To the members of the Mental Health Task Force,

This document is a written supplement to the Thursday, May 20th 2010 presentation by five representatives from the Graduate Student Council (GSC) to the Mental Health Task Force (MHTF). Our May 20th presentation summarized the strengths of the Caltech graduate student experience as well as the breadth of concerns and suggestions that were volunteered by more than one hundred graduate students, solicited over the five months preceding the presentation. While we realize the importance of an expedient reporting process, if there is any information that you think could help you make the final recommendations, we strongly encourage you to return to us for clarifications before you issue your report. Specifically, in the next few weeks we will be launching a major survey of graduate students regarding quality of life and advising issues. We would welcome your input into that survey and we are enthusiastic to help create a concrete set of recommendations that can be effectively implemented. While this report is specific to graduate students, it has also been reviewed by the ASCIT President, who reports that many of our recommendations will also improve quality of life and mental health for undergraduates and that none of the proposed initiatives are in conflict with full support of undergraduate life.

We are providing what we believe to be several good ideas and hope that sufficient resources will be made available to comprehensively address the enclosed list of recommendations; however, we strongly discourage implementation of these recommendations as unfunded mandates to already resource-deprived administrative departments. While we understand that our suggested approaches may not be the absolute best ways to address each of the underlying concerns, we are offering suggestions for concrete steps we can make towards improvement of graduate student mental health and strengthening protective factors against suicide; we hope these suggestions are supported by the MHTF and Institute. As you will see in the attached meeting minutes (Appendix A), we significantly filtered the suggestions to those that we feel are the most important. Although some of these recommendations/issues may seem minor, we are convinced that all of our recommendations need to be addressed as part of any program that seeks to broadly improve Caltech’s resources to prevent suicide and improve the mental health of the graduate student community. Since it would be impossible to identify all graduate student concerns in an ever-changing society, we also recommend the implementation of a regular, ongoing process for monitoring graduate student mental health including addressing related suggestions and evaluating the resources to implement improvement. Careful review and action based on data from regular surveys, including but not limited to the Caltech Emotional Well-Being Survey (CEWS) and GSC surveys, should be a component of this ongoing process.
When GSC Chair, Jai Shanata, met with President Chameau in July of 2009 to discuss the upcoming MHTF, President Chameau suggested that ‘now is the time for bold action’. We, and the graduate student community, look forward to your bold leadership through this difficult time.

Sincerely,
Jai Shanata (G5, Ch), GSC Chair
David Doll (G5, Ph), Advocacy Chair, Safety Net working group member
Philipp Boettcher (G4, Ae), Advocacy Committee member, Safety Net working group member
Becky Tucker (G2, Ph), Advocacy Committee member
Alex Lockwood (G2, GPS), Social Committee Co-Chair, Ruddock RA
Report to the Mental Health Task Force from the Graduate Student Council

Compiled on behalf of the Entire Graduate Student Community by:

Jai Shanata
David Doll
Philipp Boettcher
Executive Summary

Positive aspects of the graduate student experience abound at Caltech. However, surveys of hundreds of Caltech graduate students (2007-2010) and in-depth focus groups about graduate student mental health hosted by the Graduate Student Council (GSC) in the winter and spring of 2010 revealed that a lack of readily accessible, systematic support in some areas leaves a non-negligible number of graduate students feeling isolated from the Caltech community and lacking the personal resiliency to cope with the stress of their day-to-day academic and research experiences at Caltech. Many students reported that in the current Caltech climate, they would not seek treatment. Moreover, the majority of graduate students reported that they lacked the emotional strength and time, let alone knowledge and skills, to help their peers who might be suffering from mood disorders or to recognize other signs of a possibly suicidal peer. In preparation for this report, the GSC invited the entire graduate student community to collectively identify a range of areas for improvement, which, once fully addressed, should significantly increase the prevalence of protective factors against suicide and escalating mood disorders and thereby improve graduate student mental health.

Introduction

Caltech is one of the most outstanding research institutions in the world; recent rankings from the Association of American Universities place Caltech as being decisively the best. Our innovative faculty leads teams of graduate students, postdoctoral scholars, and undergraduates in research that regularly shapes the course of science. Without a doubt, Caltech has succeeded in producing one of “the world’s greatest intellectual playgrounds.” Moreover, when graduate students were asked in a 2008 GSC survey (Appendix B) to rate the influence of various factors on their decision to attend Caltech, by a wide margin, graduate students cited the high caliber of research and outstanding reputation of the faculty as the two top reasons that they choose to pursue a Ph.D. at Caltech (N=349).

Understanding that elite research and academic achievement often produces a high stress environment, we realize that Caltech faces a unique challenge in balancing unparalleled research and academic achievement with unnecessary stress and isolation, factors that can contribute to suicide. In the 17 months since the first of 4 recent suicides, several Institute and graduate student-led programs have begun to address some of these troubling factors:

Institutional Changes

• Expanding health insurance: ambulance coverage, HPV vaccine for women, and allowing students to individually buy higher levels of coverage.
• Inclusion of undergraduate and graduate students in Safety Net Working Group
• Increased depth of support of graduate students by the Student Affairs. Gradual, but consistent, steps towards supporting graduate student quality of life at the same levels offered to undergraduates are being made.
• Setting up the Mental Health Task Force (MHTF)
• And, very recently, replacing the nurse cut from the Health and Counseling Center with a psychiatric nurse.

Graduate Student-led Programs Coordinated by the GSC

• Recognizing outstanding academic and research mentoring of graduate students by faculty, postdocs and other graduate students
  http://www.its.caltech.edu/~gscacad/awardinfo.html
• Student2student mentoring program
  https://s2s.caltech.edu/
• Research lab reviews
  http://www.its.caltech.edu/~gscacad/html/lab_review_survey.html
• Lunch with faculty program
• Strengthening relationships with faculty Option representatives to emphasize graduate student quality of life at the Option level.
• Working with Division Chairs and the Board of Trustees to make raising funds for endowed graduate student fellowships a top priority of Development
• Continuing development of the Technique—An online compilation of graduate student resources
  http://technique.caltech.edu/
• Social events: Monthly social hours, off-campus trips (beaches, wineries, museums, clubs), annual field day at Caltech, and health-focused programming.
• Strengthening the relationship between undergraduate students, graduate students, and postdocs for joint career and social events.
• Funding of ~20 student clubs in 2009-2010
• Weekly free coffee for graduate students to meet at Red Door and discuss quality of life issues (begun August, 2010).

Although the purpose of the GSC is to provide consistent programming and help to inform the Institute about graduate student suggestions and concerns, we recognize the urgency and importance of an immediate improvement in our quality of life. We have recently re-evaluated our priorities and our budget to emphasize the critical goal of improved graduate student mental health. The above graduate student-led programs were made possible through the combined efforts of many GSC BoD members and funding from the graduate student dues. However, we have reached the limits of what we can achieve on behalf of graduate students based on our available resources. Providing the level of support services and strength of safety net that all graduate students deserve now requires significant action by Caltech’s faculty, and the Institute as a whole.
Graduate Student Input—Suicide Prevention and Mental Health

In order to evaluate the efforts of the Institute and the GSC in addressing graduate students’ suggestions, we sought broad graduate student input. Specifically, with the announcement of the creation of the MHTF and the charge to “identify ways in which [to] improve the mental wellbeing of members of the community and more effectively address mental health issues,” the GSC solicited input for the MHTF so that graduate student perspectives could be easily identified and centrally located. To augment the MHTF’s graduate student focus groups, the GSC felt that face-to-face communication with peers may solicit a different, complementary collection of opinions. To that end, the GSC hosted six topic-specific dinners, as well as one planning dinner during which these topics were identified and one general idea-collecting event at the Athenaum’s Rathskeller. These events were well attended (15-40 graduate students at each), free to the entire graduate community, and operated under a condition of anonymity.

The topic-specific dinners included: Adviser-Advisee relations, Academic Programs and Degree Progress, Stress and Stress Relief, Healthcare and Insurance, Suicide and Violence Prevention, and International Students and Students with Dependents. The conversations at each of the dinners dealt primarily, though rarely exclusively, with the evening’s topic of discussion. In general, we had a relevant member of the Caltech faculty or staff come to the meetings for part of the meeting to offer their perspectives and answer questions (for example, Jim Endrizzi from the International Student Programs office attended the International Students and Students with Dependents dinner). This allowed the offices to help strengthen the safety net by sharing existing resources with the graduate students present and provided an opportunity to jointly identify strengths and areas for improvement.

In these meetings with graduate students, we identified a number of positive factors at Caltech. These factors include the support from the Graduate Dean’s Office, the Counseling Center, International Student Programs (ISP), and Student Affairs office. Additionally, at the Division and Option level, support includes organized social events ranging from daily teas to international field trips, and institutionalized advising through multiple faculty contacts.

In these meetings, graduate students also brought to us a wide variety of concerns, indicating areas that could be improved to address the lack of protective factors against suicide and support for graduate student mental health. Many protective factors to suicide exist, including but not limited to: problem solving / conflict resolution skills, personal resiliency, access to care, religious or philosophical beliefs that prohibit suicide, and a supportive network of friends and family. These help in combating the primary risk factors to suicide, including: family/personal history of mental illness, knowing someone who has committed suicide, previous suicide attempts, lack of personal resilience, incarceration, lack of treatment, and interpersonal isolation. As one of the risk factors includes knowing someone who has committed suicide, we recognize the exceptional importance of preventing any suicide in our community,
and hope that a supportive network can become part of the culture at Caltech. We feel that the recommendations in the following sections will help to foster a supportive, helpful environment directed toward improving mental health. The list of recommendations contains 2 sections: (A) Major Projects and Initiatives with more detailed comments about suggested implementation and (B) Recommendations Focused Specifically on Enhancing Protective Factors to Suicide and Decreasing Risk Factors for Suicide.
List of Recommendations for the MHTF

(A) Major Projects and Initiatives

Part A of this list is in ranked order. However, we feel that it is essential that the underlying concerns related to each of the 6 major projects and initiatives be addressed (or at least started) by summer of 2011.

1. Improve Resources for High Quality Mentoring of All Graduate Students by Faculty

A. In parallel to the recent document produced for faculty advising of undergraduates, produce and distribute one for faculty advising of graduate students—for direct mentors, as well as faculty on Thesis Committees, Option Representatives, etc. Specific expectations of these roles should be clearly described, both at the Institute level as well as the Option/Division level. We suggest that a joint group of faculty and graduate students work with the Provost’s Office to develop and distribute this resource to both current and new faculty.

B. Provide sufficient faculty resources in each Option/Division to ensure that graduate students can access high quality mentoring by faculty. See Table 1 below for a comparison of graduate student to faculty and postdoctoral scholar ratios across Caltech’s 6 Divisions (adapted, with permission, from Table 1 of Caltech’s 2010 Educational Effectiveness WASC Report).

C. Ensure early and consistent access to Thesis Committees for all graduate students. All graduate students should have the opportunity to meet with their Thesis Committee at least once per year—and more often if the student feels that such interactions are in their academic and research interests. Thesis Committees, or at least one faculty member beyond the adviser, should be established in the first year of graduate studies so that it can be an effective resource. Its composition should be flexible so that it can grow and evolve to continually support each individual graduate student.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division</th>
<th>Graduate Students</th>
<th>Professorial Faculty</th>
<th>Graduate Student: Faculty Ratio</th>
<th>Postdoctoral Scholars</th>
<th>Postdoctoral: Senior Mentor Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>BIO</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>32</td>
<td><strong>4.4</strong></td>
<td>151</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCE</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>37</td>
<td><strong>6.6</strong></td>
<td>121</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAS</td>
<td>493</td>
<td>76</td>
<td><strong>6.5</strong></td>
<td>108</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPS</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>32</td>
<td><strong>2.3</strong></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSS</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>46</td>
<td><strong>0.6</strong></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PMA</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>67</td>
<td><strong>2.9</strong></td>
<td>122</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total/Average</td>
<td><strong>1179</strong></td>
<td><strong>290</strong></td>
<td><strong>4.1</strong></td>
<td><strong>549</strong></td>
<td><strong>1.4</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Create a First Year Graduate Student Experience Course

The objective of this course is to teach students about ethics, mental health, communication skills, stress coping skills, and campus resources. This course should be designed and implemented to help in building a comprehensive Caltech community by having faculty members teach small groups (12-20 graduate students) with support from the Health and Counseling Center, Graduate Dean’s Office, Student Affairs, and Faculty Option Representatives and Option administrators. This also provides an opportunity for faculty to become re-acquainted with these important campus resources. A more targeted form of this course may also be useful to some graduate students in their second or third years, particularly in Options where coursework dominates the first year.

3. Ensure Graduate Students can Access Sufficient Time Off and Achieve Work-Life Balance

Currently, graduate students are entitled to two weeks of paid vacation in addition to 11 Institute holidays. This amount is significantly lower than our peer institutions overseas; MIT allotted an extra 12 days of vacation per year to students in response to a suicide cluster like the one Caltech recently experienced. Still, even standing Caltech policies are not uniformly enforced. Some graduate students reported feeling guilty about even taking both days of a weekend off, even occasionally. We should work to address both the actual and widely perceived expectation of work with little to no respite. Graduate student leave policies should revised, then published and distributed to the community by both faculty advisors as well as the upper administration each year. The issue of sick days and medical leave should be re-examined and a revised policy that demonstrates the administration’s understanding that a student should not be punished for a long-term illness, be it concerning mental health or otherwise, should be developed. Similarly, leave policy for jury duty should be clarified in a way that does not punish students for performing their civic duty.

4. Create an On-Campus Student Center

Caltech’s campus needs a central place with significant indoor space that is open 24 hours/day where graduate students can congregate to work and socialize. It may be appropriate to provide office space for many Student Affairs staff in this facility so that they can regularly interact with the student body and execute effective programming. To be effective, this space will probably have to be >30,000 ft². In addition to a central-campus location, a series of common areas (so-called 3rd spaces) local to different buildings or Options would greatly benefit the student community, as students need non-academic environments close to their lab to unwind or relax prior to returning to long work days.

5. Improve Graduate Student Housing

A. Provide sufficient housing for graduate students at rates that are affordable based on graduate student stipends. Rent in Pasadena
is significantly above national average, and living in non-Institute housing places an additional burden on a student’s budget. Figure 1 below outlines two actual graduate student budgets to highlight the importance of providing affordable housing. A 2008 GSC survey of 282 renting graduate students showed 47% of graduate students live in Caltech owned housing, whereas 77% listed Caltech owned housing as their preferred living situation.

B. Stabilize or increase the variety of graduate student housing choices, which currently appear to be in a troubling decline. We recommend greatly increasing residential programming in all of these housing complexes, such as the recent expansion of Catalina support via the CCA program to effectively build several vibrant, supportive graduate student residential communities. To ensure that all graduate students are supported, a parallel program should be developed for graduate students who are forced to live off campus due to insufficient housing, or who choose to live off-campus. These students may otherwise quickly become isolated. Providing trained graduate students in each academic building would be one way to support these students.

C. Improve customer service in the Housing Office and implement effective and supportive communication from the Housing Office in all communications, especially in written communications. Graduate students shouldn’t be treated as an afterthought by Housing, but rather as customers and valuable members of the Caltech community.

6. Continue Monitoring and Expanding Support of Graduate Students

Graduate student needs should be highlighted as an Institute priority by re-funding recent cuts to Student Affairs (in order of
importance: Health and Counseling Center, Graduate Dean's Office, Career Development Center, and Caltech Center for Diversity—especially programming for women, Housing, and Dining.). While the cuts were necessary in response to the financial crisis and targeted the least effective resources, these cuts have disproportionately impacted graduate students who used these resources, some of whom are in the most vulnerable groups. Cuts, especially in the Graduate Dean’s Office and Health and Counseling Center may have diminished access to protective factors against suicide; some roles, such as the ombudsperson, are significantly missed and at present largely unfilled. Sadly, some positions were also cut at a time when they were needed the most. It is our hope that restoring many of these resources will help to strengthen our safety net. Since it would be impossible to identify all graduate student concerns in an ever-changing society, we also recommend the implementation of a regular, ongoing process for monitoring graduate student mental health including addressing related suggestions and evaluating the resources to implement improvement.
(B) Recommendations Focused Specifically on Enhancing Protective Factors Against Suicide and Decreasing Risk Factors for Suicides

Part B of our recommendations is not in ranked order, but rather is organized around specific areas widely believed to impact suicide risk.

Recommendations to Decrease Isolation for Graduate Students and Build Community

- Have faculty and current graduate students lead by example in making time to ask each other about their lives, in interacting with other labs, Options and Divisions, and in promoting a strong social community on campus to match the strong intellectual community. Implement Option, Division, and Institute level awards/recognition for faculty and graduate students who contribute in an outstanding way toward engendering a strong sense of community, as is done for example in the Aerospace Option.
- Hire a coordinator for graduate student life with the equivalent level of Institutional support and programming budget as currently offered to undergraduate students. Student Affairs has been an increasingly strong advocate of graduate student community building and improving graduate student quality of life over the past year. However, we feel that a position dedicated to graduate student life would be even more effective. These positions could often work together for mutual graduate student and undergraduate student programming. However, as a larger and more amorphous population, graduate students need at least one person who is an expert in understanding the graduate student experience in very stressful research environments and, whose sole job it is to monitor and implement effective programming to draw graduate students together.
- Encourage first year graduate students to arrive earlier on campus – housing contracts can start September 1st. This will particularly benefit international students coming from overseas, who need to adjust to a new school as well as a new culture.
- For international students, offer an intense ~two week ESL course before classes and research begins. Scheduling of this course should be done to ensure that full attendance by international students is possible. It is important particularly for those students that have difficulty with English, as interpersonal isolation can easily occur in these cases.
- Make it easier to book common spaces—a single way to book many spaces on campus would help to facilitate events and decrease isolation. Many campus groups, for example the several Dance Clubs, have expressed frustration in the process for securing a venue for their classes.
- Develop the north athletic fields in such a way that they can be used for longer periods of time during the year, especially over summer, for student sports such as the softball league. Turning the field into Astroturf would likely extend the usable length of the summer sporting seasons while diminishing the amount of water required for upkeep, thereby helping the Institute to reach our sustainability goals.
- Transform orientation (international and general) to be a yearlong series of events that remind graduate students of relevant Institute resources and foster inter-Option social
and academic communities – this could be incorporated in the First Year Graduate Student Experience Course mentioned above under “Major Projects”.

- Ensure that current open spaces on campus are maintained (not built upon) and expanded when possible (many students have reported that the campus is starting to feel claustrophobic). Students take advantage of these spaces for exercising and socializing – two very important ways of combating stress and isolation.
- Have a once per term (4 times per year), campus-wide afternoon snack break (e.g. lemonade and cookies for everyone at a central location). All available administrators, faculty, staff, postdoctoral scholars, and students should be encouraged to attend.
- Strongly support the Fun Club (engages in one-time activities like museum visits for the entire student community) and similar groups.
- Organize get-togethers with low-key social and professional events with local schools (UCLA, USC, etc.) to allow graduate students to network beyond Caltech.
- Improve efforts and provide sufficient incentives to recruit and retain administrators and students with high energy to plan and promote events. Seek student input on these hires when possible.
- Increase graduate student recruitment for under-represented students (URS), perhaps by hiring an expert to focus on this, as was done in the undergraduate office.
- Ensure administrators, faculty, and graduate students are supported with sufficient funds and leave time to actively recruit (URS and general).

Recommendations to Decrease Unnecessary Stress

- Increasing stress-related seminars for campus and for Option.Division-specific concerns.
- Review degree programs at the Option level and ensure that each requirement is important and directed towards the degree goal(s). Especially consider cutting courses when they cause significant and unnecessary stress.
- Alleviate financial stressors for graduate students; these include: housing, healthcare, parking, dining, stipend levels, etc.
- Ensure that advisers (or Options) offer a funding guarantee for their graduate students (at least 4 or 5 years with satisfactory progress) that is made known to the students during their first year. Encourage faculty administrators, such as Option Representatives, to be more proactive in helping graduate students who do not yet have a lab understand their choices and communicate with prospective advisers. This can be particularly difficult for international students, who do not necessarily have the ability to apply for the same breadth of fellowships to support themselves if they don’t find a research group.
- Require all faculty and graduate students to establish, in their first year working together, a mutually agreed upon timeline for degree progress and graduation. At a minimum, this should include outlining reasonable time commitments and expectations for: TAing, taking classes, attending seminars, preparing for qualifying exams and candidacy, writing and publishing papers, writing grant and fellowship proposals (if any), preparing for and giving group
meetings/presentations, preparing for and attending conferences, mentoring other students, upkeep of equipment, applying for jobs, and all other graduation requirements. There should be some flexibility in this timeline, and it should be jointly revised at least once per year starting in the second year in an annual meeting with the graduate student’s Thesis Committee.

- Decrease the negative stigma—present among both faculty and graduate students—associated with switching advisers that currently exists in several Options.
- Ensure that students who choose to switch advisers are treated fairly by all faculty involved and address concerns regarding degree length and funding for graduate students who decide to switch advisers. Further, if a student does choose to switch groups, the previous adviser should provide as fair of an assessment as possible of the student's capabilities - many students switch groups simply because a given lab environment is not ideal for them and end up highly successful in a different setting.
- Provide mechanisms for formal lab rotations in each Option so that graduate students can make informed decisions when selecting an adviser.
- Systematically provide information for graduate students about filing taxes, including tax treaties for international students.

Recommendations to Strengthen Graduate Student Resiliency and Problem Solving

- Have subsidized spots dedicated to Caltech graduate students in the Children's Center at Caltech so graduate students who are parents can be in lab. http://www.ccc.caltech.edu
- Increase funding for childcare assistance program (currently max of $4000 per year) http://cit.hr.caltech.edu/ccap_program.htm
- Increase funding for the graduate student dependent health insurance supplement program (currently $100/month) through the Graduate Dean’s Office
- Offer varying levels of health insurance and dental plans for graduate student's spouses and children, such as those available to staff. Currently, the only Caltech-based health insurance for spouses and children is prohibitively expensive for many graduate students, some of whom reported choosing to go uninsured rather than into debt. This can be especially difficult for graduate students coming from overseas whose spouses need to have health coverage, but can only purchase our reasonable coverage-based plan, which is often prohibitively expensive for a graduate student budget.
- Provide a consistent level of health benefits and cost (or specific cost increases)--several graduate students reported significant anxiety over year-to-year changes in these benefits.
- Implement multiple parallel orientation sessions/workshops during international student orientation for international students of different cultural backgrounds
- Provide online resources for information presented during international student orientation and orientation so that students can access it throughout the year.
- Implement a language partner program: provide coffee cards for ESL students to meet one-on-one to talk informally about their lives and academics/research with native speakers to help improve language skills.
Recommendations to Increase Access to Health and Mental Health Care

- Continue to keep the list of in-network psychologists and psychiatrists up-to-date and readily available and advertised.
- Several students reported having to go beyond the psychiatrists covered by Caltech’s insurance to find one that was able to meet their needs. **Thus, the number of psychiatrists on the insurance provider panel should be increased (this is necessitated by the current reimbursement system which does not sufficiently incentivize participation in our insurance plan for many psychiatrists).**
- Provide and/or better advertise services that provide free or low cost transportation for graduate students to get to off campus medical appointments.
- Sufficiently staff the Caltech Counseling Center so that every graduate student who wants to stay on campus to see their therapist is able to do so. Current practice sometimes guides graduate students who may be in need of long-term treatment to select an off-campus therapist, which can pose additional time and transportation restraints on accessing these services.
- Provide a specific outline of steps necessary to take a leave of absence (both medical and non-medical).
- More clearly identify the few people knowledgeable about health insurance (i.e. Jeannie Holloway and Angelica Santana) as resources for students.
- Support and increase resources beyond the Health and Counseling Center, such as the Health Educator, for students to learn about healthy living and gain the skills to implement it in their life.
- Advertise emergency loans (available from the Graduate Dean’s Office); expand quantity available if they are not currently sufficient for broad advertising.

Recommendations to Enhance Academic and Career Support

- Implement a support group for graduate students writing their dissertations; perhaps partner with postdoctoral scholars.
- Support resources for graduate students writing papers and research proposals: both for classes and publications (expand and advertise)
- Ensure strong support of graduate students as they plan their future careers. **Current CDC resources and attitudes are insufficient and leave graduate students feeling hopeless about their job prospects.**
- Strengthen the alumni network and how it works for current graduate students as they seek jobs after Caltech.

Recommendations to Systematically Solicit Graduate Student Input

- Implement a regular, recurring faculty-graduate student forum for these communities to come together at the Institute and Option levels to discuss strengths and areas for potential improvement. This could be modeled after the biannual undergraduate Student-Faculty Conference.
• Encourage each Division to solicit input from graduate students and staff, in addition to faculty, during tenure decisions. This will help to emphasize that quality of mentoring, as well as teaching, is valued at Caltech.
• **Consult with graduate students during selection of faculty Option representatives and Option administrators and other Option/Division level support staff.**

**Recommendations to Implement Graduate Student-Friendly Hours**

• With the restoration of the nurse staffing to previous levels we recommend that the Health and Counseling Center return to a schedule where they are open over lunch.
• Lactation room hours are not sufficient (breastfeeding happens between 5pm and 8am, too).
• Expand hours for the gym and provide graduate student-friendly hours for gym classes.

**Recommendations to Better Advertise Graduate Student Resources**

• Continue to update and improve the Graduate Dean's Office webpage to be more accessible, interactive, informative, and inviting. This resource can help graduate students to find pertinent resources, including but not limited to degree progress, mentoring, counseling, financial resources, and conflict mediation.
• Better advertise the S2S Mentoring program.
• Keep a website and wiki with up-to-date resources for students with dependents (with access from the main Graduate Dean's Office page).
• Make sure to have printed pamphlets including all important graduate student resources in the following offices: Graduate Dean's Office, Health and Counseling Center, Human Resources, Housing Office, International Student Programs Office, and each graduate Option administrator and faculty Option representative's office.
• **In general, continue to enhance the extent to which the Graduate Dean’s Office is seen as a helpful, first-stop resource, along with Option administrators, faculty Option representatives, advisers, and thesis committees.**

**Additional Recommendations**

• Improve the experience for international students who take the speaking test—some reported that it was awkward. Also, directly relate the results to TA hiring.
• Make it easy to reserve buses for off-campus trips.
• Consider Caltech graduate student housing and on campus dining as services provided to graduate students that, therefore, do not need to break even/make money.
• **Increase Student Affairs and Caltech Y staff, etc., so that graduate students don't have to do as much planning and set-up for events.**
• Expand the Technique to include a 'best food of LA' section.
Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the hundreds of graduate students who shared their opinions and suggestions and whose views are condensed in this report. Additionally, several graduate students provided detailed comments and suggestions during the preparation of this written report. Alphabetically by last name, they are: Artemis Ailianou (G2, ChE), Megan Dobro (G2, Bi), Mark Kendall (G3, APh), Alex Lockwood (G2, PS), Fan Liu (G1, Ch), Christine Romano (G5, Ch), Maggie Thompson (G2, Ch), and Becky Tucker (G2, Ph). Also, we wish to thank President Chameau for suggesting, and the Caltech Board of Trustees for supporting, the formation of the MHTF, as well as each member of the MHTF for their time and dedication to this hopefully revitalizing effort.
Appendices

to the

Report to the Mental Health Task Force from the Graduate Student Council

Compiled on behalf of the Entire Graduate Student Community by:

Jai Shanata

David Doll

Philipp Boettcher
A – Minutes from GSC hosted dinners

Adviser Advisee relations

• Positive Examples (or “Things that can be Duplicated by Others”):
  o Advisor set aside time to teach difficult classes
  o Advisor showed how to set up equipment
  o Advisor has a “true open door policy” so available to answer questions
  o Advisor letting students “find their own way”
  o Advisor helps with career searches down the road
  o Knowing where you stand financially as far as advisor’s funding is concerned
  o Advisor gets to know students; therefore knows how to give good advice
  o Advisor finds interesting problems that match your strengths and takes your future into account
  o Conflict Resolution:
    - Management skills to resolve within the lab conflict
    - Good source of academic advice/source of support
  o Help with transition to job after graduate school
    - Having time to travel for interviews
    - Active help in contacting potential employer
    - Good letters of recommendations
  o Transparency
  o Honesty about timeline
  o Equality among grad students
• Negative Examples (or “Things that should be avoided”):
  o Favoritism
  o Lack of Ability to buy things to save time/effort (excessive micro-management)
  o Taking a student without funding source
• Establishing timeline - can be difficult
  o 4\textsuperscript{th} year meeting (Chem, generally now in 5\textsuperscript{th} year) - can lead to a lot of work at last minute leading up to it. Better relationship could have led to less last minute work and more of a plan earlier on.
  o Physics is similar with oral candidacy
  o Need a way to establish a roadmap to graduation; be it candidacy, 4\textsuperscript{th} year review, etc.
  o Achieving mutual expectations of faculty and graduate students can be very difficult
• Financing
  o Transparency in funding would be very nice. “Give us a reason to expect you and we will work our tails off for it.”
  o Force people to start talking about money earlier.
• General recommendations
  o Students need to talk to students in the lab
  o Professors often may need required ‘sensitivity training’
- Advisor said to undergrad affected by recent suicide said a couple of weeks later “you’re not still upset up about that are you?”
- Advisor recommending dropping out because “PhD is very hard” as a way to “motivate”.
- Motivation vs. intimidation.

**Trends (When Henry Arrived):**
- It is taking students longer to finish
- Uncertainty in future path (postdoc, post-grad jobs)
- Stress from faculty.

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**Academic Degree Programs and Progress**

**Option Specifics:**
- Physics website has good description of requirements and description of tests etc.
  - Potentially adopt for all options, but must be kept up to date (at least at a yearly basis (by staff?)
  - Flexibility of physics as far as dates (such as tests) is very appreciated.
- Chemical Engineering has one guide with specific timeline that’s relatively well stuck to. Perhaps a bit emphatically so
- Chemistry has to write 3 proposals - 2 in field and 1 out of field - for future research…people who stay in academia find this quite helpful
- Math is 5 years - you are asked to leave unless your advisor goes begging.
  - 1st year core sequence of classes- after 1st year have to take 3 quals and must pass two.
  - 2nd year chance to retake any test(s) you missed. Get an advisor.
  - End of 3rd year go to candidacy
  - 4th or 5th year, need to publish so you can apply for post-docs
- Aero - quals at beginning of 2nd year. 15 classes first year. Quals over 3 of the classes (orals). Up to 50% leave after 1st year.
  - Candidacy must be before you write thesis (preferably by beginning of 3rd year)

**Qualifying Exams**
- Retake procedures – no set rules
- Master's Degree or Engineer’s Degree as a consolation prize

**Candidacy Committee**
- Chemistry has a strong committee that can be called upon, but isn’t widely used
  - 4 meetings required with your committee
- Chemical Engineering should meet every year
  - Not required in Physics
- Is Candidacy Binding? NO!!--Research plans can change.
- Can/should graduate students use it in trying to highlight a minimum for what their thesis should contain?
- Good to have non-advisor as candidacy chair

**RoadSigns- Sufficient?**
- Make sure advisors and advisees are having discussions
- Get something in place where you have figured out what requirements are available
- In catalogue, required to meet with committee after 4 years
- The online effort will try to monitor degree progress in a more uniform way
- There is an online “advising” at REGIS for online text-tracking of progress and suggestions.
- Grades - Some options don’t require courses/grades (not just physics)
- Option rep has a large input into catalogue requirements

• Leave Procedures
  o Can’t access access.caltech.edu when you’re no longer an active student
  o Can continue health insurance at student rate ($108/term) for 1 year
  o Housing can be difficult when going on leave
  o Have to get a bunch of signatures
  o International students can change to “curricular practical training” to stay in the States
  o You should take time on when you’re going to take a vacation
  o Remind people to take a vacation.
  o “ABITUR” - being gone away, kicked out without a degree

• Classes
  o P/F system, systematic approach about what classes should be taken P/F and which for grades
  o Philosophical question about whether +/- on grades is helpful or hurtful

• Quality of Teaching
  o Considered at Tenure time (according to the Provost), this could be better emphasized
  o Teaching, especially of grad classes, is not often not of high quality

• General Concerns
  o What happens if Advisor runs out of money and you’re a 4th year?
  o What about if you are unsure of Advisor’s support level?
  o If you change projects, will your support go away?

Stress and Stress Relief

• General Observations:
  o Role of stress was quite downplayed in response to the suicides – let's admit that this is a high stress place, and figure out how to deal with the level of stress and to reduce unnecessary stress.
  o Graduate students feel that the academic and research stress at Caltech can act as a trigger towards worsening mental health
  o Less stress at other institutes, it seems--anecdotally, students transferring with advisers to other schools have observed decreases in stress

• Stressors
Prestigious school, so we feel more stressed to publish more/better papers
Should we feel more relaxed, and know that the research will take care of itself – “A happy student is a productive student”.
Stress vs. Academic Rigor (Community as a protective factor)
Students wanting to impress advisor - get good data
Culture of Stress
Get finished because of relationship status – long distance relationship
Monetary stress - traveling home costs much money (esp. internationally)
Vindicate the admissions – impostor syndrome
There is an inherent stress in having a great idea in science
Bad relationship with advisor
Living at Catalinas makes you feel you should keep working (no break from home – too close)
Graduate student isolation

• Places to improve
  Remove the culture of stress - not feel guilty if you want to take the weekend off.

• Stress Relief
  Sleep
  Important to find a community
  Tai Chi (exercise) - organized classes, not the most student friendly courses
  Getting off campus
  Having an understanding advisor
  More Common spaces for activities and stress reliefs - a student lounge and airy open areas where you can just sit around and chill
  Need more open spaces; Caltech is getting too congested. - Fit into long term plan for open space.
  Take a break when needed, and sometimes when perhaps you feel like you shouldn’t
  Stress reduction is about emotional well being, and hence stress reduction should be on the table as well.
  Have a campus wide event every now and then (Make it rain on Tuesdays)

• Dealing with stressors
  Improve communication with advisor (where Kevin works)
  Address questions of asymmetrical power
  Stress is a part of life. All students need the tools to be able to cope with life stress, and identify when this is too much to seek help. Recommend increasing stress-related seminars for campus and option/Division-specific.
  Grad students will choose to work even with faculty who are not good mentors
  Vice Provost Melany Hunt wants to look into the role of faculty in the academic programs for both undergrad and grad.
  Good training of new faculty: motivation of grads, honor code, sensitivity training, sexual harassment, etc.
  Organize trips for places outside LA
  Food interests - get a webpage going.
  Meet with GSCs from other schools (USC, UCLA, etc.) - we should contact them for programming
o Movie screenings
o We feel undergrads get much better use of Tom Mannion than we do, we NEED a AVP for SA for grad students - Don’t frame it in terms of undergraduates because they’re younger - frame it as how we’re isolated how we need centralized programming and a community. Argument - “Community is a protective factor - community is good”
o Perhaps a ½ time student activities coordinator to offload some of tom’s roles.
o Incorporate Post Docs into grad student community gatherings
o Pitty Poker and the Culture of Stress
  - Feeling guilty
  - Potentially leading to cheating & falsifying results
o Websites for dinner groups, food near campus, trips (MOSH)

**Healthcare**

- Managing Mental Health Issues on Campus
  o Mood Disorders manifest in early twenties (late teens). Grad students coming in will see these holes. We have good first line resources with counseling center.
  o Psychiatrists at Caltech are WAY over subscribed.
  o Only 3 other psychiatrists in plan (with no copay), Caltech’s plan only covers 60% of Pasadena psychiatrists. More therapists available
  o Transportation to the available psychiatrists etc. is a huge problem; and not many people have cars...do they provide for taxi vouchers.
  o Quality of care is different, and can be better, when go out of Caltech’s network; especially better when you go off of campus because she doesn’t have enough (only 10-15 minute appointments).
  o 36 sessions covered, after 25 there’s a copay. Some students are going to reach this cap; but may be okay because of “extreme conditions” clause. To find about the specifics had to call Aetna.
  o Health care plans should be opt out not opt in
  o Therapists are better as far as availability
  o Regulated work hours
  o Encouragement to take vacations
  o Opt out option means that students who are now on their parents health plans may be more reluctant to seek some services, especially mental health services that their parents will then see billed.

- General Medical Care
  o People have had recommendations to an out-of-network doctor - causing much higher expenses.
  o Meeting with the doctor is difficult.
  o Possible over charging because of referral process.
  o STRESS: Pre-approval is difficult for general claims or procedures…and Aetna says they’ll decide afterward
  o Nurse practitioners are wonderful resource and help for students
The Health and Counseling Center should NOT close over lunch. This is one of the few times that most students have free during the day, and one of the most likely times they would go. Reaching the Center during the day then being turned away because of lunch hour closure decreases the chance that that student will seek further help.

- Less nurses for Health Center has increased wait time (anecdotally)
- Nurses are well liked but more waiting times and busier nurses are prone to make mistakes (specific instance of prescription of conflicting medications)

- **Dental Care**
  - Transportation problem; esp. when Delta Dental assigns you way out of town; and 30 days if you want to change.
  - Mak & Kleiger - dropped us...big problem
  - Current time for signing up for a Dentist – during NSO when no one knows about the area or the dentists--is unreasonable. Recommend revision

- **Women’s Health and Gender Reassignment Surgery**
  - Gender Surgery is being looked at for next year’s plans
  - Birth Control, aside from hormonal birth control, is not covered.
  - Plan for annual appointments keeps changing, and lab charges are never clear.
  - Wait time for Gyn. Appointments are a bit long.

- **Students with Dependents**
  - Not cost effective to have a spouse on plan; though children is great (esp. with dean’s office’s $100 subsidy).
  - In the end most get covered, but sometimes at a level that’s too high for something to go wrong that’s not catastrophic. Need stitches at midnight!
  - Perhaps need a nice central resource about outside insurance policies for future student with dependents.

- **Sleep Deprivation**
  - Stress can keep folks awake and not getting sleep during break time (sleep time)

- **Student Solutions**
  - Transportation - maybe have “Caltech-wide” Zipcar, so you didn’t need to spend $30 each month for medical purposes.
  - Increase # psychiatrists. (Kevin says they’re bringing in Huntington Hospital psychiatric residents; may be a year of lag time because of a requirement to bring general practitioner residents)
  - Better Dental Coverage

**Suicide and Violence Prevention**

**Recommendations**
- Women mentoring women program
- Have people checking in on them is great aspect
- Might be wise to have an upperclass mentor for each Caltech student
- Make a requirement, would be good to subsidize or incentivize to start things off.
- Incentive the program to ensure minimal activation barrier to use.

- **Tininess of Caltech leads to problems with labs**
  - How about a “Graduate Grievances Group” (email list, wiki, blackboard, real-time FAQ); username login to ensure anonymity (if desired)
  - A central service for questions and ideas to share between different graduate students
  - Either a core group (but this might be too small) or a wiki/blackboard (make sure still anonymous) - possibly incorporate this into the technique
  - Also can cause problems in changing labs--students feel stuck

- **Suicide prevention:**
  - Diversity of depression’s symptoms, the community should be more educated about seeing these symptoms (April 12th Mental Health Forum started us in this direction)
  - Perhaps have students write anonymously about their experiences with depression
  - We need to make sure people know there are resources for depression, and people need to be able to talk about it--create an atmosphere where discussion of mental health is the norm
  - Perhaps get people to share their story in the open (Orientation)
  - If faculty would do it, we may have more success.
  - Efforts to reduce Stigma of Mental Health Issues--must be done regularly

- **Problems in general**
  - Chinese students, with English as a second language, have a problem going to counseling center.
  - It is hard enough to talk about your mental health problems; even harder in a non-native language
  - Don’t have the same social background and don’t necessarily fit in; even at parties
  - Mandatory meetings will force a reach out to international community and give cover to certain groups (especially Asian males) whose cultural background often frowns upon seeking help.
  - Class identity - programming for getting to know your class (1st years)
  - EE has monthly gathering; math has daily tea and snacks - might be good for other options
  - 2nd year and beyond students sometimes feel that they’re a bit ignored…perhaps have person who actively checks in with them
  - Perhaps make this institutionalized (have a person who actively seeks feedback)
  - People don’t seek out a student ombudsman, it takes motivation on ombuds to go talk to person
  - Class identity (same year or same year and option) is an important--problem set/course support as well as emotional support--in the same boat.

- **Implementation**
  - Orientation - perhaps have skits (?) (Potentially a professional company; definitely should be amusing)
o Get divisions on board and have them make education a requirement
o Need to institutionalize the required education and regular re-education on spotting the symptoms in those around us: parallel to required safety training in many options
o Perhaps have a required course taught by faculty - taught by division or option (so it has the maximum relevance to as many students in the room) - Kevin wants the protection factors included in such a class (conflict resolution, etc.)
o Perhaps having a contact in each of the larger international groups to break down those hurdles
o Have person in each division responsible to look out for “quality of life”.
  o "Talk and Walk" session with counselors rather than having to physically go to the counseling center.
  o Institutionalize regular quality of life in division surveys
  o Have a few grad students, several in larger options, actively check in with each student ~1/quarter. It is easier to respond to an e-mail than to proactively ask for help.
  o Faculty point person in each option who is responsible for actively responsible for graduate student quality of life
  o Publicize phone numbers/hotlines that are available for students to call 24 hours for mental health and health crises; Caltech's on-call counselor

• Requirements ↔ Institutionalization
• How much social activities goes on in a research group?

**International Students and Students with Dependents**

- Grad Student Housing
  o Many international Students
  o Can no longer give preferential treatment (discriminate) to people with children as far as assigning apartments - but length of lease is longer for them
  o 296 S. Wilson falling apart, but good at fixing things
  o Haven’t raised the rents there
  o Extend grace period for families with kids after graduation to when they need to vacate the housing
  o No rent increase next year
  o We need more institute housing
  o Get CCA program up and running - keep going somehow?!
  o Dinning expenses are getting much too high
  o Grad students don’t feel as supported as much as undergraduates are
  o Get more people around Felicia or have her in charge of hires.
- International Students
  o Need more advertising for campus assistance programs
  o Jim’s awesome (and is leaving soon)
  o Language barrier - more separation in the community
  o International orientation covered by student affairs - most of other budget covered by HR
• Perhaps more culture tailored international student orientation
• Though some felt it was useful even from Canada to have 6 day orientation
• 2.5 day orientation was very tiring if still jet-lagged
• Orientation throughout the year
• Not much overlap between the 2 orientation sessions
• Have online wiki for cultural discussion and transition ideas
• 6 day is good to get people’s ears tuned to English
• ISP has the benefit that immigration docs are date specific
• Occasionally people miss IS orientation
• ESL offering will be through PCC
• Summer ESL has been lost; could really do a 2 week intensive course since housing in place starting September 1st
• Tie this into the S2S; do student pairing for practicing English – Incentivize
• Dissertation Support Group for ESL or foreign students writing dissertation
• Grad students in general should be using the writing center
• ISP does a great job with Visa issues - very quick response
• Speaking test is done through Dean’s office - TA improvement
• No one answers questions about taxes
• Finding CPA who does non-resident taxes well
• We need to hold programs earlier
• We need to make sure ISP still a resource for Safety Net
• I-20 Drop box a bit odd and a bit sudden to get used to
• Emergency contact; they’ll seek help to make sure the call isn’t too scary for the family
• People in lab will not necessarily think something is wrong because of cultural difference assumption

• Students with Dependents
  o Child care - Expensive and waiting list is way too long. Open to the entire Pasadena community.
    - Cheaper
    - Spaces set aside for graduate students
    - Childcare Assistance program here at Caltech - give up to $3000/year
    - JPL childcare is pretty much the same price
  o Waiting list at Child care is not well managed
  o Lactation room makes little difference because it’s far from everywhere and not at all convenient - only open during office hours
  o There’s an American stigma against breast feeding in public - problem?
  o Health insurance for dependents - If international you need to have dependents insured as a law; as students we only have our Cadillac plan available to us - staff plans have more options - $100/month from grad office for dependents healthcare (not ADVERTISED!!)
  o Page, centralized resource for maternity/family stuff (wiki based)
  o Make sure these places have materials on family friendly things:
    - ISP
    - Dean’s office
    - Housing
- HR
- Health Center
  o Student Fees do not go towards Family friendly events
    - Beach trip
    - More interaction with Post Docs would benefit this community (family)
    - One good thing is the Caltech Women’s group (name?) which has a furniture pool