graduate schools to provide as much flexibility and funding as we can.”

In the forum, Pollack also discussed the implications of funding and other hurdles for international graduate students over the past year.

Pollack said the University has allowed those who wanted or needed to work abroad to do so, and highlighted the capability of international students to be teaching assistants or resident advisers from different countries.

Though she said she is mostly pleased with how Cornell has handled the pandemic, Jullien Flynn grad said that there are “still some cracks that are left” in the University’s support of its international students.

An international student from Canada, Flynn has not left Ithaca since December 2019 out of fear that her research in satellite DNA would be canceled or that she would not be paid for her work if she were to live abroad.

“I’m trying to graduate at the end of the summer,” Flynn said. “And if I get stuck, and I can’t get paid and I can’t continue my research, then it’s just too risky.”

Throughout her time at Cornell, Flynn has faced many issues with the Office of Global Learning and the University that the pandemic has only amplified. Flynn claimed the administration has failed to give her complete information regarding visa statuses.

At one point, Flynn said she was even forced to hire an accountant -- using hundreds of dollars of her own money -- to figure out a discrepancy with her residency.

“It’s been very challenging for me to navigate the system here and especially interface with the specific rules between the U.S. and Canada,” she said.

Co-president of GPSI Elvisha Dhamala and other organization members have described similar problems with information provided by the administration.

“As an international student at Cornell, finding information and a reliable support network can be especially challenging,” Dhamala wrote in an email to The Sun. “Most professors, administrators, and staff are often not equipped to help us find the resources or the answers we’re looking for. This means we end up spending hours of our time trying to figure out the right person to help us until we either get the information we need or we reach a dead end.”

Dhamala urges the University to create a single website specifically focused on international graduate students, where information on travel restrictions, visa guidelines, moving logistics and a list of contacts would be easily accessible. This site, Dhamala said, would allow for increased clarity during a time of changing international restrictions and would be useful for faculty and staff to refer to when approached with student questions.

Other students and members of graduate-affiliated organizations call on Cornell to make tangible changes to different parts of campus, including to Cornell Health.

Xander Lacrampe, a second-year grad student studying biochemistry, molecular and cell biology, said Cornell must address mental health, especially for grad students.

“I think that the University can afford to and needs to commit to increasing counselors, and access to mental health care at the University,” Lacrampe said. “CGSU is committed to holding the administration accountable until they meet this need.”

Though many grad students are urging the University to better address their needs, Wasser said he’s glad other communities on campus can also offer support by speaking up.

“We’re stronger together,” Wasser said. “And so the more voices calling for change, the better.”

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5:30-7:00 PM



### ABOUT KAYLA RIGGS

Kayla Riggs is a member of the Class of 2024 in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. She is an assistant news editor for the news department and can be reached at kriggs@cornellsun.com

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