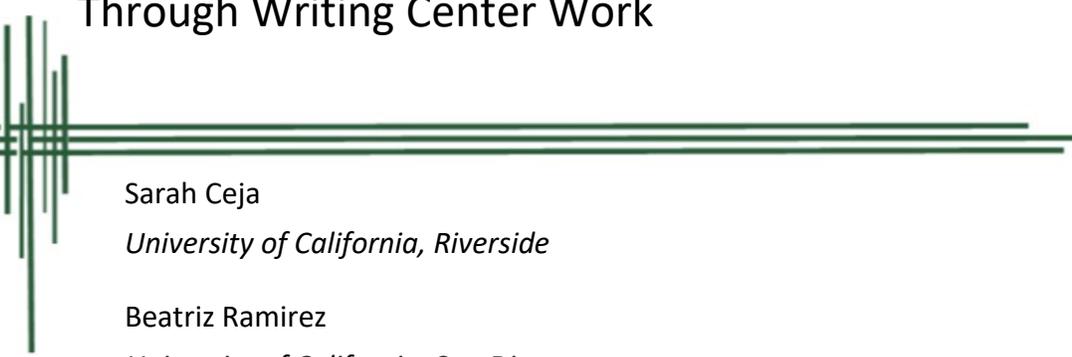# Contingency and Care: Reimagining Graduate Student Labor Through Writing Center Work

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Abstract

This article explores how graduate writing consultants (GWCs) working in a writing center at a public R1 university engage in forms of labor that both respond to and resist the neoliberal logics of higher education. Through a combination of critical reflection and collaborative case studies, the authors examine the emotional, intellectual, and infrastructural work performed by GWCs within a writing center that serves a diverse graduate population.

The piece highlights how GWCs, as contingent academic workers, play a crucial role in building peer support systems, facilitating professional development, and fostering inclusive academic communities—all while navigating institutional precarity and resource scarcity. Drawing from embedded tutoring programs and partnerships with campus affinity spaces, the authors illustrate how GWC-led initiatives serve as "infrastructures of care" that challenge dominant metrics of productivity and institutional value.

By centering graduate student labor and voice, the article intervenes in writing center and academic labor scholarship to argue for broader recognition of the affective and relational work that sustains graduate education. In a moment marked by budget cuts, shrinking services, and increased demands on student workers, this article asks what it means to sustain meaningful support in the absence of formal recognition or secure funding—and what possibilities emerge when graduate labor is treated not as expendable, but as essential.

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Dr. Christine Sharp is a writing scholar and educator who empowers writers at every stage to develop confidence, express their ideas, and communicate authentically across diverse contexts. Previously, she served as Director of the Writing and Communication Learning Services unit in UC San Diego's Teaching + Learning Commons. With twenty years of experience teaching writing and literature and leading writing programs, she is deeply committed to expanding access and belonging in higher education, especially for first-generation, low-income, and historically excluded students. A Latina and first-generation college graduate, Dr. Sharp brings her expertise in eighteenth-century British literature, the Gothic, and writing studies to her research and publications. She believes that everyone is a writer and champions writing as a transformative tool for connection and community.

G raduate writing support services are often framed as win-win offerings: they help students progress toward degree milestones and develop skills they'll need beyond the academy. In a recent _Inside Higher Education_ piece, a writing center director touted the benefits of services provided by writing centers for graduate students—especially writing retreats—stating that they not only help "graduate students complete degree requirements" but also provide "sites for cultivating transferable skills." Retreats are, according to the author, sites where graduate writers generate

> important documents that achieve their professional goals and demonstrate membership in professional communities—such as journal publications, reports, white papers, grant applications or materials for job searches. Likewise, writing retreats provide space for practicing other transferable skills identified by the Council of Graduate Schools, such as data literacy, analytics and scholarly ethics. (Homar)

The values stated here, of technical and disciplinary communication competencies, align with the academy's hyperfocus on productivity—publications, research, and grants—as primary sites of value. There tends to be more focus on these products and discourse that privileges professional advancement and placement rather than the human experience of completing a degree, the value of communicating within our discourse communities, and the sense of belonging and value therein. In this framing, writing support is celebrated for its alignment with institutional efficiency, not for its role in sustaining the emotional, intellectual, and relational labor that actually makes those outcomes possible.

We do not disagree that the aforementioned skills and "products" are important parts of graduate students' careers; however, we are equally concerned with the informal systems— often unmeasured and undervalued—that sustain a graduate student's lifecycle in the academe. We use "lifecycle" intentionally here, because in our own experiences as administrators, we

have seen how this term has been appropriated within neoliberal university discourse. Rather than signaling a period of organic, ongoing scholarly growth, "lifecycle" has come to demarcate the increasingly discrete limits within which a student may remain enrolled: shortened time-to-degree deadlines, rising labor and research expectations, and shrinking financial support. These pressures create conditions in which the removal of community-based supports, particularly writing support that cultivates transferable skills, may have serious implications for student well-being, persistence, and development.

Our graduate writing services have helped us notice another story unfolding: one that centers not just on productivity, but on community, trust, and care. Consider, for instance, programmatic data that we have collected that acknowledges sense of belonging as vital to graduate student success:

> "Trust is crucial for some things such as job applications and dissertation writing and your consultants make a great job at building trust."

> "The Writing Hub provides instrumental support to graduate students on our campus." "Without the Writing Hub, graduate students would be left with little institutional spaces to build writing community with one another."

> "[My consultant] created a welcoming environment for us to share our progress, no matter how small."

Trust, community, a welcoming environment: these and similar phrases signifying the benefit of engaging with our services regularly appear in our students' responses. Yet institutional measures of success—much like those highlighted above—rarely consider the co-communicative dynamics that lead to academic and personal success for our graduate student population. What are we to make of such omissions and emphases?

We consider this question especially for our GWC team, who works to uplift graduate writers through the unspoken, underidentified aspects of the graduate student experience. If such "soft" skills—which, importantly, provide a backbone to the kinds of "transferrable" skills that are more visible at our institutions—are not valued by the academe or considered an equal part of the graduate experience, what place can (or should) writing services play in this "lifecycle" of graduate students and their careers?

Increasingly, we have been confronted with this question as we navigate a changing landscape involving ongoing reductions in resources for graduate writing support. However, we've also continued to come back to our community as a source of support and strength—not just for our GWCs, but for the graduate students they work with, too. Consultants and students alike continue to cite our space as a haven: a safe learning environment where they feel empowered to take control of their own professional and personal journeys. By reflecting on our experiences—its successes, tensions, and ongoing questions—we aim to shift the conversation around graduate student labor in writing centers. This labor is often informal, affective, and hard to quantify, yet it remains essential. It is through this contingent labor that writing centers can function as critical infrastructures of care, especially for graduate students navigating an increasingly precarious university. We hope this piece contributes to a larger conversation about the future of labor in higher education—and how graduate writing services might offer a small but powerful model of resistance, connection, and possibility.

Throughout this article, "we" refers to the collaborative team of the Graduate Writing Consultant Coordinator, the Associate Director, and the Director of the Writing Center, who oversee graduate writing support programming. When the first-person singular "I" appears, it refers to Sarah in her role as GWC Coordinator and graduate writing tutor, drawing directly on her situated experience working with graduate students, developing and leading tutor development, and managing program initiatives.

Contingent Labor and Graduate Student Employment

To understand what graduate student contingency labor is, we first consider the kinds of work (both visible and invisible, paid and unpaid) that graduate students perform throughout their programs. These students face a complex labor landscape shaped by variable funding structures across disciplines, degree levels, and institutional contexts. Some students receive stable multi-year funding packages, while others rely on competitive internal or external employment opportunities to support themselves. These uneven structures create conditions under which many graduate students must pursue additional work—sometimes within their departments, sometimes elsewhere on campus—to sustain their studies and cover basic living costs.

These dynamics reflect what Bousquet identifies in *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* as the broader corporatization of the American university, in which graduate labor becomes increasingly essential yet structurally obscured. As he argues, the contemporary university depends on layered forms of contingent labor while simultaneously rendering much of that labor invisible. This framing is especially instructive for understanding graduate writing center work, which often falls outside traditional academic employment structures and is therefore easily overlooked in institutional accounts of graduate labor. Martin's earlier analysis in *Chalk Lines: The Politics of Work in the Managed University* provides an important historical precursor, documenting how graduate workers—particularly within our home system, the University of California—have long contested these conditions. He describes graduate-employee organizers as "meeting the State head on" in challenging the university's authority to unilaterally define the terms of their employment (Martin 4–5). Situating GWCs within this lineage helps illuminate how their present-day labor conditions are shaped by decades of struggle over recognition, employment status, and the value of academic labor itself.

Our primary focus in this article is on doctoral students who take on contingent labor to fill gaps or seek alternatives to departmental funding.[1] Writing centers often become part of this landscape, especially when, as in our case, the center is housed outside academic departments and functions as an external employment opportunity. In some cases, where the writing center is part of an academic department, writing center employment may be classified differently (e.g., as a teaching assistantship). On a large scale, graduate student contingency labor can result from the funding available from students' field-specific programs and institutions, and, on a more local level, from competition for non-departmental contingent employment (on- or

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[1] We focus on doctoral students as we hire them primarily as writing tutors.

off-campus), fellowships, and grants. Our writing center is not part of an academic department, but rather part of a larger Teaching and Learning Commons and is therefore able to provide external employment that can either be supplemental to or integrated with a student's primary academic funding.

Graduate students can experience contingency labor based on their academic discipline and the opportunities those disciplines have for institutional and external funding. [2] The socioeconomic context of an institution's location, as well as the diverse backgrounds/needs of students (e.g. caregivers and parents, single, out-of-state, low income, etc.), also play a factor as we consider what basic living costs may require students to seek out these kinds of jobs. On our campus, for instance, rising living costs have led to growing participation in basic needs programs. Campus data shows a marked increase in food insecurity among graduate students from 2021 to 2023, prompting expansions to our Food Pantry and the establishment of a Basic Needs Hub.[3] This all factors into the demand from students for employment, albeit contingent or non-departmental, that can help supplement living costs.

While some graduate students have secure funding that allows them to focus exclusively on their research, many must balance multiple roles—as teaching or research assistants, readers, housing community assistants, and more—in order to make ends meet. Graduate students are often put in a position to compete within their own department or campus for these limited positions, and these roles often extend beyond the boundaries of compensated time. The labor of mentoring undergraduates, managing lab groups, answering emails, and sustaining emotional support systems for peers can become a significant, unpaid demand. This hidden or informal labor plays a key role in the academic ecosystem yet is rarely recognized when gauging productivity or success in these roles.

The effects of graduate student contingency labor, then, expand beyond monetary needs and labor market competition and reveal a tension between their primary work (increased scholarly output and progress toward degree completion) and the need to secure financial stability. In contrast to undergraduate enrollment—which is typically seen as a financial generator for institutions—doctoral student enrollment is often framed as an expense or cost because they must generate the funds to pay students for their research, teaching, and other tasks related to their doctoral program. Doctoral students' research, scholarship, teaching and other program-related tasks function through a logic of production and labor at the onset. Hugo Horta, Mattia Cattaneo, and Michele Meoli's studies on graduate funding and Ph.D. doctoral degree completion indicate the correlation between graduate student research production and the completion of their doctoral degree; they consider how high number of publications and a shorter time to completion make graduate students competitive in the academic job labor market (Horta et al.).

Institutions and academic departments stress degree-completion timelines, which creates a demand for graduate student labor for production of research, scholarship, grants, and more.

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[2] See appendix Table 1 for data on dollar funding per discipline at our campus 2023-2024; notable differences across disciplines can be noted.

[3] See appendix Table 2 for data graphs and data information.

This facet of the experience ultimately competes with the additional work that many doctoral students must take on to fill in their financial gaps. From this vantage point, our center exists both within and against institutional logic. As an employment site, it reflects the contingent labor landscape that many graduate students must navigate. But as a non-academic department and mentoring space, it also provides a countermodel: one that centers care, mutual support, and the development of shared scholarly practices. The writing center becomes a space where labor—though still precarious—can feel less extractive and more relational, offering graduate students a rare site of connection amid increasingly isolating and competitive conditions.

Graduate Writing Tutoring Labor in the Neoliberal University

A growing number of writing studies scholars are exploring the impact of neoliberalism in public universities, examining how writing centers are entangled in the structures, ideologies, and practices shaped by neoliberal logics. These studies consider neoliberalism as both an economic structure and political ideology that has increasingly shaped the landscape of higher education. David Harvey defines neoliberalism as "an ideological, economic and political project that posits unrestrained 'individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills' as the primary guarantors of 'human well-being'" (Harvey 2). The term "neoliberalism" is now commonly used to describe the global and local dynamics transforming educational institutions (Tomlinson and Lipsitz 4–5).

Scholarship in composition studies has similarly traced how neoliberal political economy reshapes the day-to-day conditions of writing programs. Scott and Welch note that these austerity logics influence "not only writing assessments, curricula, and funding but teacher's agency and philosophies of program administration" (12). Their framing makes visible how programs like ours operate within an institutional environment that increasingly treats pedagogical and administrative labor as sites of efficiency, accountability, and cost containment rather than as relational and intellectual work.

Following Giaimo and Lawson's "Writing Center Labor in the Neoliberal University," we build on their insights by examining how neoliberal structures impact graduate student tutors through a process of collaborative autoethnography (Vander and Aspenlieder). As Vander and Aspenlieder note, collaborative autoethnography enables researchers to analyze shared experiences in ways that reveal layered, intersecting perspectives not accessible through individual reflection alone. This method also allows us to foreground experience as a vital site of inquiry, resisting positivist assumptions that often dominate scholarship on teaching and learning (287). Its emphasis on situated, relational knowledge is particularly suited to examining graduate programming in writing centers, where our roles overlap but are not identical. In particular, we are interested in how neoliberalism creates an ideology and praxis of "students as consumers and faculty as service providers" that "has dominated global practices in colleges and universities for some time" and extends into the graduate student experience (Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg 155). Graduate students' precarity reflects neoliberal patterns in which research and scholarship are valued as commodified outputs rather than as transformative practices that support the development of emerging scholars.

As Scott and Welch argue, neoliberalism has ushered in dual forms of privatization in higher education: corporate privatization, which moves commodifiable aspects of university

work to the market, and domestic re-privatization, which shifts essential but non-profitable forms of labor into the realm of unwaged or volunteer work. This social reproductive labor lens helps illuminate the position of GWCs, whose relational, emotional, and pedagogical labor is vital to graduate student success yet remains structurally undervalued and largely invisible (15).

Wright demonstrates how neoliberal university branding actively erases the labor of graduate student workers. In her analysis of the University of Houston's Tier One campaign, she shows how graduate labor becomes disposable in service of institutional prestige ("The Rhetoric of Excellence"). Wright also argues that the dominant narrative of the graduate student as an "apprentice" learning a trade rhetorically obscures the very labor that institutions depend on for their daily functioning (276). This framing offers a critical lens for understanding the position of GWCs, whose work is often conceptualized as developmental rather than essential, reinforcing their invisibility within administrative narratives.

In this article, we use *care* to refer to a set of relational and labor-intensive practices that foreground people's well-being, intellectual growth, and dignity within contexts that often deprioritize these values. Our understanding draws from care ethics traditions that define care as a practice of attending to and supporting others within unequal or precarious structures (Tronto "Moral Boundaries" 1993; de la Bellacasa) as well as scholarship in writing center studies that conceptualizes writing support as an affective, feminist, and community-oriented endeavor (Denny; Salem). We build on this foundation through what we term an *infrastructure of care*: an informal, affective, and relational system of support that operates counter to the isolating and efficiency-driven logics of neoliberalism. Prior work in the field—such as the 2020 *WLN* special issue—positions tutors' emotional labor, boundary-setting, and well-being as central to writing center practice. While we elaborate on this framework more fully in a forthcoming project, we offer this working definition to clarify the commitments guiding our case studies.

Our writing center is part of a teaching and learning center within Academic Affairs at a large R1 public institution. As non-ladder-rank career staff members working in a neoliberal university setting, we too occupy vulnerable positions at our institution.[4] Writing centers often serve as employment sites for graduate students, yet these roles come with institutional limitations. We observe how rhizomatic, contradictory neoliberal ideologies ask us to "train both students and faculty to align themselves with market subjectivities," to be both student-centered and aligned with market-based measures of success (Tomlinson and Lipsitz 4; Bazaldua et al.). Our work strives towards social justice, yet we contend with "the contradictory praxis of higher education institutions promoting (individual) success while being dependent on public support vis-a-vis local and federal funding" (Monty 39).

Writing centers differ widely in structure and resource allocation, which subsequently impacts availability of services. Our inclusion within a learning commons structure enables "a

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[4] See Fels, Dawn "The Risks of Contingent Writing Center Directorships" in Kahn, Seth, William B. Lalicker, & Amy Lynch-Biniek (Eds.). (2017). *Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity: Labor and Action in English Composition*.

sense of interconnectedness, provides a space for synergistic relationships, increases the possibility for deep and authentic collaboration, and creates opportunities for all learning commons professional and student staff members to think more expansively about the kinds of writing and learning students are engaged in both inside and outside the classroom" (Blackmon et al. 28). Even so, we remain subject to fluctuations in funding and shifting institutional values, much like our writing center colleagues. Despite these challenges, we have worked to preserve the writing center as a kind of "third space" for resistance—an alternative site that challenges neoliberal constraints.

As future sections will show, our graduate writing program in particular provides the energy driving these pockets of resistance. GWCs often find this space to be one of community and support, in contrast to other institutional settings that feel siloed and isolating. Although the peer-to-peer work they do is emotional and demanding, they report a stronger sense of belonging within our writing center than in many other areas of campus.[5] We posit those spaces and experiences are symptoms of navigating a broader neoliberal ecosystem that governs academic labor.

To the extent that resistance is possible, our center actively identifies and critiques the neoliberal practices that shape our work. As we puzzle through what resistance and resilience look like, we know that we contend with systemic and structural processes that require various levels of intervention— sometimes not within our reach. As Giaimo and Lawson have recently noted,

> While many writing center workers have tried to resist neoliberal impulses, there is a trend within writing center scholarship that ironically embraces the logic of neoliberalism—such as through extolling assessment and data—even as it argues that such practices can serve as a buffer against some of the neoliberal practices detailed above… part of the managed university includes using data (and other empirical markers of success like revenue) to justify budgets or to seek external privatized partnerships as a way to maintain funding. ("Writing Center Labor," 10)

We aim to practice and theorize a kind of writing center labor that exists in this "third space": one that critiques, navigates, and creatively responds to structural challenges. To inform our work, we draw upon social justice scholarship like Laura Greenfield's, which frames higher education reform work as confronting institutional oppression of minority, BIPOC populations. Our approach insists on intersectional, systemic resistance that acknowledges graduate student labor as both shaped by and pushing back against neoliberal structures. Writing center studies not only critiques neoliberalism but also demands actionable strategies for justice and change. Through our collaborative autoethnography, we hope to share lessons learned, reflect on interventions we've attempted or found out of reach, and contribute to ongoing efforts to reimagine writing center work in more equitable and humanizing ways (Monty).

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[5] Mannon explains tutor labor as starting "from emotional labor, the application of that emotional intelligence" in one-on-one appointments with their peers; the circumstances and context are higher stakes as graduate students express their fears with failing their academic program, not being productive enough, and academic relationships.

Shifting Landscapes for our Graduate Writing Services

The GWC role at our institution has evolved significantly since the establishment of the Teaching and Learning Commons around 2017. At that time, the Writing Hub—the title by which our writing center is commonly known at our campus—had a thriving graduate writing program. By 2021, we employed 15 GWCs from across disciplines, supporting graduate students through one-on-one appointments, campus workshops, a virtual writing room, writing retreats, and two embedded graduate tutoring programs in Social Sciences departments (Sociology and Anthropology). The embedded initiative began in 2017 with our Sociology department, catalyzed by a GWC whose academic home was in that department.

However, beginning in 2022, when graduate student employees and their unions began to demand cost-of-living increases and equitable wages, our institution's administration implemented a series of significant, increasingly drastic resourcing cuts. These changes were justified by the administration as necessary offsets to rising labor costs—an application of neoliberal logics that value market efficiency over pedagogical need. As a result, our graduate writing services were significantly scaled back to align services with historical usage data and increasing fiscal constraints. In 2025, we currently employ only seven GWCs, and the scope of services has narrowed to one-on-one consultations, limited writing retreats, our two embedded programs, and a newly launched Dissertation Writing Circle initiative (which is facilitated by professional staff as opposed to GWCs). Workshops and the virtual writing room have been discontinued, and on the horizon is the sunsetting of embedded tutor programs. The future of GWC employment at our center remains uncertain.

In the following case studies, we highlight the tradeoffs involved in these shifts, limitations, and the lived realities of our GWCs and staff navigating this climate. As part of our ongoing resistance to these pervasive forces, we present some of our creative solutions that have assisted us in navigating this changing landscape.

Background: Behind the Numbers

The most recent reductions, occurring between Winter 2024 and Spring 2025, required the most significant and complex restructuring of our graduate services to date. In response, our team initiated a comprehensive audit of our program, assessing budget documents, utilization data, and student experience surveys. We also incorporated GWC perspectives to help us create an impact narrative report of our graduate services, which we then forwarded to the Academic Affairs office.

When reporting to our internal administrative unit—which then transmitted our impact narrative to our Academic Affairs office, we found ourselves needing to advocate for evaluation criteria that moved beyond raw appointment numbers. Given declining graduate enrollment and shifting patterns of use, total visits alone could not reflect the ongoing need for—and outcomes of—graduate writing support.[6] To more accurately represent the scope and

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[6] We had to advocate for a similar approach in measuring the impact of our undergraduate services as well. Whereas other learning services relied solely upon visit numbers to justify their impact, the nature of 1:1 peer

significance of our work, we supplemented quantitative data with qualitative narrative: testimonials, tutor reflections, and context-specific analysis. Although this qualitative evidence was not requested, we believed it necessary to articulate our program's true impact—not only on the graduate students we serve but on GWCs themselves.

We were acutely aware that our own positionality as contingent employees shaped the limits of what we could challenge. Our staff's vulnerability mirrored that of the GWCs we supervise, whose positions have always been marked by precarity. The material and emotional consequences of service reduction weighed heavily. We worried not only about the sustainability of our programs but also about the trust we had cultivated with our GWCs, the collaborative ethos of our center, and the foundational commitments to equity, growth, and care that shape our pedagogical practice and enable us to see and serve the humanity of graduate students.

So, while the quantitative and data-driven analysis catered to an administrative audience, our insistence that qualitative analysis should find a way into our overall narrative emphasized our commitment to confronting neoliberal logics with meaning and humanity. While higher administration may desire more quantitative measures of graduate student outcomes, meaningful tracking of the long-term impact of writing center engagement presents significant challenges for us. Currently, we do not have access to institutional data tied to student identifiers (such as student ID numbers), which limits our ability to correlate graduate student use of our services with outcomes such as publications, academic placements, or time to degree. Quantitative reporting beyond attendance or utilization metrics would require voluntary (and often varied) participation from students themselves, adding layers of complexity and potential self-selection bias.

Consequently, while quantitative data could complement our qualitative insights, a rigorous and administratively satisfying dataset would likely need to combine voluntary longitudinal tracking with institutional data access—a level of infrastructure that is presently beyond our capacity. In the absence of such mechanisms, we believe that our collaborative autoethnographic approach and qualitative observations provide the richest, contextually grounded understanding of graduate student development, peer mentorship, and the relational labor that sustains our services.

It is with an abiding belief in the power of narrative to create forces of resistance that we focus most of our attention upon the stories and initiatives of our GWCs themselves. By doing so, we position ourselves alongside other scholars in writing center studies who call for resistance strategies grounded not only in critique but in humanizing, justice-oriented action.

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tutoring—compared to group tutoring and supplemental instruction—as well as the vastly different learning needs associated with writing and communication skills necessitate a different approach to measuring impact. It is worth noting that, in all of these conversations, qualitative data was neither requested nor reviewed. The neoliberal logics of our local contexts demanded only quantitative data—in the form of basic participation—as a means of making widespread decisions regarding the delivery of services.

Case Study 1: The Care Work Behind the Consultation

In this case study, we draw on our own experiences as graduate writing program administrators to examine the opportunities and limitations of Graduate Writing Consultant (GWC) work through individual writing consultations and writing retreats. By situating ourselves within this analysis, we acknowledge that our understanding of GWC labor emerges not from detached observation but from our daily participation in and responsibility for this work. We aim to: (1) contextualize the mentoring and consulting work of GWCs using the training materials and professional development activities we design and revise; (2) examine the contingency of their labor as graduate students and peer workers whose employment remains precarious; (3) illustrate how GWCs navigate institutional structures while building meaningful, reciprocal relationships with peers; and (4) complicate the notion that writing center work "protects" graduate student employees from the most extractive forms of institutional labor. We suggest instead that this role simultaneously fosters a sense of care and community while asking for heightened emotional and academic labor. Our position as coordinators and co-learners alongside GWCs allows us to see how their contingent work and community building constitute an infrastructure of care—an informal, affective, and relational system of support that operates counter to the isolating and efficiency-driven logics of neoliberalism.

We begin training for GWCs with a foundational workshop titled "Impostor Syndrome and the Role of GWCs," which one of our returning consultants co-developed and leads each hiring season. As the program coordinator, I participate in this session alongside new tutors and have witnessed how Villarreal's autoethnographic piece, "Impostor Syndrome in the Writing Center," invites incoming GWCs to reflect on their own experiences of self-doubt and anticipate how such feelings may emerge in their work with students. The session includes affirmation writing, group discussion, and the exploration of hypothetical situations in which tutors may feel underprepared or overwhelmed—for instance, when working with students from unfamiliar disciplines or writing genres. Over time, we have come to recognize this workshop as an early moment when GWCs begin naming the social reproductive labor that often proves critical, yet at times hidden, to their roles. Framing this labor as both intellectual and affective also establishes expectations for transparency, growth, and authentic engagement—values that shape not only their consultations but our broader approach to fostering a care-oriented community.

These conversations also initiate a critical ethos of shared vulnerability and trust among the GWC cohort—something we have observed deepen each year. As consultants share their worries, hopes, and questions, we see the relational fabric necessary for peer mentorship and collaborative problem-solving take shape. Although this community-building is neither quantified nor formally acknowledged in university metrics, it consistently emerges in our team meetings as essential to the effectiveness of graduate writing support. From our vantage point, these affective and relational investments form a foundational component of our program's infrastructure of care—one that subtly but powerfully resists neoliberal emphases on productivity and quantifiable outputs.

In subsequent training modules that I have designed and facilitated, I worked with GWCs to deepen their understanding of the systemic contradictions inherent in graduate education. Drawing on Starke-Meyerring's "The Paradox of Writing in Doctoral Education," we discuss

the tension between institutional demands for autonomous scholarly productivity and the often invisible labor of disciplinary acculturation. We introduce Rosenberg's work on nonviolent communication as a tool for responding empathetically to students' emotional and rhetorical needs, and we highlight scholarship by GWCs at UC Davis as examples of peer researchers actively shaping knowledge within writing centers (Wittstock et al.). These texts have helped us articulate, with consultants, how their work intersects with broader questions of labor, identity, and relational practice.

These readings and discussions reinforce ideas central to our program philosophy, which acknowledges that the long process of disciplinary becoming can entail years of considerable, if hidden, struggle (Starke-Meyerring). In our work with GWCs, we have seen how meaningfully supporting graduate writers requires

> supporting them in that long, often messy, and sometimes isolating process. Graduate student writing support thus sits at the intersection of academic support (student success), professional development, and social/emotional well-being (Gray). As a result, graduate writing support programs must also incorporate empathetic, affective support for students who may be struggling with overwhelm, confusion, loneliness/isolation, and, potentially, exclusion. ("Graduate Student Services")

Recognizing this complexity has shaped how I, as a coordinator, structure training and how we as a team understand the emotional terrain GWCs must navigate. That they do so while navigating similar pressures and vulnerabilities as graduate students themselves underscores the relational, co-experiential dimension of their work—another facet of the care-based infrastructure they help construct.

These ideas play out in real time during our weekly GWC staff meetings, which function as spaces for horizontal mentoring, community building, ongoing co-learning, and graduate service co-design. In these meetings, consultants facilitate learning for their peers, raise questions about service delivery, and reflect collectively on challenges and successes. These sessions, and the trust that makes them open spaces, allow me to gather qualitative insights that, in turn, inform our approach to services.

One moment that illustrates the value of this infrastructure occurred during Fall 2024, when several GWCs mentioned repeated sessions with distressed students during a weekly meeting. As we listened, it became clear that these interactions were taking an emotional toll, leading to signs of burnout across the cohort. In response, we reshaped the next several meetings to unpack the issue together. GWCs shared experiences, identified patterns, and co-developed strategies for managing emotional labor. We read and discussed scholarship related to emotional labor, including Giaimo's "Toward an Intersectional Praxis of Emotional Labor in The Writing Center."[7] As one new GWC reflected, "It was surprising how much of the work we actually do entails this emotional side—I guess I was not expecting it." These conversations

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[7] See also Driscoll, Dana Lynn, and Jennifer Wells. "Centering the Emotional Labor of Tutors." *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2020. https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/2197dcd3-bc4e-47d4-884c-3dbf9ebab4eb/content.

also prompted us to consider how our program might better scaffold emotional labor and clarify boundaries for consultants.

As this exchange demonstrated, GWC work often demands a broad range and intensity of labor that can blur the line between peer and professional, student and service provider. In these moments, we have found ourselves balancing empathy for consultants' experiences with the responsibility of setting humane expectations. We emphasized that tutors should not carry the burden of this work alone, since larger institutional factors shape the needs they encounter. As administrators, we are committed to prioritizing the well-being of GWCs; after all, meaningful academic and emotional support for graduate writers is impossible when the consultants providing it are stretched thin or unsupported themselves.

By creating space for reflection, peer mentoring, and vulnerability, our GWC program cultivates a collective care that stands in contrast to the individualistic and efficiency-driven logics dominating higher education. Even as their labor remains contingent, GWCs help build this infrastructure of care in ways that sustain consultants, student writers, and staff alike. Our roles within this process—listening, adjusting, co-learning, and co-designing—position us alongside GWCs in resisting neoliberal norms and nurturing the relationships that make this work possible.

Case Study 2: Embedded Support as Labor and Resistance

Another dimension of GWC work involves leading initiatives and representing our program in cross-campus partnerships. In our roles as the GWC coordinator, Associate Director, and Director of the Writing Hub, we have often found that this work requires moving across institutional boundaries in ways that mirror the mobility and precarity of graduate student labor itself. These partnerships distribute the large load of supporting our graduate scholar population, as we know that any one university department or unit (including writing centers) would find it impossible to 'shoulder the weight' of graduate writing support alone (Simpson 95). In the context of our teaching and learning center, such partnerships are essential to sustaining our work and maintaining close ties with the communities we serve. Our program is unique in that we partner not only with academic departments but also with campus affinity centers to coordinate embedded tutor workloads and identify high-impact sites for writing support. While the Writing Hub bears the full training load, the majority of assessment responsibilities, and a significant share of resource demands, we view this labor as a meaningful—if often institutionally undervalued—investment. As administrators, we have repeatedly witnessed how these partnerships surface tensions between institutional expectations and the relational forms of care that GWCs enact. We pursue these collaborations as part of our broader effort to challenge dominant rhetorics of value at our institution, which often reduce success to numerical participation rather than relational or developmental impact.

Much of the literature on graduate writing studies has established and advocated for the importance of communities of practice (CoPs) in aiding transitions from graduate students to scholars and professionals in their fields (Bell and Hewerdine; Phillps; Gradin et al.; Coffman et al.). They articulate the need for low-stakes, flexible, community-driven group spaces where graduate students can co-develop their scholarly identities and ethos (Phillips). Drawing on this scholarship, our writing program has supported formalized CoPs facilitated by GWCs and

embedded within broader institutional structures. In doing so, we have also reflected on our own roles within these structures, particularly as we worked alongside GWCs to shape these initiatives. These include consultant-led partnerships with APIMEDA Programs and Services, the Black Resource Center (BRC), and the Sociology and Anthropology departments. Together, these efforts have contributed an infrastructure of care—one shaped by values of community, autonomy, validation, and equity, and one designed to support students' growth as both writers and scholars.

Graduate writing groups made possible through these partnerships, both embedded and affinity-based, are not simply helpful, but rather part of a larger, necessary professionalization process for graduate students (Gradin et al.). The Writing Hub at UC San Diego builds on these studies by exploring possibilities for formalized CoPs in graduate writing support that are: (1) facilitated by graduate writing consultants and (2) funded and logistically managed by administration. From our vantage point within this administrative space, these collaborations have consistently revealed how care-oriented writing support emerges through social reproductive labor, reciprocity, and the lived experiences of GWCs and student participants.

Embedded Tutoring

There is robust, and growing, interest in our field on embedded tutoring in institutions of higher education—however, much of the literature focuses upon undergraduate "course-embedded" tutoring models rather than graduate-level embedded tutoring. What scholarship we do have demonstrates that such programs are modeled on undergraduate course-embedded programs (Hallman). These programs take as their foundational ideal that embedded tutor programs "link students to specific writing-intensive courses, encourage partnerships between a Writing Fellow and a course professor, and promote collaboration between peers" (Hughes and Hall).

These outcomes resonate with our own embedded tutor pilot programs in the Sociology and Anthropology departments at UC San Diego. In these roles, GWCs are able to "unite… in powerful ways ideas of collaborative learning, peer education, [Writing Across the Curriculum], and faculty development" (Hughes and Hall). In our local context, these interventions are made possible through graduate student labor and investment of institutional resources. Such programs have a strong potential to increase Ph.D. completion pathways, enhance student preparation for the professoriate, and cultivate academic climates grounded in inclusion and equity.

Our first embedded tutor program began in Sociology during AY 2017–18. These partnerships situate writing support directly within students' home departments, enabling embedded GWCs to tailor services to disciplinary expectations. In 2021, after seeing the success of the Sociology model, Anthropology students petitioned their department for a similar collaboration. In both departments, we co-hired embedded GWCs who split their time (which has historically been 50% full-time equivalency, or 20 hours per week) equally between department-specific support and general Writing Hub programming. In their departments, they facilitated first-year writing workshops and consultations, guided students through disciplinary discourse practices, and collaborated closely with faculty to offer relevant programs that tailor writing services to disciplinary conventions in their fields.

Data from these pilot programs highlights the effectiveness—and vulnerability—of embedded GWC labor. Students consistently reported that working with a peer who understood the stakes of graduate writing contributed to both their academic confidence and sense of belonging. One participant noted how having the embedded tutor in their department helped "demystify some important (though often assumed) skills necessary to succeed in their field (Wright, "Embedded Programs"). Faculty, too, appreciated the value: one faculty member shared that embedded GWCs in their department "have been extremely valuable to our students and also reduced a lot of added work for the VCGS and staff." Ultimately, information we've gathered from our pilot embedded tutor programs with Anthropology and Sociology departments suggest that interventions for graduate students, by graduate students can promote a sense of belonging and community, inform graduate students about characteristics of writing and genre that are germane to their discipline, and ultimately help graduate students find and feel sustained success in their programs.

Despite this, these programs remain among the first to be cut under times of austerity. Recently, we were informed by a department chair that our longest-running partnership will be ending next academic year due to budget constraints:

> "I'm writing to let you know—regretfully—that Sociology will be unable to continue supporting the Writing Consultant position next year. Unfortunately, due to the deep budget cuts we are facing…we've had to make this difficult decision. It has been a real pleasure partnering with the Writing Hub, and I'm grateful for the support the Hub offered and the impact this embedded role has had over the years."

This termination reflects a broader institutional logic that struggles to quantify the worth of embedded tutoring, especially when its benefits—like professional socialization, community-building, and emotional support—resist easy metrics. As our former embedded GWC in that department later reflected,

> "At UCSD, many students (including myself) learn these aspects of the profession the hard way, through the types of difficult experiences that make you question whether you belong in the field. I think the Writing Consultant has an important role to play in being a gentler agent of professional socialization and supporting students when these difficult experiences happen."

This graduate, department-embedded writing tutoring model, then, represents more than a partnership; it is an infrastructure—emotional, academic, and social—that supports graduate student development. Its precarity under institutional, statewide, and nationwide resource strains reveals that this care labor remains undervalued, even when its impacts are deeply felt. As writing centers and institutions grapple with sustaining equitable support for graduate students, these programs offer a potential model—but only if their contributions are recognized and resourced accordingly. The presence and protection of these "gentler agents" of professional socialization, to borrow our tutor's language, is always a worthwhile investment.

Affinity Group Partnerships

In both our embedded tutoring partnerships and our standing collaborations with campus affinity spaces—namely, the Black Resource Center (BRC) and APIMEDA Programs and Services—these alternative models of service delivery emerged from GWC-led initiatives.

Rather than being launched through formal top-down planning, these partnerships took shape organically as GWCs recognized unmet needs within their own academic and cultural communities and began developing interventions to address them. For example, GWCs initiated collaborations with the BRC and APIMEDA Programs to offer writing groups, workshops, and other events designed specifically for students navigating graduate education at the intersection of identity. These efforts grew directly from consultants' own experiences and relationships within their communities, as well as their attunement to support structures that graduate students of color often lack.

These affinity-based collaborations align closely with recent scholarship emphasizing that graduate students often need support beyond one-on-one advising, especially given that many academic departments do not provide formal writing instruction. As a result, many students seek out resources from campus writing centers, where they can form their own systems of support and professional development. These writing spaces function as "third spaces" that support both writing and professional development (Brooks-Gillies et al.). Brooks-Gillies et al. also emphasize how "encouraging graduate students to discard the image of the struggling lone scholar and to take up practices that provide support and commiseration regarding the emotional struggles of graduate work… [is] just as important as direct writing instruction" (8). In this way, the goals and outcomes of these partnerships are not only supported by research but also central to students' academic belonging and professional development.

These smaller-scale, GWC-led partnerships do not require significant additional time or funding to sustain, yet their impact on our center's reach and reputation is notable. As Simpson reminds us, "systems theorists identify leverage points—places where small, strategic changes can potentially have ripple effects throughout the system" (104). These points of intervention are not "magical cures," but rather "places where writing programs and university departments with few resources and personnel can focus their efforts to strengthen their educational systems" (104). The initiatives led by our GWCs reflect such leverage points: efforts that build trust with student populations historically underserved by institutional structures, and that invite students into communities of practice that recognize their identities, needs, and contributions.

Still, writing centers remain structurally precarious because they are vulnerable to institutional logics that prioritize numbers and immediate "impact." The real measure of success, we argue, should be based on qualitative feedback and relationship-building, rather than by institutional expectations of quantitative data. After conversations with GWCs leading our BRC initiative, I've found myself wondering: "When the number of bodies in the room is the main metric by which we assess success, what does that look like when less than 5% of the student body at our institution is Black?" Despite consistently positive feedback from students, center staff, and consultants alike, these programs are often among the first to be cut in times of austerity.

The GWC who coordinated our BRC partnership, where all programming was and remains open to all UCSD graduate students, noted that the collaboration cultivated a cross-disciplinary community, lowered barriers to entry for students uncertain about working with the Writing Hub, and strengthened our center's presence across campus. At the same time, she observed that attendance can be low because of UCSD's already-small Black graduate student

population, and the sustainability of these partnerships is especially vulnerable to graduate consultant turnover. These observations point not only to the fragility of these programs under shifting resource conditions, but to the limitations of data-driven assessment models in capturing the relational, affective, and equity-based value of this work.

As our center faces further resource tightening, we hope to retain these partnerships, even if in more modest forms. One way we have adapted is by embedding partnership programming within our general services—for instance, hosting open workshops in campus partner spaces where students may already feel a sense of belonging and trust. Still, the future of this work remains uncertain. Like so many in higher education, we find ourselves waiting for information about next year's funding, knowing that what we can sustain will depend less on what our programs make possible for students and more on what we can quantify.

Takeaways and Future Considerations

Realistically, we do not expect the structural conditions governing graduate labor to improve in the short term. The more graduate students and contingent staff "do more with less," the more the institution perceives that these services can be sustained under ever-tighter constraints—potentially reducing institutional willingness to invest in, or even maintain, additional resources. At the same time, there is both power in, and a rich history of, collective action: graduate student organizers have long fought for improved labor conditions both nationally and on our own campus. How higher administration chooses to implement said change is often uneven and not universally popular, yet the university ultimately relies on this labor to keep essential functions running.

Given these realities, we advocate for practices that prioritize well-being and create spaces where people can flourish. While such strategies are not a cure-all, they offer a tangible way to resist the narratives that have long defined these spaces, providing immediate relief and fostering the relationships, trust, and care that make meaningful academic work possible. In all of the work we do, we strive to put people first by supporting professional development in deliberate, human-centered ways—what adrienne maree brown calls "moving at the speed of trust." This principle guides how we cultivate relationships with our graduate writing consultants (GWCs) and with the graduate students we serve. It is also what sustains our work in the face of increasing uncertainty and institutional precarity.

As the conditions of labor in the academy grow more unstable, particularly for graduate student workers, we are called to reexamine the values and systems that shape higher education. By centering graduate contingent labor within our writing center and programming, we foreground a population often overlooked in institutional discourse, yet indispensable to the intellectual and emotional fabric of the university.

GWCs occupy a dual role: as students, they navigate structural vulnerabilities such as uncertain funding and expanding workloads; as writing mentors, they provide affective and intellectual labor central to our program's success—building trust, fostering belonging, and supporting peers. This labor is foundational, yet it remains undervalued by institutional metrics that prioritize speed, quantifiability, and productivity over care and personal/professional growth. Our position outside traditional departments allows innovation, but also exposure, where rapid data collection and standardized assessment reflect the neoliberal logic that

devalues relational and developmental work. In response, we have sought small forms of resistance—such as integrating qualitative reflection into our reporting—to affirm the legitimacy of trust-based, community-building practices.

GWC-led initiatives—like embedded tutoring support and cross-campus collaborations—remain precarious not because they are ineffective, but because their impact resists quantification. Their marginalization—and the consequent marginalization of services, such as cross-campus collaborations, that contribute to their advancement—is exacerbated by institutional funding models that prioritize undergraduate education as a revenue stream, while positioning graduate students as a financial burden. In this logic, graduate students (outside of their contingent labor) are not viewed as institutional assets but as resource drains—a perception that undermines efforts to build robust, equity-minded support infrastructures for them. Graduate writing support services become vulnerable, their value questioned or quietly diminished. We must ask: *Does higher education still value the presence and development of its graduate students?* If the allocation of resources is any indication, the answer is far from reassuring.

One of our GWCs recently asked a question that continues to reverberate: What happens when the full weight of budgetary fear is projected onto this "bulwark" we have created for ourselves, onto the graduate labor that makes it all possible? This question encapsulates the high stakes of this moment. We may be tempted to retreat—into isolation, resignation, or reactive compliance—but we believe instead in recommitting to the principles that animate our work: growth, trust, community, and care.

Ultimately, we offer this article as a call to imagine a different future of labor in the academy—one that values graduate students not only as learners or laborers, but as essential members of a scholarly community where their labor is acknowledged *and* meaningfully supported. A future in which writing support is recognized not as a peripheral service, but as a vital site of professional and personal growth, coalition-building, and transformation for tutors and student visitors alike. And a future where the labor of care—often invisible, often feminized, often contingent—is understood not as supplemental, but as the very infrastructure of higher education.

Appendix

Table 1

UC San Diego Graduate Student Support, 2023-2024

Graduate student financial support

		Campus		Program type		CA residency		Academic year	
○ Per capita dollars ⦿ Total dollars		San Diego ▼		Academic doctoral ▼		All Students ▼		2023-24 ▼	

	Grand Total	Engnr & Comp Sci	Arts	Humanities	Health Sciences	Life Sciences	Physical Sciences	Social Sciences
Full year equiv. enrollment (FYE)	3,701	1,221	122	160	11	781	693	424
FYE with any financial support	3,643	1,192	121	159	11	778	686	419

Fellowship/grant support

	Grand Total	Engnr & Comp Sci	Arts	Humanities	Health Sciences	Life Sciences	Physical Sciences	Social Sciences
UC scholarships	$38,532,376	$11,707,545	$891,547	$2,055,451	$134,774	$9,198,999	$5,101,407	$5,779,866
Federal scholarships	$10,998,052	$1,906,933	$0	$0	$18,096	$6,245,966	$1,978,778	$701,856
Other scholarships	$2,594,320	$1,115,813	$148,700	$165,007	$20,440	$712,869	$176,662	$189,857
Total scholarships	$52,124,748	$14,730,291	$1,040,247	$2,220,458	$173,310	$16,157,834	$7,256,847	$6,671,579

Link: https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/about-us/information-center/graduate-student-financial-support-and-debt-graduation

Table 2

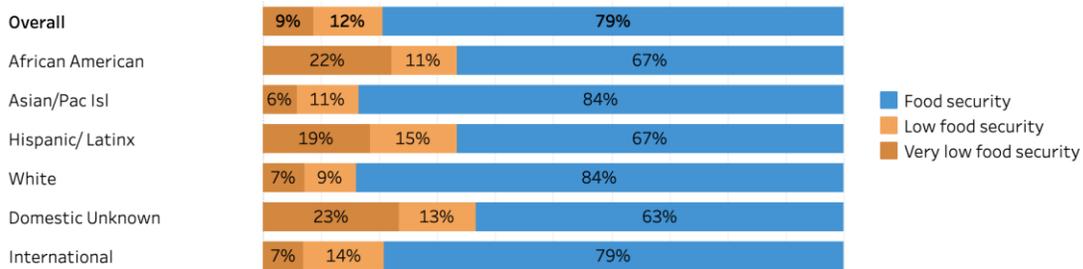**UC San Diego Food Security 2023, 2021**

Background

The University of California (UC) launched the Global Food Initiative (GFI) in 2014 to address how to sustainably and nutritiously feed a world population expected to reach 8 billion people by 2025. From the beginning, this goal has included a focus on food security among UC students. This dashboard provides information on basic needs and illustrates the relationship between food insecurity and/or homelessness to student learning, engagement, satisfaction, and outcomes. Data are from the 2016, 2018, 2020 and 2022 UC Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES), the 2016 Graduate Student Well-Being Survey (GSWBS), and the 2021 and 2023 UC Graduate Student Experience Survey (UCGSES).

Defining food insecurity and homelessness

Refer to the following description to see how UC measures food and housing insecurity: https://www.ucop.edu/institutional-research-academic-planning/measuring-food-and-housing-insecurity.pdf

Campus: San Diego **Survey year:** 2021

Graduate level: (All) **Sexual orientation:** (All) **Gender:** (All) **Discipline:** (All)

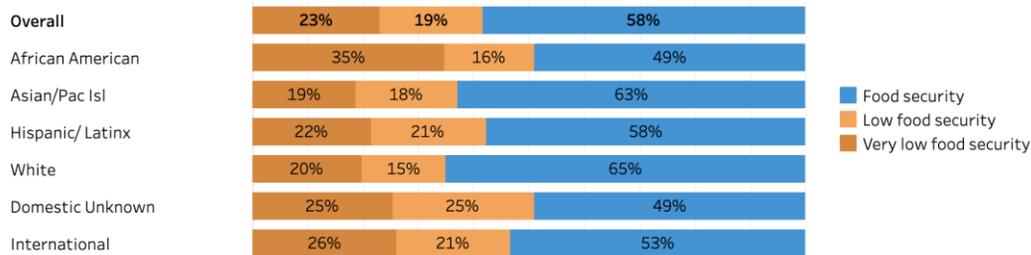|	Very low food security	Low food security	Food security
Overall	9%	12%	79%
African American	22%	11%	67%
Asian/Pac Isl	6%	11%	84%
Hispanic/ Latinx	19%	15%	67%
White	7%	9%	84%
Domestic Unknown	23%	13%	63%
International	7%	14%	79%

* Graduate student respondents are weighted to reflect the population (see background tab). Categories with group size fewer than 10 are hidden.

Graduate student food insecurity

Campus: San Diego **Survey year:** 2023

Graduate level: (All) **Sexual orientation:** (All) **Gender:** (All) **Discipline:** (All)

	Very low food security	Low food security	Food security
Overall	23%	19%	58%
African American	35%	16%	49%
Asian/Pac Isl	19%	18%	63%
Hispanic/ Latinx	22%	21%	58%
White	20%	15%	65%
Domestic Unknown	25%	25%	49%
International	26%	21%	53%

* Graduate student respondents are weighted to reflect the population (see background tab). Categories with group size fewer than 10 are hidden.

Link: https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/about-us/information-center/student-basic-needs

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