The Graduate Student Council (GSC) represents the nearly 7,000 graduate students of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). We support policies that recognize, foster, and support student mental health and wellbeing as being foundational to the success of our academic institutions. In particular, we strongly support efforts targeted at addressing the root causes of mental health and wellbeing problems in academic institutions.

Over the past few years, many prominent reports (National Academies 2020 Report; ACHA 2019 Report; Nature Article; Nature Biotechnology Study) portray the significant and growing problem of student mental health, and that of graduate students in particular. As noted in findings published in Nature Biotechnology, graduate students are six times more likely to experience anxiety or depression than the general population. As postgraduate education becomes more common and necessary for today’s workforce, it is imperative that the proper systems are established to develop and maintain a healthy and supportive academic environment so as not to exacerbate an already problematic situation. Addressing the growing mental health crisis among students is critical to maintaining and, more importantly, improving our academic institutions - especially in relation to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Encouragingly, there is a growing effort to address mental health and wellness through campus services and treatment, as highlighted by a recent NASEM report and project. Unfortunately, few efforts are being made to better understand and address the root causes of graduate student mental health. We must develop a better understanding of the root causes so that they can be targeted through legislation and policy.

In order to effectively address student mental health issues from the federal level, we ask that:

1. An interagency task force (consisting of representatives from relevant federal agencies, legislators, and graduate students, with an emphasis on graduate student voices) be established in order to pursue the following:
   a. Launch a continuous, large-scale, and scientifically rigorous data collection process to elucidate our understanding of the following critical areas of concern, with the intent of establishing legislative recommendations and “best practices” for funding agencies, academic institutions, and research advisors:
      i. Advisor/advisee relationships
      ii. Wellbeing in relation to DEI initiatives
      iii. Graduate student work-life balance
      iv. Career outlook and uncertainty
   b. As a task force, hold regular meetings to discuss findings, progress, and plans moving forward.
   c. Establish programs, such as annual conferences, that foster open, regular communication among relevant stakeholders (agency leadership, students, academic faculty, legislators).
   d. Broadly signal the importance of student mental health and wellbeing to federal funding agencies and university leadership.

2. Federal funding agencies (e.g. NSF, NIH, DOD, DOE, NASA) are mandated through legislation to require one-page reports outlining research expectations and professional development plans agreed upon between all advisors and graduate students working on a project funded by said agency. This is already required for some funding mechanisms (e.g. NASA FINESST, NSF Postdoctoral Researcher Mentoring Plan, NIH) and has been beneficial for previous participants.

3. In line with the FAARM Project’s “Immediate Needs,” within their Core Policy Memo, federal funding agencies be mandated through legislation to require clear policies and
procedures around reporting problematic behavior, both for agency staff as well as graduate student trainees supported by said agency funding.

4. Relevant federal agencies, such as NSF and NIH, be mandated through legislation to devote funding to institutions of higher education to expand research into the root causes of graduate student mental health challenges in order to determine effective approaches in reducing its incidence, in line with the approach laid out by the College Transparency Act (CTA) and requests within FAARM’s CTA Policy Statement.

These specific requests, in particular the recommendations and “best practices” established by the interagency task force, will serve to encourage the broad indicators that are correlated with graduate student success and fulfillment, and will serve students across the breadth of postgraduate degrees and fields of study.

We look forward to working with you to address the growing graduate student mental health crisis. If you would like to know more about the importance of graduate student mental health, please reach out to us at gsc-eab-fed@mit.edu.

Prepared by: James McRae, Jack Reid, Michael DeMarco