

To our fellow department members:

After the town hall about mental health hosted on 02/27/2021, the Columbia Physics Graduate Council members write this letter first to express support for the students in our department, especially those who are experiencing unusual difficulties during this pandemic, as well as to state what our position is on the town hall discussion.

We do recognize that mental health is a difficult and delicate issue, and depression and anxiety can affect anyone regardless of demographics or occupation. However, **recent studies show that graduate students face mental health problems at a much higher rate than the average American**. For example, a [study among economics Ph.D. students](#) showed that they were three times more likely to face depression than the general population, while [another study](#) encompassing a wider range of fields determined that graduate students (mostly in Ph.D. programs) were facing mental health issues at a rate six times higher than other people. As pointed out by Dr. Anne Goldfield at the town hall, these issues have spiked during the pandemic because of a number of different reasons according to data gathered by the Columbia Psychological Services (CPS). Physics also faces its unique mental health challenges, something documented to have gotten worse during the pandemic, as [recently reported on Physics Today](#). Many students don't feel motivated to continue doing their work/feel their work is pointless given so many social, economic and health issues that we are facing.

On that note, we would like to point out that the students and staff members of our department are first and foremost human beings, as rightly pointed out by Prof. Brooijmans in our discussion. While professors are not mental health experts and we encourage students, faculty and staff to seek professional counseling when needed (no issue is too small for such!), we expect empathy and understanding from faculty, as mentioned by Prof. Dodd at the town hall. And as Prof. Pasupathy suggested, sometimes simply saying that you've been in your student's shoes and that you understand how hard it is being in their position should suffice to start an honest conversation or at the very least to make your advisee feel more valued and less of an imposter. We hope that talking about mental health will eventually be destigmatized in our community, but we also remind faculty that **graduate students are at the bottom of the academic ladder and might be struggling more than they are willing to share due to a range of different reasons** (many of which are directly related to our department's environment). Among other things, students and staff might be afraid of repercussions in their careers or of being seen differently by their peers and advisors.

**All of us have implicit biases and we should recognize that. Not willing to share something so personal and being afraid of making yourself vulnerable does not**

**make you “weak”**. Therefore, we strongly support the idea of training for faculty on how to handle situations in which you might be in a position to support someone who is struggling, so they can also reach their full potential. We expect that professors (instructors and advisors) will look out for signs that a student might be falling through the cracks, with the understanding that there might be something personal playing a role in it. Patience and compassion should be exercised. If a student is feeling overwhelmed, they might not be nearly as productive as expected, and we hope that you share our understanding that this should be ok and normalized, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also when life goes back to “normal.”

Supporting a student can be as simple as asking them if they need some time for themselves to rest and saying that their well-being is more important than their work. If a student ends up sharing something more personal and you don't feel equipped to handle it, you can help them find available resources that they might not have the energy or mental space to find. That way, you will not only show **support but also normalize seeking help when necessary, while also directing them to people who are appropriately trained**. So we urge the department to find a mechanism to support students and to offer resources that faculty can use to support their students and advisees, such as the mental health awareness training mentioned previously, among other things that we expect the department to work on in conjunction with the PGC.

Graduate students, especially in their first two years in our program, are expected to take classes, teach, grade exams from classes that they are not teaching themselves, hold office hours, do research, and (up until last year) take qualifying exams, all under low-pay with uncertain future careers. Moreover, most of our current female and minority students do service work as student group board members, committee representatives and preceptors, while most male students do not, adding a burden to underrepresented groups. **While students might be here to further their education, they should have a right to sleep and have a personal life. Working excessive hours should not be normalized.** Working when you're not feeling well at all and maintaining the same research output as before the pandemic is also an unreasonable expectation in our opinion.

Furthermore, **we urge the Columbia Physics Department to release a statement of principles under which it will operate during the pandemic similar to the [one published by the English department](#), including provisions of how to respect personal time students might need to take for their mental well-being**. Lastly, we thank the Climate, Diversity and Inclusion Committee for starting this discussion in our community, and invite all of you to reflect on what was discussed as well as to read the

mental health section and appendix on the [“Report on student body sentiment around qualifying exams.”](#) which was circulated in the department in the Fall of 2020. The report showed that almost half of our survey respondents “explicitly mentioned incredible stress or seeking counseling,” with an even higher rate among women and minorities.

We will continue advocating for the improvement of student well-being in our department and hope faculty members will join us in this effort. In doing so, we hope the good intentions of our faculty will turn into actual change. [Other physics departments have their own mental health resources](#), so there’s no reason for us not to do the same.

Sincerely,  
The Columbia Physics Graduate Council

**If you are struggling or need psychological assistance, here are a few resources:**

- Columbia Psychological Services appointments and after-hours support: 212-854-2878, <https://health.columbia.edu/content/counseling-and-psychological-services>
- Columbia Ombuds Office: <https://ombuds.columbia.edu/>
- Columbia Sexual Violence Response (confidential): <https://health.columbia.edu/content/sexual-violence-response>
- NY Project Hope hotline and resources: <https://nyprojecthope.org/>
- NYC Well hotline and resources: <https://nycwell.cityofnewyork.us/>

**Other resources:**

- While none of us at the PGC are mental health care professionals, we are always willing to listen to a complaint you have about our department and bring it up to the appropriate committee anonymously so we can try to make our environment more welcoming to you. No issue is too big or small.