



BIPOC Graduate Student Support

Information & Assessment Summary

CONTRIBUTORS

Kent Holsinger
Karen Bresciano
Cinnamon Adams
Stuart Duncan
Megan Petsa
Marie LeBlanc
Shalyn Hopley

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Preface

In this report we use the imperfect term BIPOC - Black, Indigenous and People of Color - to represent the range of racial and cultural identities of graduate students at the University of Connecticut while knowing “the ways it engages an erasure of the wide diversity of human identity yet articulates distinctive lived realities” (Wendi Williams: <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2021/06/18/advice-how-colleges-can-lift-some-emotional-burden-bipoc-faculty-opinion>).

In Spring 2020, The Graduate School began to gather information about the experiences of BIPOC graduate students in direct response to specific events of racial injustice. We recognize that we should have acted sooner, and we regret that it took the shock of these events for us to respond. This report focuses on the race/ethnicity of students, but we recognize that other individuals with other identities experience hate and injustice and that other identities intersect with race/ethnicity, often amplifying the injustice they feel. We do our best to incorporate an understanding of this complexity into the actions we implement as a result of this report.

Acknowledgements

Work of this nature is never done alone. We are immensely grateful to the following people for shaping our work. We thank all of the people and organizations listed below for every moment of challenge, support, accountability, grace, and consideration you gave The Graduate School team. Most importantly, we thank you for making the lives of UConn Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Color (BIPOC) better.

- The Office for Diversity and Inclusion, specifically Dr. Jonelle Reynolds and Dr. Frank Tuitt
- The Cultural Centers staff and graduate assistants
- The Office of Institutional Equity
- The Ombuds Office
- The Graduate Employee Union
- The Graduate Student Senate
- The Graduate Students of Color Association and specifically Dominique Courts (president) who encouraged us to think about material support for BIPOC students
- The graduate faculty and staff who responded to our Fall 2020 survey
- Monique Domingo, School of Business doctoral student, who encouraged us to think about the curriculum's effect on students of color and who asked us "How?"
- Anonymous graduate students and alumni who met or emailed to give us feedback before our period of public comment
- The Mohegan, Mashantucket Pequot, Eastern Pequot, Schaghticoke, Golden Hill Paugussett, Nipmuc, and Lenape Peoples, who have stewarded the land UConn occupies
- The BIPOC faculty, students, and staff who learn and labor in white supremacist systems at our institution

Executive Summary

I. Process

Following the death of George Floyd and other acts of racial violence and injustice in the summer of 2020, The Graduate School engaged in reflection, research, and planning related to two main questions:

- What practices, policies, and processes have the largest negative effect on graduate students at the University of Connecticut who identify as Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Color (BIPOC)?
- What practices, policies, and processes can be addressed by The Graduate School?

We met with a variety of campus partners including the Graduate Student Senate, the Graduate Employee Union, the Office of Institutional Equity, and the Ombuds Office. We also met with Harriott and Crandall fellows and the Graduate Students of Color Association. We used the results of these conversations to develop a survey for department heads, Directors of Graduate Study, program coordinators, and departmental administrators.

II. Overall Survey Results

Campus partners identified four obstacles that have a disproportionate negative effect on BIPOC graduate students:

1. The University often fails to hold advisors accountable for discriminatory or racist behavior.
2. The power imbalance between advisors and advisees may exacerbate conflicts and limit accountability.
3. BIPOC graduate students may not have the same opportunities for mentorship and community that are available to graduate students with other identities.
4. Faculty and staff have insufficient training in anti-racist practices and advising.

III. Interpretation of Themes

The overall survey results were disaggregated by school and college. Across all programs, respondents identified increased funding, training, and mentoring as necessary to better support BIPOC students. Fostering a vibrant sense of community among BIPOC graduate students was uniformly identified as critical. Respondents diverged when it came to their awareness of resources available and their conception of racism at UConn.

IV. Priorities

The Graduate School identified three internal priorities for action:

1. Improving graduate student advising experiences.

2. Analyzing policies of The Graduate School for racially disparate outcomes (with a focus on admissions and fellowships).
3. Building the capacity for supporting BIPOC graduate students in The Graduate School staff.

The Graduate School identified three priorities and it will advocate for action on them by UConn as a whole:

1. Hiring and retaining more BIPOC faculty and staff.
2. Building a community for BIPOC students, faculty, and staff.
3. Investing in structures that support BIPOC student well-being and belonging.

Process Summary

I. Who Are We?

The Graduate School is the home for graduate education at the University of Connecticut. Our office includes the leadership team, the Admissions team, and The Graduate Student and Postdoctoral Affairs (GSPA) team. Graduate students, faculty, and staff are often surprised to learn about the variety of work we do.

The Graduate School provides vital services that support the graduate student, faculty, and staff community. The leadership team provides vision for graduate education at UConn and advocates for the interests of the graduate community. The Admissions team supports prospective students and graduate departments with the admissions process, processing thousands of applications and managing the matriculation process for all incoming graduate students. The Graduate Student and Postdoctoral Affairs (GSPA) team supports graduate education by developing engaged communities across multiple disciplines at the University of Connecticut. GSPA helps graduate students and postdoctoral scholars achieve their academic, professional, and personal goals during their time at the University of Connecticut. More specifically, the GSPA team:

1. Develops and promotes programs to enrich academic journeys and creates experiences for personal and professional growth.
2. Provides guidance to navigate various opportunities and challenges through administrative services and consultations.
3. Collaborates across UConn departments and offices to enhance the infrastructure that supports graduate education

Who we are affects how we approach equity work, and as such, we want to share the identities we hold. Our team is almost entirely white, which is a reflection of The Graduate School staff as a whole. We all have graduate education experience, some of us having completed masters programs and some of us having completed doctoral programs. Most of the group are part of our GSPA team with the exception of Kent Holsinger, the Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of the Graduate School, and Marie LeBlanc, Communications and Digital Strategy. As such our team mostly has training and experience in student affairs with multiple members of our team having experience as faculty. Multiple members of our team are UConn alumni.

II. History

Following multiple national incidents of racism and violence toward the Black community in the United States, The Graduate School wrote a statement expressing support and solidarity for our Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Color (BIPOC) graduate students in addition to promising action. Although our intentions were positive, we asked Black graduate students to share their stories and insight; the impact of that request further burdened a population who often has to relive and retell racial traumas. Since realizing the mistake and recognizing the burden we placed on BIPOC graduate students, The

Graduate School has been reflecting, researching, and discussing how we can better serve our BIPOC graduate students without overburdening them.

After a conversation with the Office for Diversity and Inclusion, we decided to move forward by working with our partners (who were either compensated by the nature of their employment by the University or had volunteered to serve in an advocacy role for graduate students through their involvement with their organization) and getting their input on two key questions:

- What practices, policies, and processes most negatively affect BIPOC graduate students at the University of Connecticut?
- What practices, policies, and processes are best addressed by The Graduate School?

With this aim in mind, we have spoken or met with campus partners including Graduate Student Senate, the Graduate Employee Union, the Cultural Centers, the Office for Diversity and Inclusion, the Office of Institutional Equity, and the Ombuds Office this summer. We also reached out to our Graduate Fellows and to the Graduate Students of Color Association. This outreach generally looked like one to two emails sent to partners and follow up if interest was expressed.

III. Intersectionality

The Graduate School believes that racism is an urgent issue in our society and in our institution; as such we focused our work upon how to improve the lives of BIPOC students at UConn. While our focus is on Black, Indigenous, and/or other Persons of Color graduate students, we believe that many of the issues of oppression we look at in our report also negatively affect graduate students who hold other marginalized identities. As The Graduate School, we can see how students with disabilities may similarly be given less mentoring opportunities or lack representation in graduate education; we witness how international students can be not only ridiculed and ostracized due to stereotypes about non-Native English speakers but can also have their labor abused by their advisor due to their precarious visa status; we see how LGBTQIA+ students can feel isolated and unsafe in the programs.

Additionally these marginalized identities have overlap. When we talk about BIPOC students, we are not only talking about BIPOC students who hold otherwise dominant identities; we are talking about BIPOC women, BIPOC queer people, BIPOC trans* people, BIPOC international students, and more. Furthermore, when we are talking about BIPOC individuals who hold another marginalized identity, we have to consider intersectionality as Kimberle Crenshaw defined the concept. We have to acknowledge that holding multiple intersecting identities is not additive in terms of the experiences of oppression but is its own unique, compounded experience of oppression in our society.

As we look to change our systems and practices in graduate education to better serve BIPOC students, we hope and believe that these changes will in fact allow us to better serve all graduate students. Trans* scholar Dr. Z Nicolazzo suggests in her “trickle up” approach that by seeking to serve the most marginalized communities (Black, queer, trans* women), we

make changes that serve all individuals, including individuals who are not marginalized. Similar to trickle up, a tenant of universal design is that we design environments so that all members of a community regardless of ability, size, identity can access the environment, and by creating spaces that can be accessed by people with disabilities, we can even improve the space for people without disabilities. The Graduate School believes that by seeking to improve the lives of BIPOC students, we are improving the graduate community for all students.

IV. Departmental Partners Themes

After speaking to our campus partners, the overarching theme that emerged involved advising and mentoring. Staff and partners repeatedly pointed out ways in which BIPOC graduate students lacked the same mentoring and advising resources to which white peers had access. Additionally BIPOC graduate students suffered disproportionate negative impacts from deficient advising.

- **Holding discriminators accountable:** Our partners and students repeatedly expressed a lack of faith in the systems in place to address discrimination and racist behavior. Advisor power creates a barrier to graduate students reporting this kind of behavior in the first place. Added to the sense that the University's processes fail to hold these bad actors accountable creates a further disincentive to reporting these behaviors.
- **Diffusing advisor power:** The advisor-advisee relationship is a large part of a student's graduate experience. For those who have positive advising relationships, the close relationship can be a strength. However, for those who have a difficult advising relationship or for BIPOC students who suffer an advising relationship marred by racist behaviors, the single advisor model has a tremendous capacity for harm because advisors have considerable power over their advisees both during their graduate experience and as they enter the field.
- **Lack of BIPOC mentorship and community:** UConn is a predominantly white institution, and the predominance is more pronounced among faculty and staff. BIPOC graduate students generally do not have the same opportunities for mentorship, especially from advisors who share their racial identity. Additionally BIPOC faculty and staff who could mentor BIPOC graduate students are often overburdened and undercompensated for this work.
- **Insufficient training in anti-racism and advising:** In addition to a few community members who do malicious harm, there are many who cause harm unintentionally. While training alone is insufficient, training coupled with other strategies could promote better, more inclusive advising and improve the experience of BIPOC graduate students at UConn.

V. Survey

In September 2020, The Graduate School distributed a survey to departments on the subject of BIPOC graduate student support. The survey was intended to gauge the opinions of those faculty and administrators most deeply involved in graduate education: department heads, Director of Graduate Studies (DGS), program coordinators, and department administrators and the Graduate Faculty Council. We received 62 responses to the survey. The survey asked for the following information.

- Program
- Are you staff or faculty?
- Do you serve as a major advisor to a graduate student/s?
- What supports would you refer BIPOC graduate students to if they were experiencing racism at UConn?
- What could The Graduate School provide departments so they could best support BIPOC graduate students?
- What practices, policies, and processes do you feel most negatively impact BIPOC graduate students at UConn?
- What practices, policies, and processes do you feel would be best addressed by The Graduate School (as opposed to other departments or offices within UConn)?

We additionally asked the respondents complete a Likert scale rating their agreement to the statement “_____ negatively impacts BIPOC graduate students at UConn” with the following themes we had previously identified:

- Advisor power in advisor-advisee relationship
- Minimal accountability when discrimination is reported
- Lack of mentoring
- Lack of community or feelings of isolation
- Lack of financial resources
- Lack of support or acknowledgement following national/local incidents of racial injustice
- Microaggressions
- Racial battle fatigue

Additionally faculty and staff who completed the survey were offered the opportunity to have a follow up discussion with Graduate School staff, which required faculty and staff to share their name and contact information. 32 individuals chose to do so.

Overall Survey Results

College and School Representation

College/School	Representation
CAHNR	1
School of Business	5
School of Engineering	4
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences	41
Neag School of Education	8
School of Nursing	2
School of Medicine	1

The survey was distributed via the Graduate Faculty Council listserv and The Graduate School's listservs for department heads, directors of graduate studies (DGSs), program coordinators, and departmental administrators. In total, 98 Graduate Faculty Council members, 95 department heads, 232 DGSs, and 280 departmental administrators received the survey. (These lists do have individuals who overlap.) Some survey recipients distributed the survey to other faculty and staff. We included all responses in our summary of results. The survey was intended to gather opinions from a subset of faculty and staff whom we expected to be knowledgeable about graduate students, not to be a representative sample of graduate faculty and staff.

A total of 62 responses were collected. Of the 62 responses, 6 were from graduate staff, 8 were from faculty who were not major advisors to graduate students, and 48 were faculty and major advisors to graduate students. **Over half of the respondents (32 respondents) wanted a follow up conversation on BIPOC graduate student support with The Graduate School staff and were willing to give their contact information.**

Knowledge of Resources Related to Racism

Based on our question about what supports they would refer their students to if they were experiencing racism, we assessed our respondents' knowledge of resources available to students at UConn. Responses that gave more than 3 supports were considered adequate knowledge of resources; responses that gave 3 or less supports and did not give further explanation of their response were considered improvable knowledge of resources; responses that gave incorrect information, did not respond, or expressed that they did not know were considered concerning knowledge of resources; finally, responses that expressed a lack of faith in UConn to support students experiencing racism were placed into their own category.

Over 50% of the respondents displayed improvable knowledge of resources. 25% of our respondents were in the

concerning category. Additionally 2 respondents (about 3%) did not have faith in UConn to address racism students were experiencing. This data was especially concerning, and exposed a clear need for improvements in advisor training and in anti-racist and inclusive practice.

Likert Analysis

Please rate your agreement with the following statements: “_____ negatively impacts BIPOC graduate students at UConn.”

	1 Highly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neither Agree Nor Disagree	4 Agree	5 Highly Agree	Unsure	Average
Advisor power in advisor-advisee relationships	5	11	13	10	9	13	3.15
Minimal accountability when discrimination is reported	2	3	6	13	23	14	4.11
Lack of mentoring	1	6	9	21	17	7	3.87
Lack of community or feelings of isolation	2	0	6	12	36	5	4.43
Lack of financial resources	2	2	10	14	28	5	4.14
Lack of support or acknowledgement following national/local incidents of racial injustice	2	9	5	21	16	8	3.75
Microaggressions	2	0	4	20	30	5	4.36
Racial Battle Fatigue	1	2	2	16	34	6	4.45

Looking at our Likert data, the faculty and staff tended to agree that the areas listed in the table above negatively affected our BIPOC graduate students at UConn. However it is clear that faculty were less likely to agree when it came to advising and mentoring. Specifically the lowest levels of agreement included “Advisor power in advisor-advisee relationships,” “Lack of mentoring,” and “lack of support or acknowledgement following national/local incidents of racial injustice.”

These responses conflict with areas emphasized by our campus partners we spoke with during Summer 2020. Multiple cultural center staff members emphasized the lack of support and acknowledgement following racial injustice. The Ombuds Office and the Office of Institutional Equity both identified the power dynamics of the advisor and advisee were most frequently involved in issues that rose to their offices. Furthermore lack of mentoring receiving lower agreement was out of line with the level of agreement for lack of community and comments about the lack of BIPOC faculty, staff, and leadership. While perhaps the level of disagreement is not surprising as these areas are most suggestive of faculty and department

culpability, it is disappointing given the research available that emphasizes the importance of advising, mentoring, and support in students' overall graduate experience and the trends identified by our campus partners. Additionally this lack of agreement did not align with the thematic analysis we completed on our other questions.

Thematic Analysis Process

In order to analyze the remaining questions, Shalyn Hopley, Student Support Specialist, ran through each qualitative question doing an initial theming and count of themes that emerged. Once the initial analysis was created, the themes were categorized and regrouped. A narrative was created based on the themes for each question we asked. Additionally, we separated our data by college or school to identify trends and themes that emerged.

Survey and Analysis Considerations

When embarking upon assessment and research, every choice affects the results and what conclusions we can draw from our results. When reviewing our results, we want our graduate community to be aware of the following considerations.

First and foremost, our team is heavily white-identifying. Our white identities are a limitation to building rapport and trust with BIPOC students. Our whiteness carries privileges, bias, and power which can (and does) harm people of color. Survey respondents aware of the identities held by our staff may have been hesitant to share their feelings authentically. Additionally our white identities mean we could not bring lived experience as a lens through which to analyze racism in graduate education. Our whiteness also meant we had the privilege to not analyze our white identities if we chose not to previously; we needed to do further self education work than BIPOC staff likely would have had to do by the very nature of their racial identity.

Our survey's construction also has limitations, many of which were highlighted by graduate students who graciously gave feedback during the 2020-2021 Winter Break. Firstly, we did not ask for the racial identity of our respondents, so we could not determine whether BIPOC faculty and staff identified issues different from those that non-BIPOC faculty and staff identified. Our questions were also based in individual perception. Not only is individual perception highly susceptible to flaws in our worldviews and to bias, individualization is a tool of white supremacy. By boiling down the issue of racism to an issue of racist individuals or individual racist acts, we avoid the systemic and structural nature of racism.

Our survey was not designed to be a representative sample of opinions from faculty and staff who interact with graduate students. Rather, it was specifically designed to solicit feedback from those individuals who are likely to be most knowledgeable about graduate student issues. Nonetheless, because they are faculty and staff, not graduate students, their perceptions may not reflect the experience of graduate students in their programs. Furthermore, the respondents may or may not be BIPOC, meaning their perceptions might not be reflective of BIPOC students in their programs.

One person conducted the theming, which is often a subjective process which could be strengthened by additional

analysts' view points. Once themed, the content then could not be easily member checked as surveys were able to be completed anonymously.

Survey and Analysis Strengths

The greatest strength of our survey and analysis is that it is part of a multi-faceted, long-term process of understanding how systemic racism impacts BIPOC graduate students at UConn. Surveying graduate faculty and staff alone would be a poor representation of the many experiences and challenges BIPOC graduate students experience in higher education. Our survey has been paired with conversations with multiple campus partners and stakeholders, research and self-education on racism in academia undertaken by our Graduate School staff members, The Graduate School's strategic planning process, and small student feedback sessions. Our survey's analysis and impact on our work will also evolve as we continue this work. These results are preliminary results which have yet to reflect the engagement of our larger community. When we complete our process of public comment, this analysis will be adjusted and will shape our future equity work as we learn more.

Our survey, and the process leading up to the survey, also worked to minimize uncompensated labor for our participants and partners. When we spoke with the Office for Diversity and Inclusion, they challenged us to think about how we could gather information from faculty and staff who the university employs or from students who expressly volunteer their time in student organizations that support graduate students. While we did move forward with getting student feedback which did require uncompensated labor, we are continuing to consider how BIPOC students, faculty, and staff can be supported in material ways when they engage in equity work.

Departmental Support

What could The Graduate School provide departments so they could best support BIPOC graduate students?

Theme	Count
funding	14
Resources, resource compilation	13
training (both of community and of faculty)	10
programming	8
recruitment of faculty	6
mentoring	6
affinity groups, peer support	5
recruitment of students	5
dedicated staff	5
research and share findings	4

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Theme	Count
space (physical and metaphorical)	4
color blindness	2
unaware	2
consistency between departments	2
accountability/reporting	2
clear support structure	2
restorative justice	1
group therapy	1
cohort model	1
supports for students network	1
inclusive curriculum	1

The main departmental supports respondents sought were **funding, resources, trainings, and programming**. Following these requests were requests for supports that aligned with the themes from our meetings with campus partners: supports that address a lack of mentoring, a lack of community, and a lack of faculty and staff who are either BIPOC themselves or dedicated to the improvement of the BIPOC student experience at UConn.

In all of our qualitative data, there is also a counternarrative running through it of individuals who do not believe that racism exists at UConn and that their responses promote a colorblind approach to supporting BIPOC students. While neither our research nor our training support this approach, it is worth noting as a counternarrative as it shows that our graduate faculty and staff, just like our students, are coming to their work from a wide variety of backgrounds and understandings.

Systemic Inequities

What practices, policies, and processes do you feel most negatively impact BIPOC graduate students at UConn?

When answering this question, a number of primary themes emerged: a lack of BIPOC community, **a lack of BIPOC faculty and staff, inequitable expectations, inequitable resources and opportunities, and a hostile environment**. The most common themes, a lack of BIPOC community and a lack of BIPOC faculty and staff, were united by the idea that UConn lacked a presence of BIPOC people in general as a predominantly white institution (PWI). Aside from lacking a community of BIPOC people, BIPOC graduate students faced inequity in expectations, resources, and opportunities. Some of the expectations that were highlighted were the use of the GRE, the use of rigid milestones for program progress, and other cultural biases towards equality rather than equity. Funding opportunities were also highlighted. Finally a hostile environment emerged in the responses, exposing a pattern of faculty and student ignorance when it comes to racism and the experiences of BIPOC people, a lack of BIPOC representation and cultural competency in graduate curriculum, poor response to racism, tokenism, performative allyship, and more.

Scope of The Graduate School

What practices, policies, and processes do you feel would be best addressed by The Graduate School (as opposed to other departments or offices within UConn)?

Admissions & Orientation

Subthemes	Count
remove GRE requirement	4
diversity statements	2
remove application fee	1
orientation for BIPOC students, faculty, and staff	1
BIPOC cohorts or affinity groups established early	2
outreach to BIPOC students	3
fellowships and funding	10
transparency in funding	1
promote depts using equitable practice in admissions	1

Policies

Subthemes	Count
GRE	4
SET policies and training	2
faculty training	5

Recruitment/Retention

Subthemes	Count
recruiting more BIPOC students	8
recruiting at HBCUs	1
retaining BIPOC students	2
hiring BIPOC faculty	4
creating BIPOC staff/liaison positions	4

Supports & Initiatives

Subthemes	Count
support initiatives	5
support student-led initiatives	1
set expectations of departments	2
resource identification	2
mentoring	3
support student voice	2
clarify reporting of incidents	4
compile incident data	2
social events	4
professional development	2

Respondents felt that The Graduate School should address a variety of issues that fell into the categories of **recruitment and retention, admissions and orientation, supports and initiatives, and policies**. The two most common issues that respondents felt were within the scope of The Graduate School were recruitment of BIPOC students and fellowships and funding of BIPOC students, which in many ways go hand in hand. Having fellowships and funding for BIPOC students is a great incentive for graduate students to attend UConn.

Respondents did not ignore that these students need to feel supported and valued once they arrive at UConn. Respondents suggested a wide-variety of ways to improve BIPOC graduate students' experiences at UConn including better orientation, more support for student initiatives, social and professional development events, and adjustments to training for both students and faculty.

One particularly compelling suggestion from the survey was to utilize and share examples. The Graduate School could identify and share equitable practices departments are already employing, utilizing their work as an exemplar for other departments. The Graduate School is uniquely positioned to see how many departments and programs operate. By offering examples of equitable admissions processes or inclusive orientations, The Graduate School could promote better practice across campus. Another suggestion from students involved in our process was to reconsider how we conceive of this question of scope. Some students recommended we push the boundaries of what The Graduate School's scope is meant to be if we are truly looking to disrupt systems of power. Another student suggested we look at what we already do and find the systemic racism within rather than ask where racism is happening at UConn and what our role is in it.

Interpretation of Themes

Summary

The Graduate School wanted to then look at the collected data based on the respondents' Colleges or Schools. Based on the response rates, we felt it was worth looking at trends we could see from the School of Business (5 respondents), the School of Engineering (4 respondents), the Neag School of Education (8 respondents), and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (41 respondents). Because the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences respondents made up the vast majority of our responses, we further disaggregated the data based on program area: Humanities (6 respondents), Social Sciences (17 respondents), and Science, Math, and Technology (18 respondents).

When responses were grouped by school, college, or program, they were rethemed to see if there were clear patterns based on the respondents' academic training area.

Commonalities

When looking at the results by school, college, or program, some key commonalities emerged. Namely, respondents felt their department needed further funding and training to support BIPOC graduate students. Additionally they expressed a lack of community and mentoring for BIPOC graduate faculty, staff, and students.

Respondents generally identified a lack of sufficient funding and training to provide an inclusive and welcoming environment for their BIPOC graduate students. The survey responses indicated that they wanted more funding to offer better financial support to BIPOC students, to support initiatives that improve the department environment for BIPOC students, and to compensate BIPOC student- and faculty-led projects. The School of Business respondents highlighted that funding can be especially important for BIPOC individuals who are also international students, as they have limited access to employment due to their visa restrictions. Aside from desiring better funding, respondents requested further training to support their department's BIPOC students. This desire for training ran across all responses, however the emphasis on training could vary. For example, School of Engineering respondents expressed a degree of discomfort or uncertainty when it came to identifying the needs of BIPOC students, suggesting we ask students themselves. Their responses also reflected a self-awareness of the need for further training to build their capacity to support BIPOC students.

The respondents to the survey also emphasized that the BIPOC graduate students at UConn lack access to a robust community and to mentors. Many respondents noted that their department did not have many BIPOC graduate students. One respondent even expressed a desire to hear about the BIPOC student experience in their program, but they had only one BIPOC student in their program.

“The preceding questions are difficult to answer given that there has been one BIPOC graduate student in our department since I arrived. It would be very useful to get their input, but this is nearly impossible given that it would be obvious where it was coming from, which would make the student less likely to be forthcoming. So we have an issue that the most useful information would be from students that are unlikely to provide it. Perhaps the graduate school could institute exit interviews to gauge student experiences during their time at UCONN (for all backgrounds).”

*A Comment on Lack of
BIPOC Community*

With our BIPOC students often being one of a few (or in the aforementioned case, the only) BIPOC students in their graduate program, they lack access to a sense of community in their department or on campus. Furthermore, the leadership, staff, and faculty are predominantly white. The lack of BIPOC representation not only hinders the development of a strong BIPOC graduate community but also means that BIPOC students seeking BIPOC mentors often do not have access to them. BIPOC faculty and staff often are overburdened taking on additional mentorship responsibilities for students while not being compensated for that work or being rewarded for that work in the Promotion and Tenure Review process. Looking beyond campus, UConn BIPOC students have different experiences looking to the surrounding area for BIPOC community. The local Storrs area at the main campus is predominantly white and rural; the Hartford and Stamford communities surrounding those campuses include more Black and Brown community members, resources, and businesses.

Divergences

Although the responses across colleges and schools shared many commonalities, there were also many instances where they diverged. Respondents grouped by academic discipline had different levels of awareness of resources for BIPOC students as well as different levels of development and orientations in regards to anti-racism. The social sciences, humanities, and the Neag School of Education respondents were generally more informed of the resources available for BIPOC students experiencing racism with the social sciences grouping being the most aware. Respondents in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) were least aware of resources. Engineering respondents were most unaware of resources as a grouping.

We continued to see this divergence in responses between the social sciences, humanities, and education and STEM in their familiarity with issues of racism, racial disparity, and systemic injustice. For example, STEM responses more often emphasized support programming and events whereas responses from the social sciences emphasized addressing biased expectations and the curriculum. While all are important aspects of creating a better climate for BIPOC graduate students at UConn, the social sciences answers reflected more self-awareness and systems awareness of how racism affects BIPOC students in higher education. The trends of racial awareness aligned with what we might expect of faculty and staff based upon their academic training. Education scholars often had the most critical and anti-racism informed responses as they

were trained in analyzing educational systems. STEM scholars often have not had to analyze educational systems or racism as part of their educational training.

As we pulled together narratives and themes, we also found some outliers or counter-narratives to the larger trends we found in the results. The first counter-narrative we noticed was a denial of racism as a problem at UConn. **While looking at our Science, Technology, and Math (STM) grouping, the majority of the responses did display an understanding that UConn is not immune from systemic racism and inequity; however, there was a small group of responses that did not believe in anti-racism and advocated for a race neutral approach to supporting all students.** These respondents generally did not agree with any of the Likert questions and critiqued the survey for its basis in Critical Race Theory.

“It is important to maintain an open intellectual climate, and ensure that discussions are not dictated by the tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT). All acts of racial and sex discrimination should be addressed, and the university does have offices that address such issues. Beyond that students and all employees should be respected as individual human beings, not through the lens of labels such as ‘BIPOC’. I find these labels offensive, and I know that many others of international background also find them offensive. However, it is almost impossible to speak out on such matters in the current climate. This survey is too informed by the language of CRT.”

A Comment from a STM Respondent

We share this example not to shame faculty and staff in STEM; rather, we share this example as it highlights the reality that our graduate faculty and staff, much like our students, have very different orientations towards anti-racism and different approaches to supporting marginalized students. These differences in training, development, and orientation mean that all students, but especially BIPOC students, are receiving different support depending on the faculty or staff member with whom they work.

We similarly found a counter-narrative when analyzing the results from the Neag School of Education. The respondents from the Neag School of Education, on the whole, were the most critical and skeptical grouping. **Due to their training and knowledge, our Neag respondents had lots of recommendations and thoughts on BIPOC graduate student support. However, we also found that some respondents did not trust UConn to appropriately react to racism and support BIPOC students.** This counter-narrative contrasts with the previous, emphasizing how unique and inconsistent BIPOC graduate student support can look at UConn.

“Nothing at UConn- I would suggest they reach out to the media, as well as the NAACP and the ACLU. I don’t trust UConn to make real change or support a student in this situation in a meaningful way that has long term and systemic implications.”

Example of a Skeptical Response

While we cannot definitively draw conclusions from our survey results since they are not a representative sample, these results align with larger trends and research on the climate of STEM departments for BIPOC students across higher education institutions. The results also highlight that BIPOC graduate students at UConn can have very different experiences due to a variety of factors including their chosen field of study.

Priorities

Overview of Priorities

While there are many significant challenges and issues of systemic inequity that UConn BIPOC graduate students face, The Graduate School has set three areas of priority for our office:

1. **Improving graduate student advising experiences**
2. **Analyzing Graduate School policies for racially disparate outcomes (with a focus upon admissions and fellowships)**
3. **Building The Graduate School staff capacity for supporting BIPOC graduate students**

Improving Graduate Student Advising Experiences

Advisors, particularly doctoral advisors, have tremendous power over their graduate students, often serving not only as their advisor but often serving as their supervisor, their professional mentor, and their faculty member; additionally, they are sometimes directly responsible for the graduate student's funding. Although all graduate students are vulnerable to abuses of power from their advisors, students who hold marginalized identities are disproportionately vulnerable to abuses of power from their advisors.

Improving advising will require significant work. Being an excellent advisor is not heavily emphasized in the promotion and tenure review process for faculty. White graduate advisors, by nature of their identities, lived experiences, and academic training, oftentimes have minimal training in either advising or antiracism. BIPOC graduate advisors, by nature of their identities and lived experiences, are sought out for mentorship and support by BIPOC graduate students; as a whole they are overburdened and undercompensated for their labor in supporting these students. Departmental systems of governance often place peers in the role of overseeing fellow peers, making it hard to remedy poor advising skills and racist harm through oversight.

The Graduate School intends to focus upon three aspects of graduate student advising. We want to improve graduate faculty awareness of resources related to racism, both within and beyond the UConn community. The Graduate School is also committed to increasing and improving graduate advisor training. Training initiatives will focus upon advising in general and inclusive advising specifically. Finally, The Graduate School aims to diffuse advisor power. We will be exploring policies, practices, and advising models which improve advising experiences for BIPOC graduate students.

Knowing what needs to be addressed and selecting what issues to focus upon are only the first steps in actually addressing issues of racism. While these priorities are good to state publicly, The Graduate School also needs to know how they will attempt to address issues and bring about improvement.

In order to improve faculty awareness of resources for students addressing racism, The Graduate School will utilize our position as departmental steward to share the information. Knowing that department faculty and staff receive such a volume of communications that information can get lost, we will additionally look to utilize our relationships with departments to meet, share information from our survey, and emphasize the need to improve collective knowledge of resources. Finally, our staff is analyzing how we can better onboard graduate faculty and staff so they know information, such as resources related to racism, that will improve their advising.

The Graduate School has previously created advising training for graduate advisors for advising conferences at UConn, working with Undergraduate Advising to structure a graduate advising track at the conference. However, optional advising training will only do so much. Our staff's onboarding efforts will aim to make some of the advising information we have more widely and universally shared with new graduate faculty and staff.

In order to diffuse advisor power, The Graduate School team is invested in looking at alternative advising structures that spread the responsibility and power in advising. Co- or multi-advisor models help to diffuse the advisor power dynamic for graduate students while also creating a more communal approach to student advising, which allows students to draw upon the strengths of multiple mentors. Our team plans to explore a variety of advising frameworks and practices in order to promote more equitable advising relationships.

The Graduate School will not be able to do this work alone. We plan to strategically partner with the Office for Diversity and Inclusion, the Provost's Office, Departmental leaders, and the graduate student community to most effectively adjust graduate student advising to better serve racially marginalized students, as well as graduate students as a whole.

Analyzing Graduate School Policies for Racial Disparity

As we collected feedback from campus partners and students, they reminded us that The Graduate School needs to look within to address the systemic racism inherent in our own office's practices, processes, and policies. We are not immune from racism in our work, and it is certainly our scope and responsibility to address what is already within our office's sphere.

Based on the responses to the survey and the feedback we have received, The Graduate School has many areas they need to assess and then address including recruitment, admissions, fellowships, retention, and evaluation. To focus on all at once in a year would not be feasible. We will be focusing on two areas for 2021-2022: **admissions and fellowships**.

We selected admissions as it came up most frequently as an area which our community members felt had differential outcomes based upon race. While many admissions policies are determined at a department-level and not directly decided by The Graduate School, we are uniquely positioned to make recommendations for equitable admissions practice, in addition to analyzing the policies that are within our sphere. We also selected fellowships as we hear about how our diversity-based fellowships are not meeting students' need in a timely manner. Specifically, the fellowship payments are

often late, leaving students scrambling to meet their financial obligations.

In order to analyze these areas adequately, we need to capture the data that is available to us and determine what the current outcomes are of our policies and practices as they stand. We will select and utilize a framework to analyze our policies and adjust them with the aim of remedying these differential outcomes.

Policy assessment and adjustment is a deliberate and lengthy process. In addition to our year of assessment of the current outcomes and adjustment, we will follow up our policy changes with a period of implementation and assessment the following year. The process of policy change should also be iterative, as our policies should change as our community, our society, our outcomes, and our knowledge changes. As we undertake our 2021-2022's policy assessment, we should develop a long-term assessment and adjustment plan that will include all of The Graduate School's policies on a rotating basis.

In order to create and implement changes to policy, we will need to work with our partners throughout the process. Partnership will be especially important as we form new policies, and we will look to partner with community members who have different areas of expertise and different identities to join us in this work. Policy changes need to be reviewed and approved by the Graduate Faculty Council before we can implement those changes.

Building Staff Capacity to Support BIPOC Students

Throughout our information gathering stages, we heard the need for better representation of BIPOC people in the staff, faculty, and leadership at UConn. We cannot ignore that The Graduate School itself is composed of a majority white staff. Our visibly BIPOC members of staff currently are our graduate assistants, who hold more temporary employment and less power than full-time employees. If we are calling upon graduate departments to value representation and racial diversity in their hiring practices, we need to be setting a positive example in this area. Unfortunately we know that we will be unable to hire any new professional staff in the near future. As we continue to feel the financial impacts of consistent budget cuts and the extraordinary financial strain of the global pandemic, we are challenged to think creatively about how we diversify our staff and ensure diverse perspectives are represented.

However supporting BIPOC students is not only the responsibility of BIPOC faculty and staff. We do not need to wait to hire a more representative staff to build our capacity to support the BIPOC graduate student community. In order to build our capacity, we need to prioritize BIPOC student support in our strategic planning initiatives. We also will invest in education and professional development for our team. By becoming more informed, culturally competent professionals, we can increase our capacity for serving BIPOC students.

Additionally in the meantime, The Graduate School is committed to ensuring diverse voices and perspectives are represented in our decision making. Our team will analyze how we currently make decisions and seek out diverse perspectives. As a predominantly white team, we need to look for where BIPOC graduate students, faculty, and staff are

telling their stories, such as through social media accounts and hashtags like #BlackintheIvory. We need to read the works of BIPOC researchers and research that focuses on the needs of BIPOC graduate students. We need to attend events and go to spaces where BIPOC community members have decided to speak in rather than asking them to come to us. When we have funding for projects, consultants, or training, we want to employ diverse, talented people.

As with our other priorities, we will be looking to ensure our community is involved in the implementation and assessment of this priority.

Recommendations to UConn at Large

Systemic racism and injustice is not unique to The Graduate School, the University of Connecticut, or even higher education; racism is embedded in all aspects and institutions in the United States and beyond. The Graduate School team knows our commitments and our work must be part of a larger movement of change at UConn and beyond. Based on the responses from graduate faculty, staff, and students to our work over the past months, our team has also identified areas that the University as a whole could work to address in order to make a more equitable experience for BIPOC community members. We would recommend that the University consider the following priorities:

1. **Hiring and retaining more BIPOC faculty and staff.**
2. **Strengthening the communities for BIPOC students, faculty, and staff.**
3. **Investing in structures that support BIPOC student well-being and belonging.**

As we heard calls for our staff to be more representative and racially diverse, we heard that this was an issue across the institution. Furthermore, it is an issue that The Graduate School does not have purview over beyond our own staffing. The University has similarly identified this as a priority as they are embarking on a cluster hiring process. As this cluster hiring process begins, we recommend that the institution also embark on a parallel BIPOC faculty and staff retention plan. Continuing to hire racially diverse, talented candidates will not fix UConn's systemic racism issues alone; we must work on our environment and climate for BIPOC individuals if we are asking these individuals to invest in the institution and remain with the institution.

The effort to retain BIPOC individuals at UConn feeds directly into our second recommended priority of strengthening community for BIPOC students, faculty, and staff. This priority encompasses many different suggestions we heard from our community members. Currently many organizations and individuals work with minimal material support to provide community to the BIPOC individuals at UConn. For example, the Graduate Students of Color Association (GSCA) has built a strong presence and offered community and programming to BIPOC graduate students. However, these students are not paid and are volunteering in a student leader capacity to do this challenging work. Furthermore, their status as students means that there is often turnover and a loss of institutional knowledge, relational capital, and continuity. In addition to the efforts to recruit and retain BIPOC students, faculty, and staff needed to strengthen the community for BIPOC individuals at UConn, our respondents and partners noted that BIPOC mentoring opportunities needed to be created and

funded; they suggested that more targeted and culturally responsive events and professional development needed to be offered; partners and respondents suggested curriculum needed to be more attentive to the needs and work of BIPOC communities.

Finally we recommend that UConn financially and materially invest in structures and initiatives that support BIPOC student well-being and belonging. Repeatedly we heard from partners, respondents, and students alike that equity work is not fairly compensated. Work on diversity, equity, and inclusion often falls into faculty's service responsibilities, which are not heavily weighted in the Promotion and Tenure Review process. Diversity, equity, and inclusion work is regularly not accounted for when staff members are evaluated. Student-based equity work is often done by BIPOC volunteers and activists who are not compensated for their labors. In order to shift this pattern, we need to invest money and support into the existing equity and inclusion efforts. Additionally, UConn should be looking to provide funding to new initiatives and work that supports BIPOC student well-being, such as university-wide BIPOC mentoring programs and new staff positions focused upon BIPOC student support in multiple key offices such as The Graduate School, the Center for Career Development, and Student Activities.

Current Initiatives

A lot has happened since The Graduate School embarked on this work, both at UConn and in the world. UConn has undertaken a variety of initiatives related to BIPOC student support. The University created a course on Anti-Black Racism, which garnered the largest enrollment in a course in the history of the University. President Katsouleas created an Advisory Council on Policing.

The University administration also encouraged all departments to close for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day, after years of requesting some student services remain open, as a symbolic gesture in the recognition of the civil rights work of Dr. King. Steps toward more racial equity at UConn were also undertaken by other departments. The SchOLA²RS House Learning Community in Werth Tower graduated its first cohort of Black men with one of the highest 6 year graduation rates in the country. The Neag School of Education and the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) enhanced focus on equity and inclusion in their workshops and faculty development series. Multiple graduate programs removed using the Graduate Readiness Examination (GRE) as an admissions requirement. The Humanities Institute received a grant for their work expanding their Faculty of Color Working Group. Opportunities for mentorship for junior faculty of color were expanded.

While all these initiatives are much needed and worth celebrating, celebration must be tempered with the knowledge that there is still much more that needs to be done. Racial injustice did not start with and does not end with the death of George Floyd, which prompted The Graduate School's actions this year. Since Summer 2020, the United States has seen multiple instances of justice not served, such as the lack of charges against officers involved in the shooting death of Breonna Taylor. The pandemic has continued to disproportionately impact communities of color, communities that are skeptical of vaccinations due to a history of racism and abuse by the medical community. Incidents of anti-Asian/Asian-American/Pacific

Islander hate crimes have risen about 150% since 2019 in the wake of the pandemic and damaging rhetoric about the origin of the coronavirus. Furthermore, insurrectionists who also hold white supremacist, anti-Semitic, and hateful ideologies attacked the Capitol in an attempt to stop the certification of an election. UConn needs to continue to address racial inequity because racism continues to be a powerful, dangerous, and life-threatening presence in the United States and in our community.

Moving Forward to 2021-2022

The remainder of the Spring 2021 semester will be utilized to share these priorities and get public comments from those who wish to submit comments. We will adjust these priorities based upon the feedback we receive and prepare a strategic plan for how to address these areas of focus.

Spring 2021 will also be a vital time to prepare for the work we intend to undertake in 2021-2022. We can collect and organize data we intend to use, research frameworks for analysis, build relationships with key stakeholders, and engage in outreach to the community.

Additionally Spring and Summer 2021 gives us another chance to reach partners in the community that we did not successfully connect with during our Summer 2020 conversations or think to connect with previously. We will look to speak to more faculty, staff, and students who are invested in improving the experiences of BIPOC graduate students at UConn. We additionally can partner with external partners like the NAACP who might be able to provide us non-UConn and non-higher education perspectives.

We will also be considering how we thoughtfully incorporate BIPOC community members, whose voices are needed to do this work, without counting upon their uncompensated labor. As we continue to think about this issue, we are reflecting upon what our students shared in a feedback session: BIPOC people might not inherently feel burdened by the act of sharing their stories and their views. **The burden comes when those stories are consumed without any ensuing change to the racist systems and structures that caused those stories.** In Spring 2021, we will deeply consider the obligation we have to make change when we ask for collaboration from marginalized people.

Finally, we will be coming up with a means for our community to hold us accountable to doing the work we outline here in this report. A report means very little if it is not acted upon. We hope to create concrete goals under our priority areas and publish regular updates on our work towards those goals for all community members to view, along with contact information to allow community members to communicate with us about this vital work.