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Program Evaluation  
Group Project Design:

Improving the Retention, Progression, and Completion of Graduate Students at  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Prepared By:  
Rebel Consulting Group

Dominique Wright-Ellis  
Beatriz Martinez  
Ryan Kelsch

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## IMPROVING RPC AT UNLV

### **Executive Summary**

The purpose of this study is to identify issues graduate students face with retention, progression, and completion at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). This study will assist the Graduate College at UNLV to develop recommendations to improve retention, progression, and completion.

The Graduate College at UNLV supports over 130 graduate degrees, including certificate, specialist, master, and doctoral degree programs offered through the university's various academic departments. As the current dean of the Graduate College, Dr. Kathryn Korgan leads the Graduate College. The Graduate College and Dr. Korgan strive to provide excellence, equity, diversity, opportunity, and impact all students, programs, and staff at the graduate level at UNLV favorably. The Graduate College aims daily to collaborate with all academic colleges and departments on campus in order to provide exceptional graduate programs that assist students from the admission process through graduation.

This study surveyed students currently enrolled in a graduate level program in order to determine what factors impact the retention, progression, and completion of graduate programs at UNLV. Students provided input on how graduate programs can be improved to meet their needs and increase their success at the graduate level. The research team reviewed current literature on this subject in order to understand the best practices in the field. The survey elicited feedback from 1,474 graduate students out of 3,808 students invited to participate. We identified a lack of communication, insufficient financial aid, and ineffectual Graduate College office operations as significant barriers to graduate student retention, progression, and completion.

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### **Introduction**

The competition for public education funding resources is fierce. Not only are additional public resources for higher education increasingly difficult to procure but alternatives to the traditional educational setting are growing. Higher education is not only reserved to the easily recognized traditional public and private nonprofit schools, such as University of Texas or Notre Dame, but private, for-profit universities, such as the University of Phoenix. In addition to the growing number of for-profit institutions, educational opportunities on the internet are also increasing. Therefore, it is important for traditional public and non-profit universities such as UNLV to be able to differentiate themselves from other institutions and build competitive advantages that will allow them to recruit and support additional highly talented students.

One of the methods universities have used to differentiate themselves is by participating in the rankings process of various organizations, such as and the Carnegie Institute and US News and World Report. The Carnegie Institute ranks doctoral granting universities as those that awarded at least 20 doctorates in the 2003-2004 academic year. There are approximately 300 universities holding this distinction (<http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/descriptions/basic.php>). From there, there are three tiers: Standard, High Research, and Very High Research. Very High Research is also known as “Tier 1” and “Top Tier.” There are 108 universities in the Very High Research tier

([http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/lookup\\_listings/srp.php?clq=%7B%22basic2005\\_ids%22%3A%2215%22%7D&start\\_page=index.php](http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/lookup_listings/srp.php?clq=%7B%22basic2005_ids%22%3A%2215%22%7D&start_page=index.php)).

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The University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) is currently in the High Research category progressing towards Tier 1 status, as defined by the Carnegie Institute. For UNLV to increase its Carnegie ranking, there are two major areas which need improvement. The first is having faculty who are engaged in research, including increasing the amount of published work and research dollars generated by faculty. The second area of emphasis is increasing the number of students who are graduating with Doctoral degrees. To accomplish this, UNLV needs to increase both the number of graduate students at UNLV as well as their graduation rate as noted by the UNLV Graduate College (Dr. Korgan, personal communication, October 20, 2015).

Additionally, the state of Nevada recently changed its funding formula for universities, financially rewarding universities with higher graduation rates of graduate students, in particular graduate students in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields. As a result, UNLV will benefit by increasing the number of graduate students, their graduation rates, and helping them graduate in a timely manner.

In order to make progress towards these goals the Graduate College at UNLV has created an R<sup>2</sup>PC initiative, focusing on improving graduate recruitment, retention, progression, and completion. This study will focus on the last three parts of the R<sup>2</sup>PC initiative, omitting the portion on recruitment, which is being addressed by the Noel-Levitz Consulting Group. Retention is defined as being enrolled in school, progression as completing credits or making milestones in a graduate program, and completion as completing all of the requirements in a graduate program and graduating from that program. In our research, we inquire how UNLV can better motivate graduate students to progress through graduate programs and graduate, as well as

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what roadblocks graduate students are most likely to encounter in their graduate studies at UNLV. After our research has concluded, we will present our findings and recommendations towards improving the retention, progression, and completion rates of UNLV graduate students to the UNLV Graduate College for their consideration.

### **Literature Review**

The study of student retention, progression, and completion emerged as early as the 1970s and has grown to affect various levels of education. Since the topic of graduate student retention, progression, and completion is limited, we have chosen to review supplementary literature on undergraduate retention, progression, and completion. This literature comes from various states and countries that focus on a variety of academic programs that will shape our own study and the approaches to address the UNLV's graduate student retention, progression, and completion.

Internationally, student retention, progression, and completion has been explored by D. Scott (2005) who realized the critical need to keep track of student retention, progression, and completion at a higher education level in New Zealand. Scott looked at the percentage of students in higher education that were retained, completed, and progressed in their various degrees. Progression was defined as progression to higher education after the program the student was matriculated in was completed. He found that certificate programs have the highest attrition rates and hypothesized that was due to the different education level of the students in the certificate programs. Although Scott did not address the cause in his research, he found that women take a longer amount of time to complete their doctorate degrees but are more likely to

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complete their education (Scott, 2005). Scott's study is significant because he connected the need for increased completion to improve funding.

Some of the earliest theories of retention, progression, and completion reference Vincent Tinto's Student Integration Model and J.P. Bean's Student Attrition Model. Tinto's model argues, "Attrition is caused by the lack of congruency between students and institutions" (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993). Bean defended the notion that the students' course in their education depended on the individual student's' background and personal attitudes. In our study, we employ Tinto's model and look more into the relationships between the student and the university and how those relationships affect student retention, progression, and completion of their graduate degree.

### *Variables of Interest*

This study will focus on graduate students who are in the process of completing a certificate, master or doctorate degree at UNLV. In the study, we define retention as graduate students who continue to be enrolled in their program of study, every semester. Progression will be defined as students completing credits or making milestones in their graduation program. Progression is more distinctly defined by Grives and Wemmerus by splitting a Master's degree and a Doctorate degree. A Master's degree student can be in one of two stages in their progression; 1) Coursework completed but no degree attained and 2) Degree attained. A doctoral student's progression is 1) Coursework completed 2) Qualification/comprehension exams completed and 3) Doctorate degree attained (Grives & Wemmerus, 1988). Completion for all graduate degrees is defined as degree attained.

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There are nine variables being tested against graduate student retention, progression, and completion. Mirroring Cabrera, Nora, and Castañeda's (1993) study, the nine variables are categorized as environmental variables, those variables that the university can control, and endogenous variables, variables that are out of the universities' control. The environmental variables include 1) financial resources, defined as graduate or research assistantships availability, scholarships, grants, personal financing, and/or work reimbursement; 2) academic support defined as tutoring, academic advising, and/or research mentoring; 3) graduate coordinator quality and accessibility defined as in their availability of office hours, overall accessibility, and adequate knowledge of program; 4) variety of scheduling and availability of classes; 5) department support defined as professor availability, laboratory accessibility, and/or research funding availability. The endogenous variables according to Cabrera, Nora, and Castañeda (1993) include the graduate students' 1) relationships with faculty and staff (e.g. mentoring); 2) involvement in program and other activities in the university outside of classes (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988); 3) interest in graduate program and study; and 4) awareness of policies and procedures (e.g. leave policy, hardship scholarship, etc.).

Through the use of surveys and focus group, we expect to find correlation between the independent variables and the dependent variables. We expect our results to be similar to those found in previous studies of student retention. Cabrera, Nora, and Castañeda's (1993) survey resulted in the support of both Tinto and Bean' (1993 & 1990) theoretical framework of student integration and student attrition. They found that both models can be joined together by a complex integrated model where both the congruency between the students, the institution and



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the students' behavioral intentions have to do with the student's retention or attrition in a program of study. Bean and Metzner (1985) found the most impactful reasons for student retention were based on what the students thought of the utility of their education; their satisfaction with being a college student and lack of boredom with classes; their graduation goal commitment; and the level of stressed cause by their education. Our study will also focus on the graduate student's satisfaction at UNLV.

Girves and Wemmerus separated their finding by type of graduate degree, Master and Doctorate degree. Their study resulted in a high correlation of Master degree seeking students progressing due to the direct and indirect effect of their grades; the student's perceived advisor quality, concern, and utility of the students' progression were related to a student's academic performance; and their perception of their relationship with faculty are associated with their GPA and then indirectly with their degree progress. They also found that graduate student selection at a Master degree is critical for completion, meaning the higher grade point average (GPA) of an applicant, the more likely it will be that they will progress and complete their degree. In contrast to the master degree level, the effect of grades disappears at the doctoral level. At the doctorate degree level the students' progression depended on the involvement in one's program; the role of the adviser; the type of financial support is relevant to involvement; department organization and operations also directly influence doctoral degree progress.

Although not every study was identical, they have all been critical in their roles of defining variables and methods of research in the area of retention, progression, and completion of graduate degrees. The models of Tinto and Bean (1993 & 1990) will be used as reference to

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identify and model a number of variables for the purposes of our study. However, and the scope of study for our survey is to identify issues that the University of Nevada, Las Vegas Graduate College has control over and therefore we expect for our findings to be able to be directly in control of the Graduate College. This choice of scope is based off the recommendation of the Graduate College in an effort to use the results in the most productive manner. Being that the Graduate College can only make limited changes to improve retention, progression, and completion. The survey was based of what the Graduate College can control.

### **Methodological Statement**

#### *Sampling Frame*

The study's population includes all degree seeking graduate students enrolled at UNLV during the Spring 2015 semester. The survey was sent to all of the graduate students using Qualtrics, the survey software and Rebel Mail, UNLV's email system, as the means of delivery to the students.

#### *Data Collection*

##### *Quantitative and Qualitative- Survey*

A survey heron referred to as the "RPC Survey" was mailed electronically to all graduate students composing of 48 pre-determined questions. The questions included multiple choice and matrix questions with a likert scale with some questions having open ended options at the end of the section.

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### *Research Questions*

Our research questions were based on the three topics of interest by our clients, how to increase retention, progression, and completion.

Retention: How do we keep graduate students in their program?

Progression: How do we keep graduate students moving along in their program?

Completion: How do we encourage graduate students to finish their graduate program?

### *Independent Variables*

*Our independent and dependent variables were developed through a combination of consulting with our stakeholders (UNLV Graduate College) and reviewing previous similar studies.*

- ✓ Financial resources (graduate assistantships, scholarships, grants, personal financing, work based reimbursement, research funding)
- ✓ Awareness of policies and procedures (leave policy, hardship scholarship)
- ✓ Academic support (tutoring, academic advising, research mentoring)
- ✓ Graduate coordinator quality and accessibility (competence)
- ✓ Department support (professor availability, laboratory accessibility, research funding)
- ✓ Variety, scheduling and availability of classes
- ✓ Interest in graduate program and study

### *Dependent Variables*

- ✓ Graduate student retention

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- ✓ Graduate student progression
- ✓ Graduate student completion.

### *Definitions*

*Retention:* Students who continue to be enrolled in a graduate program

*Progression:* Graduate students completing credits or making milestones in their program

*Two Empirical Models of Graduate Degree Progression (Grives and Wemmerus, 1988)*

#### *Master Progression*

1. Courses taken but no degree attained
2. Degree attained

#### *Doctorate Progression*

1. Coursework completed
2. Qualification/Comprehension examinations completed
3. Doctoral degree attained

*Completion:* Students completing all of the requirements for their program

*Graduate student:* Any student enrolled at the university enrolled in a post undergraduate certificate program, master degree, or doctorate degree

### *Reliability*

Utilizing survey questions and topics from other studies used in the studies referenced in the literature review such as those used to develop Vincent Tinto's Student Integration Model and J.P. Bean's Student Attrition Model.

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### *Validity*

The research employed validity through the literature review which validated survey question whenever possible. Expert guidance was also used from the UNLV Graduate Dean Dr. Kathryn Korgan and Dr. Kendall Harley to construct survey measures. Additionally, interviews with graduate students were constructed to validate your survey findings.

### **Ethics Statement**

The survey was conducted anonymously to prevent any repercussions as a result from the opinions of the students on their programs or college. The surveys will not be traced back to the email account and there will be no other particular identifying factors to single out any participant. There were some instances where the survey respondent identified themselves or used key identifiers for another individual while responding to an open ended question. We omitted such information about any individual from the analysis and did not include it in the write up of the results.

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### Statement of Limitations

While developing and executing the evaluation plan for the UNLV Graduate College, we have discovered a few limitations that altered the results of the evaluation plan. With the help of the help of UNLV MPA faculty, we have listed our possible limitations and strategies we undertook to minimize the impact of those limitations on the research project.

#### 1. Graduate Student Participation:

- a. Limitation: In this study, UNLV graduate students were be asked to complete our survey, which was be sent to students through their UNLV Rebel Mail account. It has come to our attention that some students do not always check their Rebel account or are likely to send an email straight to the trash folder if the email holds no interest to the student.
- b. Strategy: This limitation was resolved by having the Graduate College dean send out the survey via her email. Secondly, we offered an incentive of three \$500 scholarships that students could be selected to win if they completed the survey. We also made personal requests to various interests groups such as graduate college coordinators, the Graduate Student Professional Association (GSPA), and every class the group members were enrolled in for the Spring 2015 semester.

#### 2. Limited Survey Pool

- a. Limitation: The survey will only be sent out to UNLV graduate students enrolled in the Spring 2015 semester as degree seeking. This does not allow for our group and the UNLV Graduate College to learn of any issues previous UNLV graduate students

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may have experienced during their program. Being able to survey previous students could allow insight into how previous students were able to complete or not continue their graduate programs.

- b. Strategy: This limitation could be resolved by creating a survey for UNLV graduate student alumni and those graduate students who did not complete their degree. The survey could be focused around the previous students' satisfaction of their graduate program. Surveying previous students can provide the UNLV Graduate College a larger survey pool.

### Results

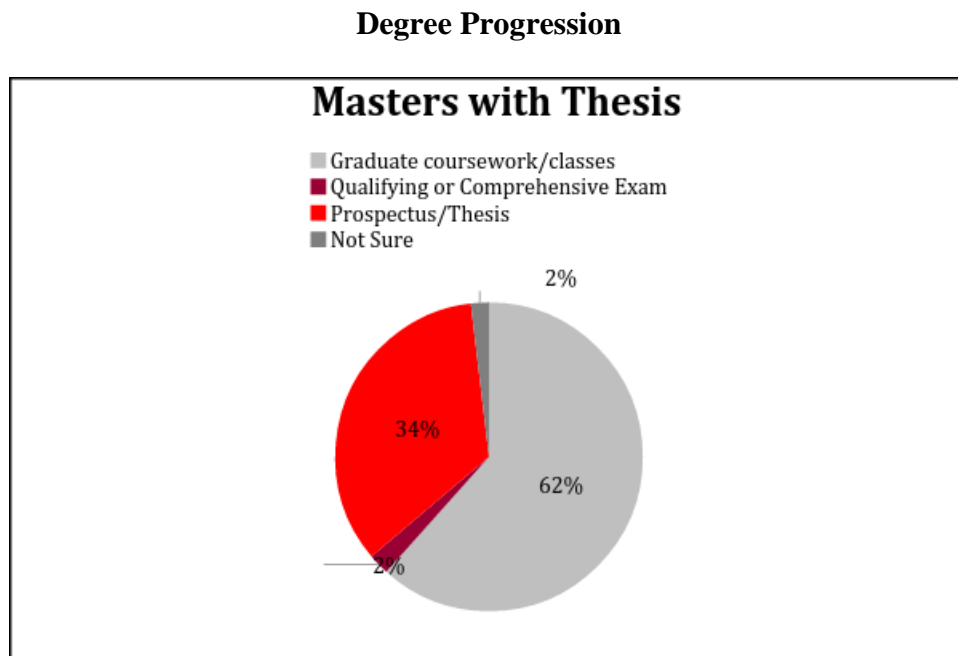
**The RPC survey results are organized into three separate categories including demographics, financial support, and academic planning and advising. There will be further data segmentation through subheadings under each category and each subheading will include corresponding data, analysis, and recommendations.**

### Demographics

The RPC Survey was sent to all degree seeking UNLV students enrolled for graduate studies during the 2015 Spring semester. At the time of the RPC survey, the estimated student population was at 3,808 students. The RPC survey was created using UNLV's preferred survey software, Qualtrics. The RPC survey was distributed to all students through Rebelmail, UNLV's email system, by the UNLV graduate college on February 20, 2015. The survey remained opened until March 17, 2015, resulting in a 26-day period for students to complete the survey.

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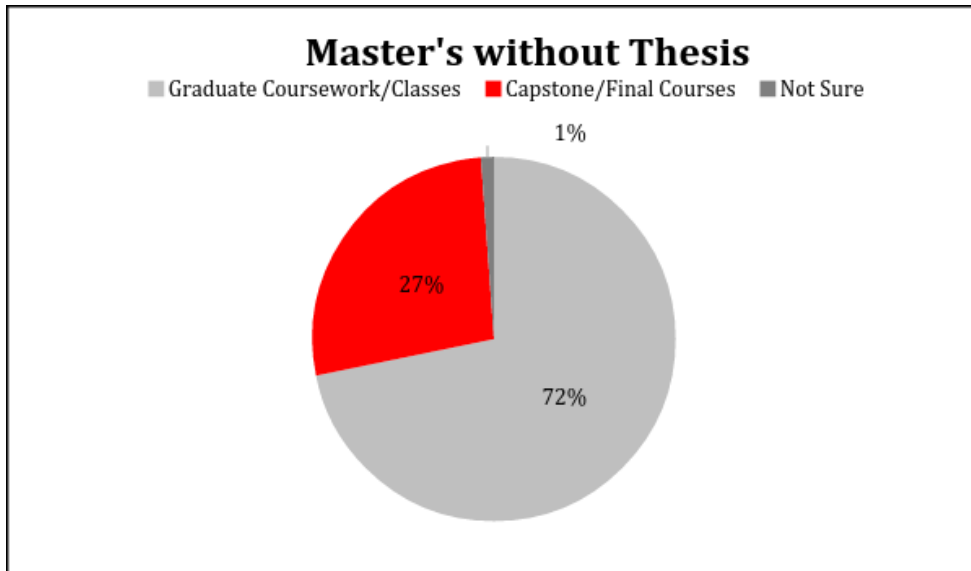
The RPC survey asked 44 questions including: multiple-choice questions, descriptive questions, matrix questions utilizing likert scale measurements, and open-ended questions. The questions were based on issues that might affect graduate students' retention, progression, and completion of their degree. 1,474 out of 3,808 invited students completed the survey, which resulted in a 38.7% completion rate. Descriptive data of survey respondents is segmented by age (appendix A-1, gender (appendix A-2), and race/ethnic group (appendix A-3). The breakdown of the age, gender, and ethnicity/race was reasonably representative of the graduate student population at UNLV.



### **Graph 1.1 Masters w/ Thesis Progression**

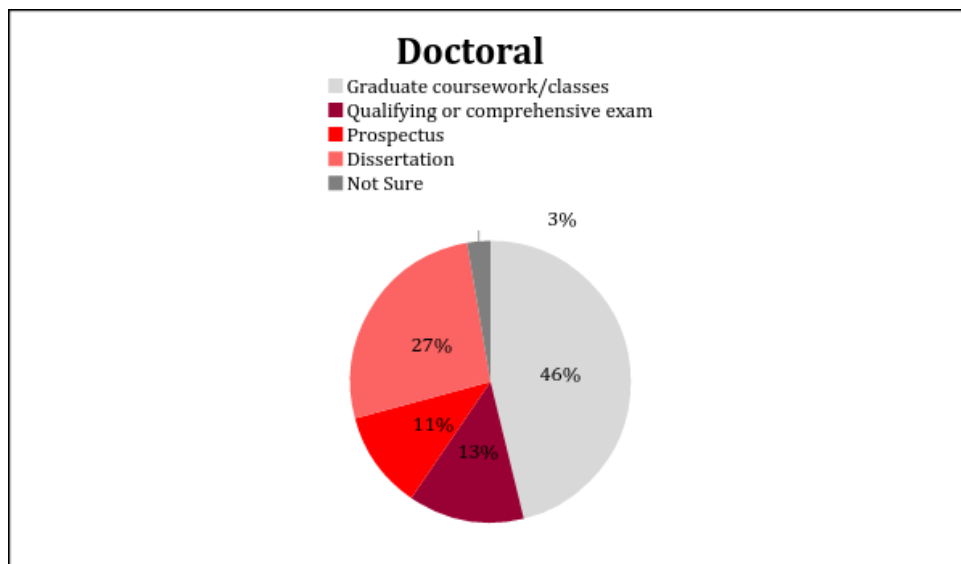
Graph 1.1 shows students who classified themselves as seeking a master's degree with a thesis. They were able to classify their degree progression as currently enrolled in graduate coursework/classes, prospectus/thesis, qualifying or comprehensive exam, or not sure.





**Graph 1.2 Masters w/o Thesis Progression**

Graph 1.2 shows students who classified themselves as seeking a master degree without a thesis. They were able to classify their degree progression as currently enrolled in graduate coursework/classes, capstone/final courses, or not sure.



**Graph 1.3 Doctoral Progression**

Graph 1.3 shows student how classified themselves as seeking a doctoral degree. They were able to classify their degree progression as currently enrolled in graduate coursework/classes, prospectus, qualifying or comprehensive exam, dissertation, or not sure.

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Response rate per College

Table 1 Survey Respondent Data

UNLV College	Total Responses to Survey	Total Students Enrolled in College <i>(As of Fall 2014)</i>	Response Rate Percentage
Allied Health Sciences	73	167	43.7%
Community Health Sciences	49	131	37.4%
Education	<b>271</b>	<b>1,145</b>	<b>23.6%</b>
Fine Arts	86	214	40.1%
Greenspun College of Urban Affairs	215	527	40.7%
Hughes College of Engineering	128	229	55.8%
Lee Business School	148	405	36.5%
Liberal Arts	171	376	45.4%
Nursing	42	138	30.4%
College of Science	<b>133</b>	<b>229</b>	<b>58%</b>
Harrah College of Hotel Administration	58	145	40%
Prefer not to answer	10	-	-
Do not know/Not applicable	10	-	-
<b>Total</b>	1,394	3,706	37.6%

Table A shows a breakdown of response rate within each college at UNLV.

Table Key:

Highest Percentage of Survey Responses	Lowest Percentage of Survey Responses
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The highest response rate (highlighted in green) was from the UNLV College of Sciences. The College of Sciences has over a 50% response rate with only 229 total students registered within that college. The lowest response rate (highlighted in red) was from the UNLV

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College of Education. Currently the UNLV College of Education is the largest graduate program at the university with over one thousand students registered within the college. This response is very low at 23.6% compared to other colleges. This low rate could be due to not all students in the College of Education opening or ignoring their email to take the survey, communication error, or not taking the time to fully complete the survey. The remaining colleges at UNLV averaged been a 30% to 50% response rate from their registered students.

### **Financial Support**

UNLV Graduate student survey respondents cited additional financial assistance as beneficial, or the lack thereof as harmful, at nearly every opportunity. Financial need was noticed when looking at the total sample data, or when focusing on the four main degree types or the eleven Colleges prominently studied by the survey. Questions asked specifically regarding common financial challenges graduate students face such as obtaining scholarships and loans, earning fellowships and GAs, as well as GA stipends and work requirements. The survey also asked about ancillary financial topics such as summer research support, grant writing support, career services, and time management, among others. Finally, questions about factors that could impact finances, such as the flexibility and availability of courses required to complete a graduate degree in a reasonable amount of time were offered. The most significant findings will be discussed here, followed by recommendations and analysis.

### **Low Graduate Assistant Stipends**

Many graduate students consider Graduate Assistantships during their graduate studies, either as a research assistant, primarily working as a researcher, or as a teaching assistant,

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primarily working teaching courses or directly helping a faculty member do so, such as leading a lab for a science course.

Table 2 describes how UNLV graduate students responded when asked “Please indicate how significant financial challenges you experienced were, if any,” with “low GA stipends” as one of the available financial challenges to comment on:

**Table 2 Significance of Low GA Stipends (by degree type)**

<b>Low GA Stipend</b>	<b>Extremely Sig. A</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Very Sig. B</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Some-what Sig.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Not Sig. or NA</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>% A + B</b>
All Degree types	501	36	232	17	169	12	491	35	1393	53
Master with thesis	97	31	48	16	43	14	122	39	310	47
Master no thesis	126	23	74	14	61	11	287	52	548	37
Doc with Master	204	54	68	18	47	12	62	16	381	72
Doc no Master	51	40	24	18	17	13	37	29	129	68

Looking at the far right column, over half of all graduate students and about 70% of all Doctoral students considered low GA stipends as an extremely or very significant financial challenge.

When students are differentiated by College, the results are also illuminating.

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**Table 3 Significance of Low GA Stipends (by graduate college)**

Low GA Stipend/ Graduate College	Extremely Sig. A	%	Very Sig. B	%	Some-what Sig.	%	Not Sig. or NA	%	Responses	% A + B
Allied Health	17	23	8	11	19	26	29	40	73	34
Community Health	11	23	8	17	9	19	19	41	47	40
Education	87	34	38	15	28	11	104	40	257	49
Fine Arts	34	43	21	26	6	8	19	23	80	69
Greenspun	55	26	26	13	25	12	102	49	208	39
Hughes	63	51	26	21	15	12	20	16	124	72
Lee	18	13	22	16	17	12	82	59	139	29
Liberal Arts	113	67	29	17	10	6	17	10	169	84
Nursing	4	10	7	18	5	13	23	59	39	28
Sciences	69	54	26	20	13	10	20	16	128	74
Harrah	9	16	9	16	8	15	29	53	55	32

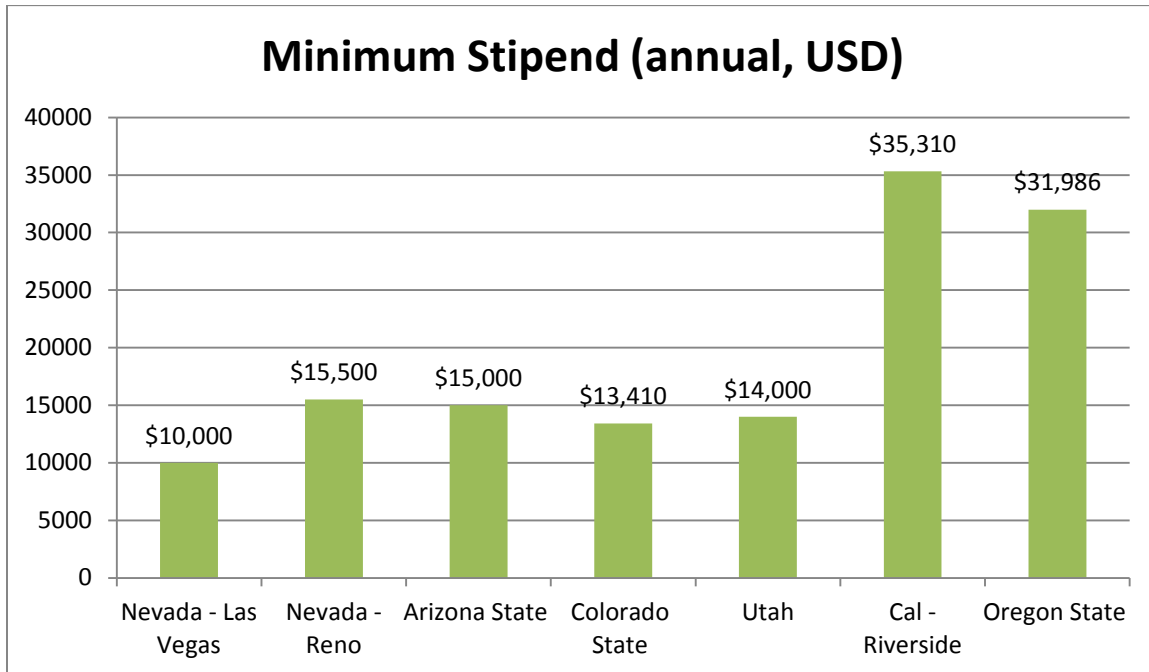
Several colleges throughout UNLV have students who experienced significant financial challenges relating to their GA stipend, with Education, Fine Arts, Hughes College of Engineering, Liberal Arts, and Sciences having 49% or more of their students rating the low GA stipend as an extreme or very significant challenge; Liberal Arts students responded with an astounding 84% reporting their low GA stipend as an extreme or very significant financial challenge. Additionally, at the end of the survey, there was an opportunity for students to leave suggestions towards improving the graduate experience at UNLV. Of the 558 students that offered a suggestion, 57 of them recommended increasing graduate assistant compensation, mostly via the stipend.

*Further Analysis*

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Once graduate students expressed frustration with what they perceive to be a low graduate assistant stipend and compensation more generally, it is important to determine the veracity of their claim, if possible. Therefore, a comparison between similar universities would be helpful. As UNLV is attempting to reach Very High Research status, it should consider Very High Research universities competitors for more academically inclined students that have opportunities to choose the university they would like to attend. Therefore, with the exception of University of Nevada, Reno (UNR), the other compared universities are currently Very High Research status universities. UNR was included as it is the other state university, draws from the same state revenue sources, and is the greatest competitor to UNLV for Nevada's residents and other students in the region seeking graduate degrees. Carnegie ranks the size and setting of universities, and all the compared were large and in a primarily nonresidential area. All are public universities, with total enrollment approximately 20,000 or greater, and are located in the Western US. Compared schools included: UNLV, UNR, Arizona State, Colorado State, Utah, California – Riverside, and Oregon State.

**Graph 2.1 Annual Minimum Stipends of Comparison Group (USD)**

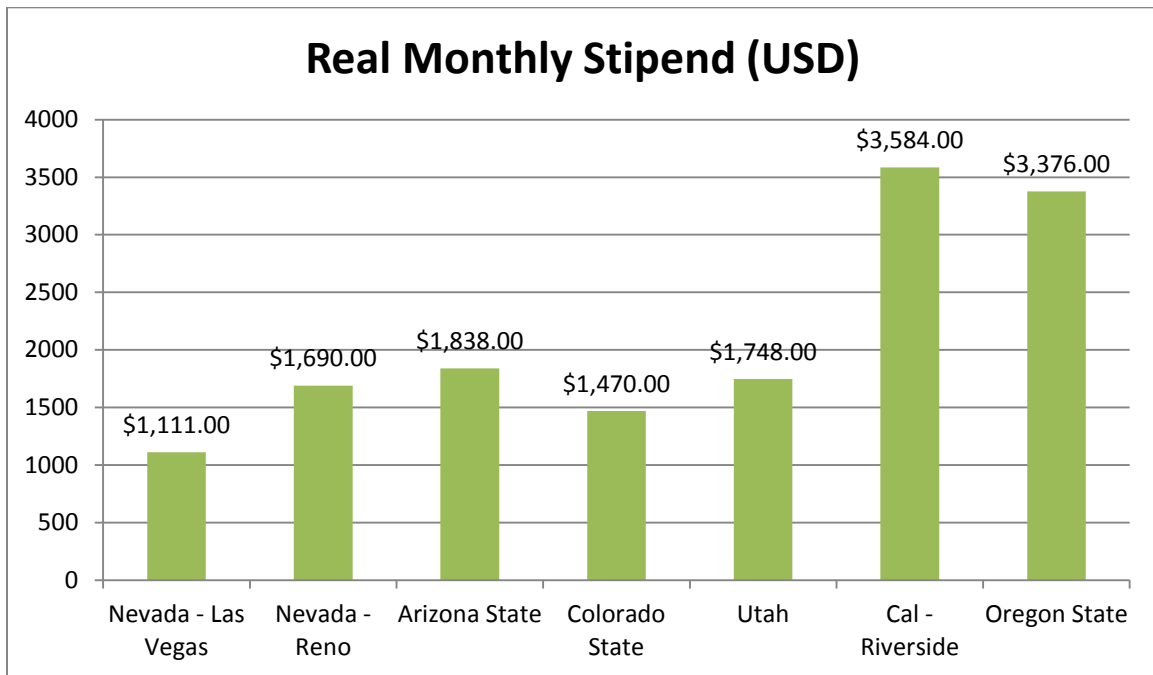


By looking at the above chart, one can see the compared universities fall into two major ranges; one is between \$25,000-35,000 and the other near 15,000. UNLV is the only university listed with a minimum annual stipend of \$10,000. UNR, UNLV’s state rival, offers graduate assistants over 50% more with a minimum of \$15,500 annually broken down into 10 monthly payments of \$1,550. The raw stipend amount does not tell the whole story, however, as different areas have higher or lower cost of living compared to whatever base city one is testing against, which in this case is Las Vegas, NV. For example, Southern California is more expensive than Las Vegas so Riverside’s stipend is not worth as much in Las Vegas dollars while the reverse is true in the more affordable Reno, NV area. When annual stipends are broken down into 9

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monthly payments (the most typical payment schedule), and cost of living adjustments are made using Las Vegas as the base, the following gross monthly wages are the result:

**Graph 2.2 Real Monthly Stipends of Comparison Group (USD)**



Once cost of living is considered, locations more affordable than Las Vegas such as northern Nevada, Arizona, and Utah are given a boost whereas areas more expensive regions than Las Vegas, such as Colorado, southern California, and Oregon are brought down. UNLV's \$1,111/mo. is by far the lowest, with the next UNR's \$1,690/mo., over fifty percent more. While UNLV offers a significant tuition discount, the other six compared pay 100% tuition, with the only reservation being UNR covers 100% of the first 9 graduate credits per semester, with nearly all graduate students taking 9 credits or less and 6 credits is considered full time for graduate students.



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Finally, universities generally require graduate assistants to have health insurance as a result of the ACA mandate. Every university in our comparison group covers the full cost of health insurance for their GA's except UNLV. UNLV pays \$1000 a year for a GA's student health insurance, although the health insurance fee was \$900/semester, or approximately \$1800 a year for 2015. Therefore, UNLV covers roughly 55% of a GA's student health insurance while the other six analyzed, including UNR, covers 100%.

### *Recommendations*

UNLV's graduate assistant minimum annual stipend information was updated in 2012, with an increase to stipends for Master – MFA (\$13,000) and Doctoral students (\$13,000 or \$15,000 if advanced to candidacy). No increase was given to master's graduate assistants outside of the Fine Arts program (they remain at \$10,000). Knowing that the university recently updated its stipend amounts, it is unlikely that they would increase them twice within a short time period, or increase the standard Masters stipend after recently rejecting to do so. UNLV Graduate College should attempt to become competitive with its in-state rival, however, and should not be surprised if aspiring researchers and other highly skilled students prefer UNR over UNLV as their stipend is roughly 50% higher. At a minimum, UNLV should cover tuition at 100% and health insurance at 100%, a common compensation for graduate assistants. If this recommendation is implemented, UNLV graduate assistants would not be concerned about the increasing costs of tuition and health insurance while their compensation remains flat. Instead, graduate assistants could focus their attention on conducting research and teaching. Once UNLV

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covers tuition and health insurance for graduate assistants at 100%, they should look towards matching UNR’s annual minimum stipend for all graduate assistants.

### Summer Research Support

Summer research support is a complementary issue to GA stipends because many of the same students are depending on or requesting both. Often graduate students, especially Doctoral students are required to enroll in a credit during the summer to demonstrate degree progression or are completing research activities over the summer and desire funding to support these efforts. When asked, “Which of the following programs, workshops, or services would be most helpful to you as a graduate student?” one of the choices “summer research support” garnered these answers:

**Table 4 Helpfulness of Increasing Summer Research Support (by degree type)**

Summer Research Support	Very Helpful A	%	Somewhat Helpful B	%	Not Helpful	%	No opinion/ unsure	%	Responses	% A+ B
All Degree types	545	39	381	28	225	16	233	17	1384	67
Master with thesis	140	46	78	25	33	11	55	18	306	71
Master no thesis	107	20	178	32	142	26	118	22	545	52
Doc with Master	234	62	81	21	23	6	40	11	378	83
Doc no Master	53	42	39	31	23	18	11	9	126	73

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**Table 5 Helpfulness of Increasing Summer Research Support (by graduate college)**

Summer Research Support by College	Very Helpful A	%	Somewhat Helpful B	%	Not Helpful	%	No opinion/ unsure	%	Responses	% A + B
Allied Health	19	26	31	42	15	21	8	11	73	68
Community Health	21	45	14	30	6	13	6	12	47	75
Education	88	35	85	33	43	17	38	15	254	68
Fine Arts	32	40	21	26	11	14	16	20	80	66
Greenspun	52	25	67	33	41	20	44	22	204	58
Hughes	65	54	26	21	13	11	17	14	121	75
Lee	23	16	36	25	38	27	45	32	142	41
Liberal Arts	119	72	27	16	10	6	9	6	165	88
Nursing	13	33	13	32	6	15	8	20	40	65
Sciences	78	60	21	16	10	8	20	16	129	76
Harrah	16	29	14	26	14	25	11	20	55	55

Finally, an extra layer of depth can be reached when one examines a college and a degree type together. Three colleges amount to nearly two-thirds of all the Doctoral students with Master's degrees that responded: Education, Liberal Arts, and Hughes College of Engineering. 85% of all the Doctoral students without Master's degrees that responded belong to these colleges: Sciences, Allied Health, and Liberal Arts.

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**Table 6 Helpfulness of Increasing Summer Research Support for Doctoral w/Masters**

Doctoral w/Master by college	Very Helpful B	%	Somewhat Helpful B	%	Not Helpful	%	No opinion/unsure	%	Responses	% A+B
Education	49	54	26	28	9	10	7	8	91	82
Liberal Arts	29	56	12	23	2	4	9	17	52	79
Hughes	70	81	11	13	1	1	4	5	86	94

**Table 7 Helpfulness of Increasing Summer Research Support for Doctoral w/o Masters**

Doctoral w/o Master by college	Very Helpful A	%	Somewhat Helpful B	%	Not Helpful	%	No opinion/unsure	%	Responses	% A+B
Sciences	2	5	19	48	14	35	4	12	39	53
Allied Health	29	62	10	21	3	6	5	11	47	83
Liberal Arts	16	76	3	14	1	5	1	5	21	90

Although the sample size is smaller when focusing on more than one indicator, readers can see how impactful the financial of summer research support, or “summer funding” as it is often referred to by students, can be once you peel away the students who may not be as involved with summer research.

*Recommendation*

UNLV Graduate College should increase summer funding, in particular for Doctoral students and especially in the programs that are most keenly affected, such as Doctoral students w/Masters degrees in the Hughes College of Engineering and Doctoral students w/o Masters Degrees in the College of Liberal Arts, where 90% or greater say additional summer research support would be helpful, and with over three-fourths answering ‘very helpful’.

**Academic Planning and Advising**

When progressing through a graduate program, course availability is important so degree requirements can be met in a timely manner. This is especially true for courses that have prerequisites. Therefore, the survey asked, “If you could increase your course options in your graduate program, which of the following would be the most helpful to complete your degree in a timely manner?” Choices included availability of: Day courses, evening courses, weekend courses, hybrid/blended courses, online-only courses, summer courses, required courses, lab access, and career advisement. Respondents could answer on a scale including extremely important, very important, neutral/no opinion, somewhat unimportant, and very unimportant. Respondents indicated the availability of required courses, summer courses, career advisement, and evening courses were the most important issues in terms of course availability. The availability of required courses was the #1 choice, with 749 (over 55%) of 1,352 respondents, considering it “extremely important.” This opinion was shared across degree types and Colleges.

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**Table 9: Availability of Required Courses**

Most helpful to add – avail. of req. courses	Ext. Imp.	%	Very Imp.	%	Neutral/ no opinion	%	Some-what Un.	%	Very Un.	%	Responses	%
	A		B							A + B		
All Degree types	749	55	276	20	229	17	21	2	77	6	1352	75
Master with thesis	160	54	70	23	52	18	3	1	12	4	297	77
Master no thesis	309	58	104	20	87	16	7	1	25	5	507	78
Doc with Master	218	59	78	21	51	14	7	2	15	4	354	80
Doc no Master	40	33	19	15	35	29	4	3	25	20	98	48
Master-Thesis												
Hughes	26	55	14	30	6	13	0	0	1	2	47	85
Greenspun	24	60	6	15	9	23	1	2	0	0	100	75
Liberal Arts	15	46	10	30	7	21	0	0	1	3	97	76
Master-No Thesis												
Education	94	71	26	20	8	6	1	1	3	2	98	91
Greenspun	67	55	24	20	21	17	1	1	9	7	93	75
Lee	60	54	26	23	18	16	2	2	6	5	95	77

The bottom half of this chart focuses on Masters level graduate students within UNLV’s largest graduate programs. Hughes College of Engineering, Greenspun College of Urban Affairs, and Liberal Arts respondents represented 42% of the total Master-Thesis respondents. The

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College of Education, Greenspun College of Urban Affairs, and the Lee School of Business represented 75% of the total Master's-No Thesis respondents.

### *Recommendations*

Graduate College Deans, graduate coordinators, and administrative faculty generally should be reminded by the UNLV Graduate College of the importance of students being able to progress through their graduate degrees and graduate in a reasonable amount of time. Every effort should be made to ensure that course availability is not a hindrance to progression and completion of UNLV graduate students. Solutions to course scheduling availability of required courses will likely vary by department and program. However, there are a few strategies which might help to increase the availability of required courses. Required courses that are only offered once a semester (one section) should not be scheduled at the same time and day as other required courses, unless there is a compelling or obvious reason to do so. For example, if one class is a prerequisite for another, both could be offered at the same day and time as a student may not take both concurrently. Increasing the frequency of course offerings is another option. Finally, departments should be more forthright about future course offerings. For example, several graduate departments course schedules for classes starting Fall 2015 list course days and times as TBA (to be announced). Academic planning should not be mysterious; departments should create and publish a stable schedule of required courses to assist students in course planning. Additionally, graduate students should be recommended to meet with their graduate coordinator on an annual basis to help plan their programs. Future course planning and meeting with graduate students would add additional workload to graduate coordinators, however; the position

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of being a graduate coordinator may need to be considered a full-time duty, whereas in some departments it is treated as a supplement to teaching.

### **Other Support Services**

Additionally, graduate students also stated they desire other support services. Highly recommended services included additional grant writing support, career services, and faculty/mentorship support.

### **Grant Writing Support**

Students were also asked whether grant-writing support would be helpful in the question “Which of the following programs, workshops, or services would be most helpful to you as a graduate student.” Again, strong support for grant writing support exists, with high numbers of graduate students listing the issue as very helpful or somewhat helpful. Overall, 73% of all UNLV graduate students listed grant writing support as very or somewhat helpful; Doctoral students were even more supportive, with 84% stating it would be helpful or very helpful. There was broad support across all colleges for grant writing support. Keep in mind when looking at the College data that if the Colleges are broken down by degree, the Doctoral students are even more supportive. For example, 71% of Hughes College of Engineering graduate students indicated grant-writing support as would be very to somewhat helpful. Hughes Doctoral students with a Master's degree desire grant writing support to an even greater degree with 94%, rating this issue as very to somewhat helpful; 70 (81%) of them or responded that grant writing support would be very helpful.



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**Table 8 Helpfulness of Additional Grant Writing Support**

<b>Grant Writing Support</b>	Very Helpful	%	Somewhat Helpful	%	Not Helpful	%	No opinion / unsure	%	Responses	% A + B
All Degree types	587	42	428	31	203	14	178	13	1396	73
Master with thesis	122	40	100	33	42	14	40	13	304	73
Master no thesis	174	31	172	31	122	22	91	16	559	62
Doc with Master	209	56	106	28	24	6	38	10	377	84
Doc no Master	73	58	38	30	13	10	3	2	127	88
<i>By College</i>										
Allied Health	26	37	30	42	10	14	5	7	71	79
Community Health	21	45	17	36	3	6	6	13	47	81
Education	115	44	87	33	24	9	35	14	261	77
Fine Arts	41	49	26	31	6	7	11	13	84	80
Greenspun	90	44	57	28	34	16	25	12	206	72
Hughes	42	35	43	36	19	16	16	13	120	71
Lee	20	14	38	27	46	32	38	27	142	41
Liberal Arts	96	58	48	29	14	8	8	5	166	87
Nursing	14	36	10	26	9	23	6	15	39	62
Sciences	72	56	33	25	14	11	10	8	129	71
Harrah	21	38	10	18	13	24	11	20	55	56

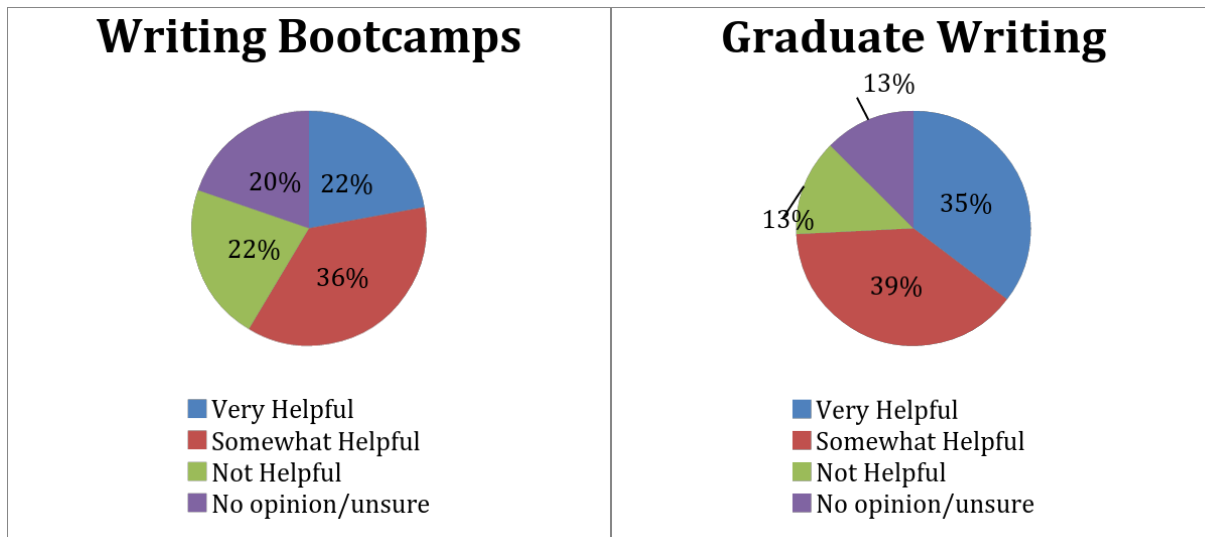
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### *Further Analysis*

UNLV graduate students understand the importance of quality writing. At different points throughout the survey, respondents asked for additional writing support or stated writing programs or services would be helpful. In the same question-discussing grant writing support, students could comment on “writing boot camps” and “support for graduate writing.”

**Graph 3.1 Writing Bootcamps**

**Graph 3.2 Graduate Writing**



One might think with a majority of respondents stating grant writing support, writing boot camps, and support for graduate writing would be helpful or very helpful that the UNLV Writing Center would be very popular and useful for graduate students. Survey results, however, differ from that conclusion. While 86% of respondents are aware of the UNLV writing center

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(1193 out of 1375), only 23% rated it as very useful in a follow-up question (287 out of 1258), with most rating the UNLV Writing Center “neutral,” “not useful,” or “not applicable”.<sup>1</sup>

When including the personal responses by students at the end of the survey, it helped clarify the need for additional resources beyond the UNLV Writing Center. In comments and suggestions, UNLV graduate students suggested that the writing support available to UNLV graduate students, such as the UNLV Writing Center, is primarily designed to help undergraduates more than graduate students. Graduate students felt the UNLV Writing Center staff could help a student craft a basic essay or research paper, but was less capable of assisting in robust graduate work and writing.

### *Recommendations*

As UNLV approaches Very High Research status, higher quality writing skills will be increasingly important as excellent writing is more likely to earn research grant awards and be published. UNLV, therefore, should work towards improving the writing support for graduate students. Such improvements may include regularly scheduled boot camps or workshops focusing on grant writing and other graduate writing topics, hiring more advanced staff at the UNLV Writing Center, or creating a new center dedicated solely to graduate writing topics.

### **Career Services**

The availability of career services was another option students could indicate would be helpful to their success as a graduate student. Additional career services were the most popular answer, garnering 630 ‘very helpful’ responses out of 1,395. The following table further shows

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<sup>1</sup> The results of this question may have been impacted by the minor misspelling of “neutral” but any effect was likely minimal.

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the distribution by degree type and college. Several items stand out in this table. First, graduate students from the various degree types have similar opinions, with 70-79% of respondents stating additional career services would be helpful to some degree.

### *Further Analysis*

When looking at the different colleges, it is interesting that Nursing does not desire additional career services as much as the other departments, with only 18% of Nursing respondents answering that additional career services would be 'very helpful'. Possible explanations of this may be the current high demand for health care workers in the US or the career placement portion of the Nursing program that is already in place. In separate questions, two-thirds of UNLV graduate students admitted being aware of the UNLV Career Center, yet only about twenty percent described it as being 'very useful.' Lee Business School was an outlier, with students reporting the Career Center as 'very useful' about 36%, the only school rating the Career Center over thirty percent as 'very useful.' However, Lee School of Business offers students in its college some specialized services in terms of career services which may account for the higher rate of satisfaction in those programs.

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**Table 10 Helpfulness of Additional Career Services**

<b>Helpful service-Career Services</b>	Very Helpful A	%	Somewhat Helpful B	%	Not Helpful	%	No opinion/ unsure	%	Responses	% A + B
All Degree types	630	45	431	31	171	12	163	12	1395	76
Master with thesis	142	46	98	32	27	9	39	13	306	78
Master no thesis	273	49	168	30	63	11	53	10	557	79
Doc with Master	158	42	111	30	51	14	54	14	374	72
Doc no Master	43	34	46	36	26	20	13	10	128	70
By College										
Allied Health	15	21	39	53	13	18	6	8	73	74
Community Health	25	52	13	27	4	8	6	13	48	79
Education	108	42	77	30	39	15	35	13	259	72
Fine Arts	37	46	24	30	9	11	10	13	80	76
Greenspun	101	49	61	30	22	11	20	10	204	79
Hughes	57	49	39	33	8	7	13	11	117	82
Lee	91	62	30	21	13	9	12	8	146	83
Liberal Arts	83	50	49	30	21	13	13	7	166	80
Nursing	7	18	13	32	10	25	10	25	40	50
Sciences	54	42	39	30	17	13	19	15	129	72
Harrah	19	35	17	31	10	18	9	16	55	66

One notices the confounding results related to career services. Lee Business graduate students have the highest regard for the Career Center, yet also are the highest school reporting additional career services would be very helpful. Business students rated their program highly, felt their degree would improve their job prospects greatly, and have confidence in finding

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employment; therefore, it would be improper to suggest Business graduate students would gain much value from additional career services.

### *Recommendations*

The career services section delivers as many questions as answers and would be a great area for future study to delve into the career needs and aspirations of graduate students. Graduate students would benefit if the career fairs hosted by UNLV were improved. Career fairs are currently held a few times a year in the Student Union or at Thomas and Mack Center. They have dozens of employers and are well attended by students. The concern is that the arrangement is designed to benefit employers much more than students, with a “bottleneck” situation occurring where numerous students descend at one place and one time to fight for handshakes and a meaningless minute of time with a lower level HR representative who recommends you fill out the application online in most cases. There is also no separate job fair for graduate students, so the smaller number of graduate students is swallowed by the much larger number of undergraduates. Rarely will a graduate student be well matched to an employer through this type of venue. If creating a separate job fair is not feasible perhaps early morning or late afternoons could be reserved for Graduate students allowing employers to plan to interact with higher level students at these points in the day.

UNLV could also host smaller, more focused career fairs specializing in different career fields/majors. Departments may become more involved. For example, if UNLV were to host an Engineering/Natural Resources Career Fair, focusing on engineering, architecture, geoscience, etc., those departments could recommend local industry leaders who would be interested in

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hiring young talent. While all students would be welcome to attend, they would also understand that this job fair is dedicated to Engineering/Natural Resources, and employers that attend understand that students interested in their industry will be appearing. Other career fairs could be held regarding education / public policy, health and science, hospitality and business, fine arts, among others. Understandably, this would probably take greater effort compared to the fewer, larger career fairs currently in place. However, this approach might increase the likelihood of high quality matches between employer and student.

### **UNLV Graduate Faculty/Coordinators/Mentors**

One key takeaway from our literature review is how important academic support can be for the success of a graduate student. Both graduate coordinators and committee chair or advisers play a key role in graduate student's support system. These individuals have the chance to shape the student's academic career and some of them also provide emotional support for their students. In our study, we focused on support that can be provided by the school's faculty and staff including graduate coordinators, committee chairs, advisors, or mentors.

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**Table 11: Graduate Coordinator and Committee Chair or Advisor is Helpful**

UNLV College	Graduate Coordinator	Committee Chair or Adviser
Allied Health Sciences	85%	83%
Community Health Sciences	56%	78%
Education	73%	72%
Fine Arts	56%	71%
Greenspun College of Urban Affairs	63%	65%
Hughes College of Engineering	65%	78%
Lee Business School	91%	88%
Liberal Arts	65%	77%
Nursing	87%	79%
College of Science	70%	74%
Harrah College of Hotel Administration	70%	75%
<b>Total</b>	<b>70%</b>	<b>75%</b>

Table 11 shows the percentage of students who strongly agreed or agreed their graduate coordinator and committee chair or adviser were helpful when they had issues, questions, or concerns regarding their graduate program segmented by graduate college at UNLV.

Table Key:

Highest Number of Survey Responses Indicating Helpfulness	Lowest Number of Survey Responses Indicating Helpfulness
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Overall, graduate coordinator satisfaction was 70% while committee chair or adviser helpfulness was 75%, both relatively high percentages. The top three colleges that strongly agreed or agreed their graduate coordinator was helpful were the Lee Business School, College of Nursing, and Allied Health Services, all three at 85% or above approval. The colleges that had the least amount of students strongly agreeing or agreeing their graduate coordinator was helpful was the College of Fine Arts and Community Health Services at 56% approval.



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The top three colleges that strongly agreed or agreed their committee chair or adviser were helpful is the Lee Business School at 88%, Allied Health Sciences at 83%, and College of Nursing at 79% approval. The two colleges that had the least number of students who thought their committee chair or adviser were helpful were the Colleges of Fine Arts and the College of Education, but both still had near 70% approval.

It is important to note that the Lee Business School, Nursing, and Allied Health Sciences had high satisfaction rates from students from both their graduate coordinators and committee chairs or advisors. However, College of Fine Arts and the Greenspun College of Urban Affairs had lower levels of satisfaction with graduate coordinators, and committee chairs or advisors. .

### *Recommendations*

Based on the written comments by survey respondents, communication plays a key role in student's satisfaction with their Graduate Coordinator or Committee Chair or Adviser. Many students relayed their frustration of unresponsiveness when they had questions or needed help with either academics or administrative issues. The lack of clear expectations or direction from Graduate Coordinators in particular creates a rapport with the student that can affect them through their tenure in their department. For committee chairs or advisors, student's satisfaction stems from both the issue of lack communication and the faculty's lack of interest in the student's area of study. Furthermore, some students remarked they had to change or reorganize their research committee which delayed their progression in their program.

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Possible improvements to the graduate student satisfaction are mandatory meetings for both the graduate coordinators and committee chairs or advisors. Graduate coordinators can conduct these meetings during program orientations, which other survey questions show that program orientations seem to have a positive effect on student's experience in their program. Meeting with graduate students can allow graduate coordinators to clarify requirements for the program, set expectations, explain milestone completion, and establish a relationship with students for future concerns. This can positively affect student retention, progression, and completion of their programs.

Dissatisfaction with committee chairs or advisors can be improved by establishing clear guidelines for all faculty who takes part in being a committee chairs or advisors. Training and closer supervision from the Graduate College can increase the quality of treatment and relationship between graduate students and their committee chairs and advisors. Satisfaction with committee chairs or advisors is critical to attract more doctoral students, a key requirement to reach the Tier 1 research institution.

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**Table 12: Faculty/Mentorship Challenges**

UNLV College	Lack of Clear Information About Policies and Procedures in my Department	Lack of Professional Development Training Opportunities/Skills Preparation	Poor Faculty Mentorship
Allied Health Sciences	19%	15%	25%
Community Health Sciences	33%	40%	37%
Education	39%	32%	33%
Fine Arts	61%	53%	45%
Greenspun College of Urban Affairs	37%	32%	31%
Hughes College of Engineering	51%	64%	62%
Lee Business School	18%	25%	17%
Liberal Arts	35%	38%	25%
Nursing	13%	13%	18%
College of Science	34%	28%	20%
Harrah College of Hotel Administration	37%	32%	29%
<b>Total</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>29%</b>

Table 12 shows the three most significant faculty/mentorship related challenges graduate students experienced which included lack of clear information about policies and procedures in their department; lack of professional development training opportunities/skills preparation; and poor faculty mentorship.

Table Key:

Highest Number of Survey Responses	Lowest Number of Survey Responses
------------------------------------	-----------------------------------

Table 12 depicts the three most frequent responses of graduate students when asked to rate the most significant/faculty/mentorship related challenges they experienced. The three most frequently cited challenges were: lack of clear information about policies and procedures in their

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departments (35%), lack of professional development training opportunities/skills preparation (33%), and poor faculty mentorship (29%). The College of Fine Arts had the highest percentage of students who had challenges with a lack of clear information about policies and procedures in their department at 61%. The Hughes College of Engineering had the highest rate of lack of clear information about policies and procedures in their department with 64% as well as challenges with poor faculty mentorship at 62%. The College of Nursing has the least amount of challenges with both lack of clear information about policies and procedures in their department and lack of professional development training opportunities/skills preparation at only 13%. Lee Business School had the least amount of challenges with poor faculty mentorship at 17%.

The third greatest challenge graduate students face is a lack of mentorship with 29% of total respondents sighting it as a significant challenge. This however, is skewed since there is an alarming 62% of respondents from the Hughes College of Engineering who listed that as a major challenge. The second highest was Fine Arts with 45% while the rest of the colleges were at 37% or below. This discrepancy can be resolved by having the Graduate College target the Hughes College of Engineering with workshops and trainings for faculty to increase student's satisfaction in mentors.

### *Recommendations*

Improving communication between students and departments is key to graduate student satisfaction and increasing retention, progression, and completion rates of programs. The biggest concerns in terms of communication are in the College of Fine Arts and the Hughes College of

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Engineering. The issues in these colleges might be best alleviated by adopting best practices from other colleges with a low dissatisfaction of lack of clear information about policies and procedures from the College of Nursing or Allied Health Sciences.

The dissatisfaction of professional development training opportunities/skills preparation can be addressed directly the graduate college in two ways. One in establishing a career center for all graduate students which can satisfy the 33% of graduate students in all colleges who do not feel they have adequate opportunities or preparation. The second and most preferable is to create a position within each college to assist students in professional development and skills preparation.

### **Communication**

Communication can be defined as the act or process of using words, signs, or behaviors to express or exchange information or to express one's ideas, thoughts, feelings, or etc., to someone else (Merriam-Webster, 2015). UNLV Graduate student survey respondents cited the significance of poor communication and clearer communication as additional suggestions and improvements to the UNLV graduate college and overall graduate experience. The data related to the improvement of communication came from questions that allowed students to rate the significance of communication within their department/college at UNLV and the final questions of the survey that asked for personal suggestions for improvement.

**Table 13 Significance of Poor Communication within UNLV Graduate Colleges**

UNLV Department/College	Significance of Poor Communication within graduate college		
	Significant	Neutral	Not Significant
Allied Health Sciences	39%	12%	49%
Community Health Sciences	42%	23%	35%
Education	31%	23%	46%
Fine Arts	35%	21%	44%
Greenspun College of Urban Affairs	26%	28%	46%
Hughes College of Engineering	39%	25%	36%
Lee Business School	19%	26%	55%
Liberal Arts	25%	29%	46%
Nursing	20%	30%	50%
College of Science	19%	24%	56%
Harrah College of Hotel Administration	24%	32%	43%

Table 13 shows the degree of significance the challenge of poor communication students faced within their Department or College.

Table Key:

Best in Category

Worst in Category

Table 13 shows about 20% to 40% of students across college believe poor communication is a significant challenge they have experienced as a graduate student at UNLV. The highest percentage of students who feel poor communication is a significant issue came from the College of Community Health Sciences, while the highest percentage of students who believe poor communication is not significant issue came from the College of Allied Health

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Sciences. The high percentage from the College of Allied Health Sciences could be due to students believing they are able to openly and easily communicate with faculty within their college. This same reasoning can be given to the students of the Lee Business School and College of Sciences, who rated the significance of poor communication within their college at only 19%. The College of Fine Arts seemed to be neutral across the board in relation to the significance of poor communication as a challenge to the student. Overall the role of poor communication as a support challenge a student has experienced could depend on the help or assistance a student needs from their department/college. Students want to be able to have their questions or concerns addressed by faculty or staff in a timely matter, meaning they do not want to wait long periods of time waiting for a help or a response from their department. Students would like one person within the department to be able to answer their questions or concerns. Being directed to multiple faculty or staff can lead to communications issues.

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**Table 14 Percentage of “Write-In” Responses Related to Communication**

UNLV Department/College	Improving Graduate Experience Related to Communication	Final Suggestions Related to Communication	Clear Communication from the UNLV Graduate College
Allied Health Sciences	20%	4%	-
Community Health Sciences	27%	5%	-
Education	20%	3%	5%
Fine Arts	13%	3%	5%
Greenspun College of Urban Affairs	26%	3%	2%
Hughes College of Engineering	22%	2%	3%
Lee Business School	26%	2%	-
Liberal Arts	11%	6%	6%
Nursing	10%	-	-
College of Science	18%	4%	3%
Harrah College of Hotel Administration	29%	3%	-

Table 14 shows the percentage of graduated students within each college/department of UNLV who wrote a response with a direct relation to the topic of communication issues in relation to improving the graduate experience, final suggestions, and rating the communication with the UNLV Graduate College.

Best in Category	Worst in Category
------------------	-------------------



**Table 15 Percentage of “Write-In” Responses Related to Communication**

<b>Student Classification</b>	<b>Improving Graduate Experience Related to Communication</b>	<b>Final Suggestions Related to Communication</b>	<b>Clear Communication from the UNLV Graduate College</b>
<b>Master Degree (No Thesis)</b>	23%	3%	3%
<b>Master Degree (with Thesis)</b>	17%	4%	1%
<b>Doctoral (with Master Degree)</b>	18%	3%	3%
<b>Doctoral (with No Master Degree)</b>	19%	7%	4%

Table 15 shows the percentage of students within each degree type classification that wrote a response with a direct relation to the topic of communication issues in relation to improving the graduate experience, final suggestions, and rating the communication with the UNLV Graduate College.

Table Key:

Best in Category	Worst in Category
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Table 14 and Table 15 display how students feel communication can be improved at UNLV within their college/department and the graduate college. Table 14 shows that students who identified themselves as students of the Greenspun College of Urban Affairs, Lee Business School, and College of Liberal Arts reported high percentages of wanting communication improvements at UNLV. 27% of respondents from the College of Community Health and 26% respondents from the Greenspun College of Urban Affairs and Lee Business School expressed communication can improve the graduate experience at UNLV. While only 10% of Nursing respondents said communication can improve the graduate experience at UNLV. The low percentage in relation to the Nursing College could be due to a clear communication of policies, procedures, and questions between the department and students. The departments/college with

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higher percentages indicating a need for improvements in terms of communication may want to reach out the Nursing College and create a model of how they handle communication with their students.

The RPC survey results show that students who identify as seeking their Master's degree with thesis believe improving communication will enhance their graduate experience. 23% of respondents identified as seeking a Master's degree without a thesis expressed communication can be improved in regards to the graduate experience at UNLV, while only 17% of respondents seeking a Master's degree with a thesis expressed the same concern.

One can further analyze the topic of communication by examining student respondents seeking a doctoral degree. 18% of students seeking a doctoral degree with a Master's degree and 17% of students seeking a Doctoral degree without a Master degree believe the graduate experience can be improved in relation to communication. In terms of suggestions students offered in the open ended survey questions, the highest percentage of students who suggested communication were doctoral students. While 4% of doctoral students said there needs to be an improvement in communication from the UNLV Graduate College. The higher level of concern expressed by doctoral students might stem from the higher involvement these students need from their advisor, coordinator, committee, and graduate college. Often times, doctoral students are required to work with UNLV faculty throughout their graduate journey because of the constant requirement of developing and conducting research, proposals, thesis', and etc.

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### *Recommendations*

Improving communication can be a key tool to graduate student retention, progression, and completion at UNLV. The largest number of concerns in terms of communication came from the Greenspun College of Urban Affairs, Lee Business School, College of Liberal Arts, and doctoral students across colleges. These concerns can be alleviated by focusing on the colleges where the issue of communication in relation to the graduate experience are low percentages (i.e: Nursing) or other colleges/universities with lower rates of communication issues. Establishing a reliable form of communication could be a key factor in terms of reducing student frustrations with the graduate college and departmental policies and requirements.

The UNLV graduate college and departments also need to create more relatable websites as a tool for students to use first before turning to UNLV faculty/staff. In the end, students just want clear communication; they do not want to jump through obstacles in order to have a question answered or receive guidance. A recent example noticed by one of this study's authors would provide an excellent illustration about the lack of communication at UNLV. A few days ago, March 8, 2015, a Twitter handle @UNLVresearch posts: “Matchmaker: Use #UNLV Research Match to connect with faculty that share your research interests [unlvresearchmatch.unlv.edu](http://unlvresearchmatch.unlv.edu).” After investigating the link, students may submit a search regarding a research topic such as “solar,” “nonprofit,” or “finance,” and the service will return UNLV faculty that have a research focus in the keyword entered. If a graduate student was searching for faculty to form a committee or for research opportunities, this resource could be invaluable! Unfortunately, this service is known by very few students. Identifying these types of

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tools could be very helpful to students and might also help prospective students connect to faculty before they arrive on campus.

Secondly, a training for all UNLV graduate staff could allow staff members who work closely with graduate students to be more knowledgeable about policies and procedures that occur at the graduate level at UNLV, so when a student needs assistance, the staff members are able to assist the students to their fullest potential. This can be staff who work directly out of the graduate college, graduate level coordinators/advisors, and fellow staff who may be in contact with graduate students on a regular basis. The following information are examples of student responses from the RPC survey written in the open ended questions at the end of the survey:

1. "Our graduate office in the hotel college is useless and they do not know any of the correct procedures or processes. This has caused several people to not advance to candidacy on-time because the office did not mail the paperwork in time"
2. "Whenever I ask a question I invariably receive at least three different answers, and in many cases, none of the answers I have received are correct"

The above comments show the distress students may feel in communication. Often times, a student turns to UNLV staff because they may feel a staff member has the answers or should know the answers. Finally, improving communication between students, departments/colleges, and UNLV Graduate College could allow for a positive increase in retention, progression, and completion of UNLV graduate students. The RPC survey allows the door for communication to be opened as graduate students at UNLV have expressed their concerns to the graduate college.

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### **Final Recommendations**

Based on the results from the RPC Survey, the Rebel Consulting Group was able to conclude that the most pressing concerns for graduate students are the availability and adequacy of financial resources, the quality and availability of faculty and staff assistance, and the quality of communication could improve the UNLV academic experience for graduate students. The three above areas were topics of highest concern for students who completed the survey.

Although financial aid is never enough, graduate students identified lack of financial assistance as a major barrier in their retention, progression, and completion of their studies. Key elements in their financial needs included higher Graduate Assistant stipends and summer funding opportunities. Increasing the funding in these areas could allow students more opportunities to complete their studies and research. Students indicated that a higher stipend would further assist them with their personal finances and overall quality of life since Graduate Assistantships is usually a graduate student's only source of income. Financial assistance can be increased by the UNLV Graduate College by allocation for more funding in order to support graduate students in their graduate assistantships and supporting students in identifying and applying for outside scholarships or grants.

Secondly, students highlighted the importance the UNLV Graduate College, departments, and faculty have on the graduate experience. Improving graduate forms, processing, understanding, and management are key factors for improvement. Many students suggested graduate forms should be easier to identify and complete. Students brought to light the lack of knowledgeable staff, which many times exasperated issues with administrative processes. The

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UNLV Graduate College and graduate departments can be improved through enhanced communication, trainings, form processing, and allocating special graduate staff within departments and colleges to support graduate students with administrative questions.

Finally, UNLV graduate students indicated there is an alarming need for increased, unambiguous, and timely communication. Students have accounted numerous breaks in communication between graduate students, graduate department, and the Graduate College. Students expressed they often do not know who to go to when trying to complete a task, finding information, and/or asking a simple question. Communication improvements should specifically focus on communication between the graduate students and their departments, the Graduate College and the graduate departments, and the Graduate College and graduate students. This issue can be alleviated through increased and routine trainings and workshops to ensure all parties are aware of any changes, additions or updated to any policies or procedures.

We would also advise the Graduate College to look at the individual colleges and schools since they each have different needs and issues of concern. College of Fine Arts and the Hughes College of Engineering appear to require extra attention; Surveys and additional attention conducted in those colleges could assist in developing specific solutions that could increase student's satisfaction and recruit more doctoral students to those programs. Furthermore, continual and periodical surveys should be administered to all graduate students as well as staff and faculty to help the Graduate College identify issues and weaknesses. This survey could in part be used as a baseline for UNLV graduate student opinions concerning issues related to RPC.

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### **Conclusion**

UNLV students, faculty, and staff are key actors in moving the university toward Tier One status through enhancement and growth of graduate education. The RPC survey has the potential to be a springboard for many improvements to come for the graduate student body at UNLV. In order for improvements to occur, however, UNLV administrators, faculty, and students must understand how important communication is. Secondly, students should be reminded the UNLV Graduate College does not have control over all issues students may face; instead, UNLV graduate students have issues with retention, progression, and completion that the Graduate College has limited control over and students need to be aware of the extent of the Graduate College's power and resources.

Overall, the survey conveyed most students are satisfied with UNLV and their overall graduate experience. With nearly 40% of enrolled graduate students completing the survey, UNLV graduate students showed dedication and commitment to raising the academic prestige of their university and attempting to improve the graduate experience for future graduate students; several even thanked the Graduate College for allowing the survey or the Rebel Consulting Group for being willing to listen to their concerns, opinions, and beliefs. This suggests student buy in will be high if recommendations are adopted and tied to the survey results in communications about changes being made.

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[benefit-program-guidelines/](https://gradschool.utah.edu/tbp/tuition-benefit-program-guidelines/)

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### Appendix A: Survey Questions

- 1) Are you male or female?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  
- 2) How old are you?
  - a. 24 or under
  - b. 25 - 31
  - c. 32 - 38
  - d. 39 - 45
  - e. 46 or older
  
- 3) What type of graduate program are you enrolled in? (FUTURE QUESTIONS WHEN DIFFERENTIATED BY A/B/C MATCH THE BELOW GRADUATE PROGRAMS)
  - a. Master – Professional / Certificate
  - b. Master – Research
  - c. Doctoral
  
- 4)
  - a) Which stage would best describe where you are in your graduate program?
    - a. Graduate coursework / classes
    - b. Capstone / Final courses
    - c. Not sure
  - b) “ “
    - a. Graduate coursework / classes
    - b. Qualifying or comprehensive exam
    - c. Prospectus / Thesis
    - d. Not sure
  - c) “ “
    - a. Graduate coursework / classes
    - b. Qualifying or comprehensive exam
    - c. Prospectus

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- d. Dissertation
  - e. Not sure
- 5) Are you the 1<sup>st</sup> in your immediate family to be enrolled in a graduate program?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Not sure
- 6) What was your undergraduate GPA?
- a. 2.99 or below
  - b. 3.00 – 3.29
  - c. 3.30 – 3.59
  - d. 3.60 or higher
  - e. Don't remember / Prefer not to say
- 7) Where you born in the state of Nevada?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
- 8) Did you complete your undergraduate degree at UNLV?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
- 9) What do you feel has been/is the biggest roadblock to completing your degree? Please rank and choose up to three issues, with the 1<sup>st</sup> choice being the most significant issue.
- a. Financial resources
  - b. Family concerns/issues
  - c. Career/work related issues
  - d. Availability of required classes
  - e. Lack of academic support (i.e. tutoring, thesis/committee help)
  - f. Lack of personal support (i.e. counseling, feedback from administration officials)

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- g. Increasing tuition/fees
- h. Other
- i. There have been no serious roadblocks to completing my degree

10) Do you know who the graduate coordinator/advisor of your program is?

- a. Yes
  - b. No
- IF ANSWERED 'NO', SKIP 11-12

11) Your graduate coordinator/advisor was helpful in explaining the program and helping you with any issues regarding the program.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neutral or indifferent
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

12) Your graduate coordinator/advisor was accessible, for example, by being available during regular office hours or responding to email/phone calls in a timely manner.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neutral or indifferent
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

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- 13) During the beginning of your program, did the UNLV Graduate College guide you to information regarding program requirements and expectations of the program?
- Yes
  - No
  - Not sure
- 14) During the beginning of your program, did your graduate coordinator/advisor guide you to information regarding program requirements and expectations of the program?
- Yes
  - No
  - Not sure
- 15) The economy has affected your ability to progress through your program in a timely manner.
- Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral or indifferent
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
- 16) Adding additional sections of required classes would improve your ability to complete your degree in a timely manner.
- Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral or indifferent
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
- 17) How impactful have tuition increases been on your ability to complete your degree in a timely manner?
- Not at all
  - Slightly
  - Moderately

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- d. Significantly
- e. Extremely

18) Has the mandatory health insurance fee for full-time graduate students without their own health insurance at UNLV affected your ability to progress through your graduate program?

- a. Not at all
- b. Slightly
- c. Moderately
- d. Significantly
- e. Extremely

19) Are evening classes offered in your program?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Not sure

IF ANSWERED 'YES', SKIP 20.

20) Would it benefit you if courses were offered during the evenings?

- a. Not at all
- b. Slightly
- c. Moderately
- d. Significantly
- e. Extremely

IF ANSWERED, SKIP 21

21) Would additional evening classes being offered benefit you?

- a. Not at all
- b. Slightly
- c. Moderately



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- d. Significantly
- e. Extremely

22) Are weekend classes offered in your program?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Not sure

IF ANSWERED 'YES', SKIP 23

23) Would it benefit you if courses were offered during the weekends?

- a. Not at all
- b. Slightly
- c. Moderately
- d. Significantly
- e. Extremely

IF ANSWERED, SKIP 24

24) Would additional weekend classes being offered benefit you?

- a. Not at all
- b. Slightly
- c. Moderately
- d. Significantly
- e. Extremely

25) Are blended/hybrid courses offered in your program? By hybrid / blended courses, we are asking about courses that use the internet in place of classroom study for a portion of the term.

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Not sure

IF ANSWERED 'YES', SKIP 26

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26) Would it benefit you if blended/hybrid courses were offered?

- a. Not at all
- b. Slightly
- c. Moderately
- d. Significantly
- e. Extremely

IF ANSWERED, SKIP 27

27) Would additional blended/hybrid classes being offered benefit you?

- a. Not at all
- b. Slightly
- c. Moderately
- d. Significantly
- e. Extremely

28) Are you aware that UNLV hosts an orientation session for Graduate students before the fall semester begins?

- a. Yes
- b. No

29) Did you attend the UNLV Graduate orientation?

- a. Yes
- b. No

IF ANSWERED 'NO', SKIP QUESTION 30

30) Did you find attending the UNLV Graduate orientation beneficial?

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neutral or indifferent
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

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- 31) If another student were to ask you about a graduate policy, you would be able to confidently inform them of the answer or where to find it?
- Very likely
  - Likely
  - Neutral
  - Unlikely
  - Very unlikely
- 32) Did you experience any career changes during your graduate program?
- Yes
  - No
- IF ANSWERED 'NO', SKIP QUESTION 33
- 33) Did those career changes positively or negatively affect your ability to progress through your graduate program?
- Very positively
  - Positively
  - Neutral
  - Negatively
  - Very negatively
- 34) Did you experience any family / relationship changes during your graduate program?
- Yes
  - No
- IF ANSWERED 'NO', SKIP QUESTION 35
- 35) Did those family/relationship changes positively or negatively affect your ability to progress through your graduate program?
- Very positively
  - Positively
  - Neutral
  - Negatively

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- e. Very negatively

36) How do you rate your graduate program?

- a. Very positively
- b. Positively
- c. Neutral
- d. Negatively
- e. Very negatively

37) How do you feel your graduate degree will impact your job prospects?

- a. Very positively
- b. Positively
- c. Neutral
- d. Negatively
- e. Very negatively

38) You will be able to find a job in your graduate field in Las Vegas.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neutral or indifferent
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

39) Have you filed an appeal to the UNLV Graduate College?

- a. Yes
  - b. No
- IF ANSWERED 'NO', SKIP 40, 41, and 42

40) What was your appeal regarding?

- a. Financial issues (tuition refund/waiver, student fees, late fees)
- b. Academic misconduct (plagiarism, falsifying information, reusing the same work)

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- c. Grade changes
- d. Paperwork Issues
- e. Other / Prefer not to say

41) Your appeal was handled fairly.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neutral or indifferent
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

42) Your appeal was handled in a timely manner.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neutral or indifferent
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

43) B&C only- How was your experience identifying an advisor for your research?

- a. Very positive
- b. Positive
- c. Neutral
- d. Negative
- e. Very negative

44) B&C only- How was your experience selecting a committee for your research?

- a. Very positive
- b. Positive
- c. Neutral
- d. Negative
- e. Very negative

45) B&C only- Have you entered the research phase of your program?

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- a. Yes
- b. No or not applicable to my program  
IF ANSWERED 'NO', SKIP 43 AND 44

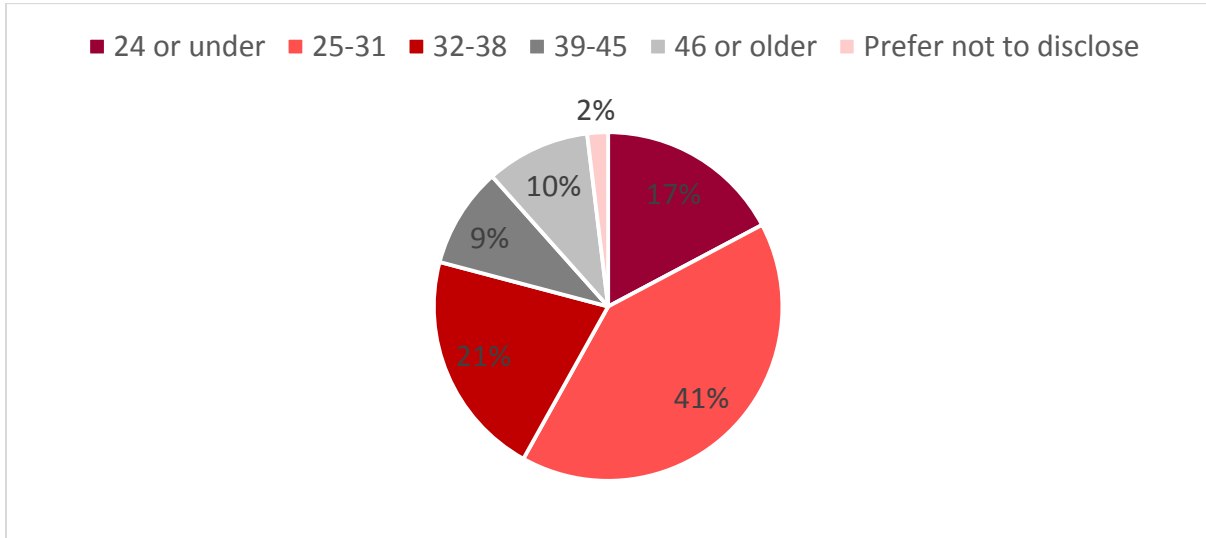
46)B&C only- your research committee works well together.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neutral or indifferent
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

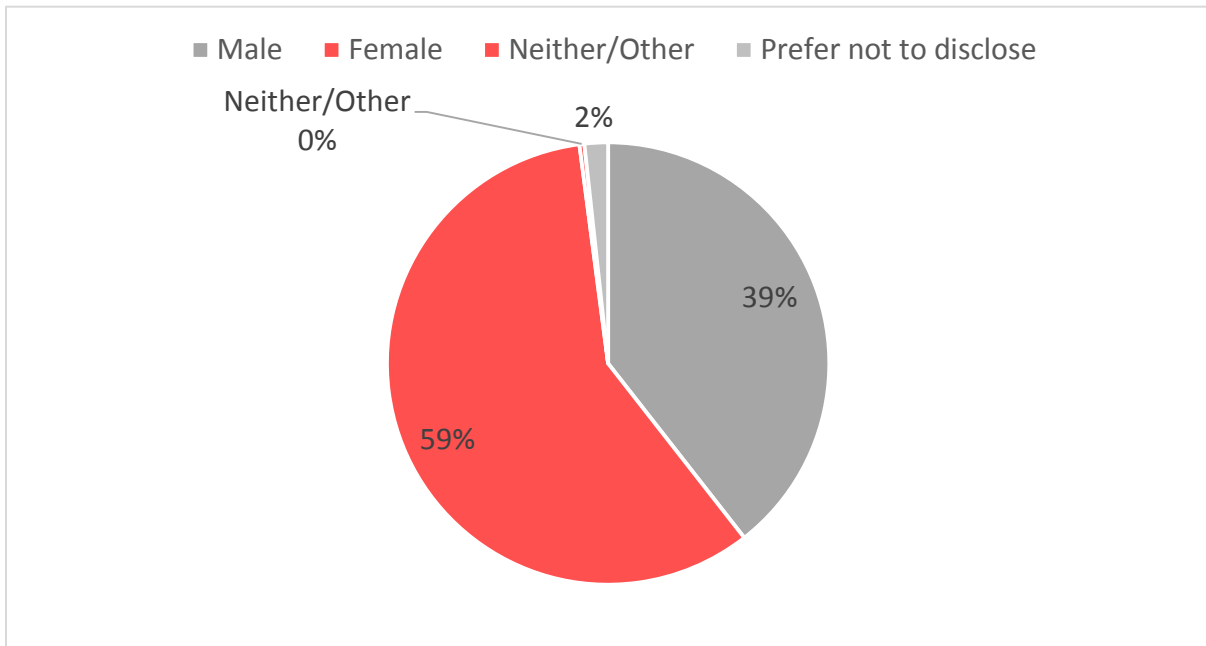
47)B&C only- your research committee gave you timely and helpful feedback as your research progressed.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neutral or indifferent
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

**Appendix A-1: Age Distribution of Respondents**



**Appendix A-2: Gender Distribution of Respondents**



**Appendix A-3: Race/Ethnicity Distribution of Respondents**

