Graduate and Professional Student Council
Quality of Life Survey
Fall 2016

Background

The Graduate and Professional Student Council (GPSC) is a recognized student organization and serves as the student government for Texas A&M University's graduate and professional students. According to its website (http://www.gpsctamu.org/) the mission of the GPSC is "to work in cooperation with the Texas A&M University administration, faculty and student leaders to advocate for graduate and professional students, and to ensure that their needs are understood and considered when campus policies concerning academic excellence, tuition and finance, and research are made." The GPSC sponsors several academic and social programs throughout the year and presents graduate and professional student concerns to university administration.

For a fourth time, the GPSC has collaborated with Student Life Studies on an assessment project focused on the life quality of Texas A&M graduate students, however the last time was in 2012. The information gained from this assessment is intended to help the GPSC Executive Committee shape future legislation and identify advocacy themes the GPSC may address for the year.

Method and Sample

The 39-question survey was developed using Qualtrics®, survey design software that creates web-based forms and databases. Twenty-six questions were quantitative, four were qualitative and nine were demographic questions. Due to branching technology, not all students who responded to the survey saw all of the questions. The data was analyzed using SPSS®, a statistical software package, Microsoft Excel® and Microsoft Word®.

On November 3, 2016, an email invitation with the survey link was successfully sent to 3548 randomly selected Texas A&M University graduate and professional students and 132 GPSC delegates who attended the September and October 2016 GSPC meetings. Three additional email reminders were sent to non-respondents until the close of the survey on November 21, 2016. Of the total 3680 students who received the survey, 532 responded to at least some part of the survey, for a 14% response rate.

Results

Results will be reported as means, standard deviations (sd), and frequency percentages for the number of people (n) who responded to the question. For ease of reading, frequency percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole percent, so totals may not add up to exactly 100%. Qualitative summary themes are reported in this report; the entire list can be found in a separate document. The report contains four sections: English Proficiency Exam, Vending Machine/Food Options on Campus, Funding/General Issues and Demographics.

English Proficiency Exam
Students identified as international students (n=1843) were asked if they were required to take the English Language Proficiency Exam for a Graduate Assistant Teaching position. Of the 273 international students who responded, 60% responded yes and 40% responded no. Those who responded yes were then asked how they reached the venue, since weekend transit was not available before the beginning of the fall semester. Table 1 indicates a small majority drove their own car or one they borrowed from a friend or walked.

Since weekend transit is not available before the Fall semester begins, how did you reach the venue?	Percent
Drove my car or one I borrowed from a friend or relative.	32%
Walked	30%
Got a ride from a friend	15%
Paid for transportation, such as taxi or Uber	12%
Rode a bicycle	9%
Transport arranged by my department	2%
Other	--

Table 1: Transport to English Proficiency Exam (n=145)

Students who indicated taking the English Proficiency Exam were also asked if they found it difficult to reach the venue. Of the 142 respondents, 53% said no and 47% said yes. Those who indicated they found it difficult to reach the venue were then asked if it would have been easier to access the exam on a weekday, and 86% of the 65 respondents said yes, and 14% said no. As well, they were asked if they would have encountered the same difficulties if the exam was facilitated on main campus. Of the 66 who responded, 39% responded no, 38% responded maybe and 23% responded yes.

Vending Machine/Food Options on Campus
All students sent the survey were requested to rank from a list of options what they most frequently ate for lunch. Table 2 shows that for their first ranked option, slightly more than half of respondents chose "Bring food from home" and one percent chose the option "Buy snacks from a vending machine on campus". The options are listed in descending order of first rank.

Lunch Option	Rank #1	Rank #2	Rank #3	Rank #4	Rank #5	Rank #6
Bring food from home	55%	20%	11%	7%	5%	3%
Go home to eat lunch	18%	18%	14%	18%	19%	15%
Buy from a restaurant, dining hall or other venue on campus	9%	22%	20%	19%	15%	13%
Don't eat lunch	9%	14%	16%	15%	16%	31%
Buy from a restaurant off campus	9%	19%	21%	17%	18%	18%
Buy snacks from a vending machine on campus	1%	8%	19%	25%	27%	21%

Table 2: Ranking of Lunch Options (n=434)

Next the students were asked to select from a list of options how long their typical wait was when they went to a food location (restaurant, dining hall or other venue) on campus. Shown in Table 3, the most frequently selected time for waiting was 5-10 minutes and least frequently selected wait time was 30 minutes +.

When you go to a food location (restaurant, dining hall or other venue) on campus, how long is your typical wait?	Percent
5-10 minutes	42%
Do not eat in restaurants, dining halls or other venues on campus	28%
10-20 minutes	23%
10-30 minutes	6%
30 minutes +	2%

Table 3: Food Location Wait (n=468)

When asked if they use the vending machines on campus, 38% of the 474 students who responded indicated sometimes, 33% said no and 29% said yes. Those who responded yes or sometimes were then asked to select from a list of options what items they typically buy. As noted in Table 4, the option "drinks" was selected most frequently and "cookies" was selected the least frequently as the items typically purchased from vending machines on campus.

What items do you typically buy? (choose all that apply)	Frequency
Drinks	69%
Chips	45%
Trail mix	24%
Candy	22%
Cookies	2%

Table 4: Vending Machine Choices (n=305)

Those same respondents were asked if they would use vending machines more if there were healthy options; 79% of the 308 respondents said yes, and 21% said no. They were then asked to select from an all that apply list of options about when they think to go to a vending machine. From the 309 responses, most frequently (66%) the option "hungry between meals (snacks) was chosen, followed by the option "need energy" (59%), and "when I forgot to bring lunch" (35%). Respondents were also provided an option to select "other" and write in their response. It was selected least frequently (8%), and 24 students wrote in responses, with the majority indicating they think to go to a vending machine when they are thirsty, needing something quickly and cheaply.

Those students who responded no when asked if they use vending machines on campus were asked a follow-up question regarding why they do not use vending machines on campus. Detailed on Table 5, on the next page, the most frequently selected response to the reason for not using vending machines on campus was that the students indicated the vending machines too expensive.

Why do you not use vending machines on campus?(choose all that apply)	Frequency
Too expensive	54%
I bring snacks from home	49%
Nothing in there I like	38%
Not one located near me	15%

Table 5: Not Using Vending Machines (n=148)

Those who indicated that there was nothing in the vending machines they liked as the reason for not using them were also asked what type of snacks they would prefer. When provided a select all that apply list of options, 54 students responded, and the choice "healthier alternatives" was selected most frequently (78%), followed by the "other" option (22%) and the option "different type of chips/cookies/candy" (20%). Those who selected the "other" option were provided a space to write in their response; 11 wrote in responses, which included fresh food, fruit, vegetables and that they do not eat snacks.

All students responding to the survey were provided a list of items and asked to indicate whether or not they would purchase the items if they were available from vending machines.   As shown on Table 6, students responding most favored purchasing sandwiches from the vending machines, but more were affirmative than negative regarding the purchase of all the selections.

Would you purchase the following items if they were available from vending machines?	Yes %	No %	n
Sandwiches	69%	31%	293
Dried Fruit	64%	36%	286
Baked Chips	60%	40%	274
Salads	58%	42%	281

Table 6: Vending Machine Choices

Funding/General Issues
All students responding to the survey were asked as series of questions regarding their research and educational funding and career development opportunities. First, respondents were asked to describe funding for their research. Noted on Table 7, one-third of the respondents affirmed that their research is funded solely through their department/university system, however, nearly another one-third indicated that their graduate program did not require them to conduct research.

Are you funded for the research that you are conducting in your graduate program?	Percent
Yes, my research is funded solely through grants or other funding through my department/university system	33%
My graduate program does not require me to conduct research	31%
No, my research is not funded from any grants or funding through my department/university system or outside resources	21%
Yes, my research is funded, but partial funding comes from resources outside my department/university system	14%

Table 7: Graduate Research Funding (n=458)

Those students who responded yes regarding their research being solely or partially funded through their department/university system were also asked if the grants provided were sufficient

to enable them to adequately complete their research. Of the 215 respondents, 51% said yes, 22% said no, 18% said "I don't know" and 9% responded that their research is not funded through a grant.

Students were asked whether there were facilities in their labs that needed to be restructured or renovated immediately. Forty-four percent of the 310 respondents said no, 25% indicated "I don't know", 16% said not applicable and 15% said yes. Those who responded yes were asked to write in the facility or facilities that needed to be restructured or renovated immediately, and 37 wrote in varied responses. The most common of the responses were computers or lap tops; see attached document for more detailed and specific facility named responses.

Next, respondents were provided a list of educational funding options and were asked to select all that apply regarding their current graduate educational funding. As noted in Table 8, work within their department as a Graduate or Teaching Assistant was selected most frequently and the "other" option selected least frequently. Those who selected "other" could write in responses and 29 wrote in varied responses, such as GI bill, external fellowships, and staff tuition assistance.

How are you currently funding your graduate education? (Please select all that apply)	Frequency
Work within my department as a Graduate Assistant or Teaching Assistant	43%
Parents/family	31%
Scholarships	31%
Personal Savings	28%
Loans	27%
Department/University system grants	21%
Income from working outside my department	15%
Other	7%

Table 8: Graduate Educational Funding (n=453)

Those who selected the option "loans" were asked as a follow-up how much in loans they take out each semester. One hundred and twenty-one responded and 31% indicated loans of $5,001-$7,500, and 26% indicated loans of less than $5000. Another 17% selected loans in the amount of $7,501-$10,000, 15% selected loans between $10,001- $15,000 and 12% indicated taking loans for more than $15,001.

The next series of questions asked all respondents about their professional conference attendance and funding. First, respondents were asked approximately how many conferences they were expected to attend each year. Table 9, on the next page, shows that over one-third indicated not being expected to attend conferences each year, and about half of the respondents indicated they were expected to attend one or two conferences each year.

How many conferences are you expected to attend each year (approximate)?	Percent
Not expected to attend conferences each year	39%
2	28%
1	24%
3	6%
4	4%

Table 9: Conference Attendance Expectations (n=447)

When asked "Did you or are you planning to attend the number of conferences you are expected to attend this year?" 60% of the 274 respondents said yes.   Another 23% of the respondents were not sure if they would be attending the number of conferences expected, and 14% said no. Three percent (3%) of respondents chose the not applicable response option. Those who selected no or not sure were asked to respond why they answered no or were not sure. One hundred four comments were received, and many indicated they did not attend conferences this year because funds were limited, either by their department or their personal financial limitations. The next most populous response was that conference attendance was not required of their program. Quite a few also mentioned not attending this year as they were in the first year of their program or their research was not far along enough to be published or presented. Others said they were professional students (medical, veterinary or law) and did not have time to attend.

Students were next requested to select all that apply from a list of options the source of their funding for conference travel. Personal funds and department grants were chosen most frequently as sources for conference travel funding. The "other" option was chosen least frequently and did not include any written in responses.

Where does your funding for conference travel come from?	Frequency
Personal funds	38%
Department grants	34%
Do not attend conferences that require travel	29%
Advisor	27%
Scholarships/grants funded externally/outside of TAMU	14%
TAMU scholarships	8%
Other	6%

Table 10: Conference Travel Funding

All respondents were asked to provide comments regarding what they would like to see changed in terms of career counseling or professional development opportunities at the University. Table 11, on the next page, features 13 summary themes that were identified from the comments shared by 140 respondents. The most populous theme "more career services for graduate students" included calls for more dedicated career services professionals, help with salary negotiation skills, CV and résumé writing, interview and general professional skill development. See the attached documents for specific comments with college and classification of the respondent.

What would you like to see changed in terms of career counseling or professional development opportunities at the University?	Comments
1. More career services for graduate students	38
2. More networking opportunities with other professionals (industry/academic)	22
3. More or better advising within the graduate school	19
4. More job recruitment opportunities/ career fairs for graduate students	16
5. NA or none	13
6. More career related speakers/presentations	11
7. General support or other miscellaneous comments	11
8. More contact with professors/course work assistance	9
9. Okay	8
10. Increase internship, fellowship and research opportunities	7
11. Career opportunities for international students	7
12. I don't know	7
13. More mental health assistance/awareness/counselors	4

Table 11: Career and Professional Development Opportunities Themes

Three diversity issue questions were asked of all survey participants. When asked if they were supportive of LGBT events on campus, 56% of 435 respondents indicated yes, 26% indicated somewhat and 19% indicated no. Students were then asked if they were aware of the LGBT+ services on the Texas A&M campus, and 47% of the 437 respondents indicated no, 29% indicated somewhat and 25% indicated yes. Lastly, the survey participants were requested to respond whether they felt like faculty and staff were well versed in diversity issues surrounding gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Of the 434 who responded 51% selected the response option of somewhat, 36% said yes and 13% said no.

All students who participated in the survey were asked to provide any additional comments or concerns they would like to make the Graduate and Professional Student Council aware of. Table 12, on the next page, features 12 summary themes that were identified from the comments shared by 118 respondents. The most commonly shared response was n/a, then the most commonly identified theme was concern regarding funding for the students' education, whether through department funding, scholarships or concern over increased fees and expenses while in school. The next most vocalized concerns were regarding dining options, including availability, selection and quality of food on campus. Some of the respondents shared very detailed and lengthy concerns; see the attached documents for specific comments with college and classification of the respondents.

Do you have any additional comments or concerns you would like to make the Graduate and Professional Student Council aware of?	Comments
1. NA /none/I don't know	31
2. Financial concerns (funding, scholarships, fees)	25
3. Concerns regarding food and dining options	11
4. Advisor interactions/faculty mentoring/professional development concerns	11
5. Concern over quality and quantity of study areas/computer labs/computers/spaces for graduate students on campus	9
6. Class/course availability concerns	8
7. Concerns regarding travel funding (conferences/professional development)	8
8. Concerns over job opportunities during and after graduate school	8
9. Concerns regarding support for International students	7
10. Overall wellbeing/graduate students mattering	7
11. Transportation/parking issues	5
12. Diversity and inclusion concerns	4
13. Childcare concerns	2
14. Admissions criteria	1

Table 12: Additional Comments or Concerns Themes

Demographics
Table 13, on the next page, provides demographic information based on official University records of the survey sample compared to that of the survey respondents. Generally, respondents' demographics reflected within a 5% margin those students within the sample, except that 8% more females and 6% more doctoral students responded than their percent representation within the sample.

	Survey Sample Percentage (n=3685)	Respondents Percentage (n=532)
Classification		
Masters	51%	54%
Doctoral	34%	40%
Post Baccalaureate, Non Degree	2%	1%
School of Law	3%	2%
Medical School	4%	<1%
Veterinary School	4%	2%
Pharmacy	3%	<1%
Dental	4%	<1%
Academic College		
Engineering	31%	36%
Agriculture and Life Sciences	10%	12%
Education and Human Development	9%	8%
Science	9%	7%
Mays Business School	8%	7%
Liberal Arts	6%	8%
Architecture	4%	4%
Medicine	5%	1%
Veterinary Medicine	4%	4%
Bush School	3%	2%
Dentistry	3%	1%
Geosciences	2%	3%
School of Law	2%	2%
Rural Public Health	2%	3%
Pharmacy	2%	<1%
Nursing	<1%	<1%
Exchange	<1%	<1%
Ethnic Origin		
International	50%	54%
White Only	31%	31%
Hispanic or Latino of any Race	9%	6%
Asian Only	5%	2%
2 or more/excluding Black	1%	2%
Black Only + 2 or more/1 Black	4%	4%
Unknown or not reported	1%	2%
American Indian Only	<1%	--
Native Hawaiian Only	<1%	<1%
Sex		
Female	42%	50%
Male	58%	50%

Table 13: Demographics

The 132 delegates sent the survey were asked as series of demographic questions which could not be obtain through student records, and mirrored some of the demographic questions within the spring 2016 Graduate Campus Climate survey issued through the Texas A&M University Office of Graduate and Professional Studies. When asked to report their gender from a select all that apply list, 56% of the 51 delegates who responded chose female, 38% identified themselves as male, 4% preferred not to respond, 2% selected gender non-conforming/genderqueer and 2% selected the "not listed" option. The "not listed" option enabled the responder to write in a comment and that comment can be found in the attached document.

The delegates were then requested to characterize their current sexual orientation from a select all that apply list of options. Of the 50 delegates who responded, straight/heterosexual was selected 88% of the time, the selection "I prefer not to respond" 6% of the time, gay 2%, lesbian 2%, bisexual 2%, and the selection questioning 2% of the time.

Delegates were also asked whether they identify with a particular organized religious tradition. Of the 50 responding delegates, 48% said yes, 42% said no and 10% selected "I prefer not to respond". Those who selected yes were requested to indicate their religious tradition. Thirty-five percent (35%) of the 23 who responded listed Christian or Christianity, 22% listed Hindu or Hinduism, 9% listed Catholic, and 9% said Methodist- United Methodist. The remaining represent 4% each of the responses: lapsed Presbyterian, Seventh –day Adventist Christian, Sunni Muslim, Muslim, Traditional Lutheran and Unitarian.

Those delegates who responded no to whether they identify with a particular organized religious tradition, were asked to choose from a series of statements which best characterized their beliefs. Shown on Table 14, one-third responded they believed in a spiritual dimension, but do not consider it tied to any particular organized religion. Additionally, a quarter of respondents considered themselves either an atheist or agnostic.

Please indicate below which of the following statements best characterizes your beliefs.	Frequency
I believe in a spiritual dimension, but do not consider it tied to any particular organized religion.	33%
I consider myself an agnostic	24%
I consider myself an atheist	24%
I do not believe in any organized religion or in a spiritual dimension.	14%
I prefer not to respond.	5%
Other	--

Table 14: Beliefs not Associated with Organized Religions (n=21)

Next delegates were asked if they had a physical, psychological or learning disability. Of the 50 who responded 88% said no, 6% said yes and 6% preferred not to answer. Those who responded yes were asked to select in a multiple response format their disabilities or medical conditions. Only three chose to respond; response frequency is noted in Table 15, on the next page.

Do you have any of the following disabilities or medical conditions? (select all that apply	Frequency
Learning Disability or ADHD	33%
None of the above	33%
I prefer not to respond	33%
Sensory, chronic medical or physical disability	--
Chronic mental health condition	--
Other disability or chronic medical condition	--

Table 15: Disabilities and Medical Conditions (n=3)

Finally, delegates were asked whether they identify themselves as a member of a traditionally underrepresented group at Texas A&M University. Half of the 50 respondents responded no, 42% responded yes and 8% chose "I prefer not to respond". Those who responded yes were asked why they selected yes, and 18 wrote in a variety of responses. Most commonly students wrote in Hispanic, and responses that included multiple identities, such as "I am a Hispanic woman in a STEM field". Please see the attached document for full responses.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Nearly half of the international students responding to the survey who indicated taking the English Proficiency Exam reported difficulty in getting to the venue to take the exam, and most felt it would be easier to access the exam during the week. The Graduate and Professional Student Council(GPSC) may want to review ways to make transportation to the exam more accessible for these students, or see if the exam can be offered during the weekdays when buses to campus are available prior to fall semester starting. International students responding to the survey also indicated need for more support regarding career opportunities and concern over the general support they receive from the University. This may warrant further assessment and GPSC could share these concerns with International Student Services (ISS) and coordinate ways to improve support for international graduate students.

Respondents to the survey seemed to prefer bringing food from home or going home to eat rather than eating from vending machines on campus or at restaurants on or off campus, primarily due to the cost.   Slightly more than one-third did indicate using vending machines on campus, and more than three quarters of them noted they would welcome healthier options. About one-third of the students indicated not using vending machines on campus primarily due to the expense, and slightly more than a third also noted there was nothing in the vending machines they liked. Many of these students also indicated they would like to have healthier choices available in vending machines. Qualitative responses also showed students would like more accessible (including cost and location) and healthier dining options. GPSC may want to work with campus dining administrations to look at feasible ways to improve the availability of healthy food options on campus for graduate students, whether through self- service (vending machines), or extended hours or new food venues on campus.

The graduate students also expressed concern regarding the cost of financing their education, as well as the lack of career services and professional development opportunities available to them. GPSC may be able to advocate on behalf of graduate and professional students for more

financial support. There may be multiple ways to address the issue, from increasing stipends to decreasing some costs relating to fees, to providing a funding pool for students to apply for when they have professional development opportunities, such as conferences and travel expenses incurred as a result. Many graduate students also expressed the need for career services, job recruiting and networking opportunities available specifically to them, and the GPSC could collaborate with Texas A&M Career Services or similar services available within the colleges to identify means to address these concerns as well.

The Graduate and Professional Student Council is encouraged to read all the qualitative comments to understand the full range of responses. Summary themes are reflected in this report but some of the specific comments made by individual respondents, of which some are very detailed, may provide useful information for GPSC.

Graduate and Professional Student Council is also encouraged to share the results of this survey with appropriate campus entities, particularly the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies, which could benefit from information reported. GPSC may also consider sharing information with other auxiliary services beyond those previously identified, such as Transportation and Dining Services. Sharing the results, along with any changes or action GPSC is taking as a result of these results, with graduate students may also be beneficial, as it would show graduate students that their representational organizations are actively working on their behalf to improve their life quality.