This informative report was completed by a graduate student who received employment income through a Type II Graduate Research Assistantship. It was commissioned by the Office of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, in collaboration with the Graduate Issues Subcommittee of the GenEq Advisory Group, to inform the University's efforts to support graduate student well-being, and, indeed, many of the recommendations have already been or are being actioned.

Improving Equity and Wellbeing for Graduate Students

A review of graduate students' experiences at the University of Guelph

A report created by Riya Sharma, Graduate Research Assistant, in collaboration with
The Graduate Issues Subcommittee of the GenEq Advisory Group and commissioned by
The Office of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

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ADVANCING THE STATUS OF WOMEN AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH

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Executive Summary

Over the last few years, graduate students at the University of Guelph have shared their experiences in many ways. They have contributed to internal evaluations and research projects and have written open letters calling for university-wide changes to enhance equity and improve their wellbeing. To support action towards these aims, in 2022 the Graduate Issues Subcommittee of the GenEq Advisory Group conducted a critical review of existing data sources focused on the lived experiences of graduate students at the University of Guelph commissioned by Office of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies. Multiple groups and graduate students from equity deserving groups at the University contributed to the data sources included in this review, including student organizations advocating for Black, Indigenous, racialized, and international students; the College of Social and Applied Human Sciences' Graduate Student Advisory Council; Black, Indigenous, and racialized graduate students; and student-parents.

A Word on Language

Throughout this report, we use the term *equity deserving groups*[1] to refer to graduate students that have been marginalized or invisibilized in academic institutions, such as Black, Indigenous, racialized, LGBTQ2+, international, and disabled graduate students, as well as student-parents. These groups are not the only equity deserving groups in the university, and these identities are often intersecting. Students are not passively underrepresented, but universities actively exclude certain groups by maintaining systems of heteropatriarchy, colonialism, racism, and other systems of oppression. The perspectives of some equity deserving groups, including disabled and LGBTQ2S+ graduate students, were not foregrounded in the data sources we identified through our scan of existing data on graduate student experiences at the University of Guelph. This is a notable limitation of our study and represents an important opportunity for future work of the Graduate Issues Subcommittee of the GenEq Advisory Group and the Office of Graduate Studies.

An Overview

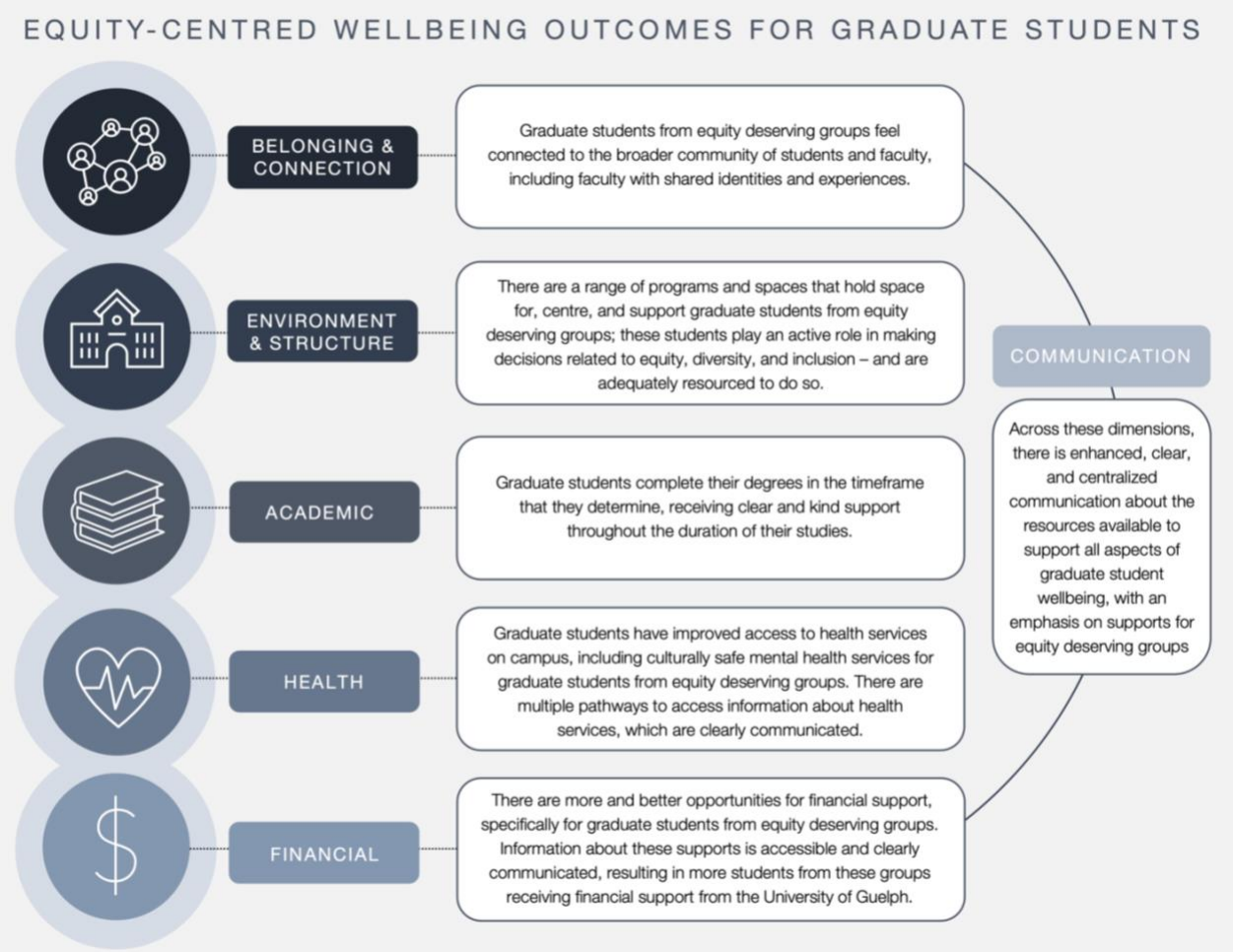
The present study was guided by an Intersectionality-based Policy Analysis Framework (Hankivsky et al. 2014) and a Wellness Framework (Swarbrick & Yudof 2015). Using these frameworks, the data sources included in this review were analysed and students' concerns and recommendations were organized into

[1] In 2019, Dr. Wisdom Tettey called on the academic community to, "start by thinking of, and relating to, those who are marginalized or are constrained by existing structures and practices as 'equity-deserving groups' and not 'equity-seeking groups' – a concept which, while well-intentioned, perpetuates a perception of these groups as interlopers." We recognize that there are still limitations to this term and are open to suggestions for more suitable alternatives.

five thematic categories. Each category represents a different dimension of support required for student wellbeing, including: 1) social belonging and connection, 2) campus environment and program structure, 3) financial, 4) academic, and 5) physical and mental health. This report elaborates on these categories and shares the details of this study, including additional background and methodological information; the study findings, which lay out issues and recommendations provided by students; and future directions, including outcomes to serve as a guidepost for action.

Equity-centered Outcomes for Graduate Student Wellbeing

As the purpose of this report is to inform action to improve equity and enhance wellbeing for graduate students at the University of Guelph, we want to begin by highlighting the equity-centered outcomes identified through this study. Based on this review, we believe that improved equity and wellbeing for graduate students at the University of Guelph would mean that:



Improving Equity and Wellbeing for Graduate Students: A review of graduate students' experiences at the University of Guelph

Background

The Graduate Issues Subcommittee of the GenEq Advisory Group has been working jointly with the Office of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies to develop a plan to engage graduate students to better understand their major areas of concern. During a strategy session, the question emerged of how to incorporate existing data on graduate students' experiences into this work. The consensus was that before students were engaged to provide more data, it was essential to synthesize and analyze the existing data that they had already provided. As a result, this study was conceived – keeping in mind that students are survey fatigued, data collection should not be duplicated, and students need to see exactly how sharing their experiences can result in change.

Goal and Rationale

The goal of this study was to conduct a secondary analysis of existing data detailing graduate students' lived experiences at the University of Guelph. There were three specific objectives of this enquiry:

1. Identify and categorize existing sources of data since 2016 that explore the diverse experiences of graduate students across the University of Guelph's seven Colleges (Appendix A).
2. Analyze the patterns in existing data, exploring graduate student experiences through a lensof equity, difference, and inclusion (critical thematic analysis)
3. Identify and present (equity-informed) recommendations that students have identified in the data sources.

To achieve these objectives, the analysis was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the concerns, challenges, and risks that graduate students from diverse groups atthe University of Guelph experience?
2. What recommended supports have graduate students identified as essential to their wellbeing at the university?

Methodology

This research was guided by two analytical frameworks. The first, Hankivsky et al.'s (2014) Intersectionality-based Policy Analysis Framework, was used to structure the analysis and presentation of results and inform future action **(**Figure 1). The strength of this framework lies in its emphasis on both description and transformation. Based on this framework, this study began by seeking to answer descriptive questions, with the goal of moving towards the more transformative questions outlined in Figure 1.

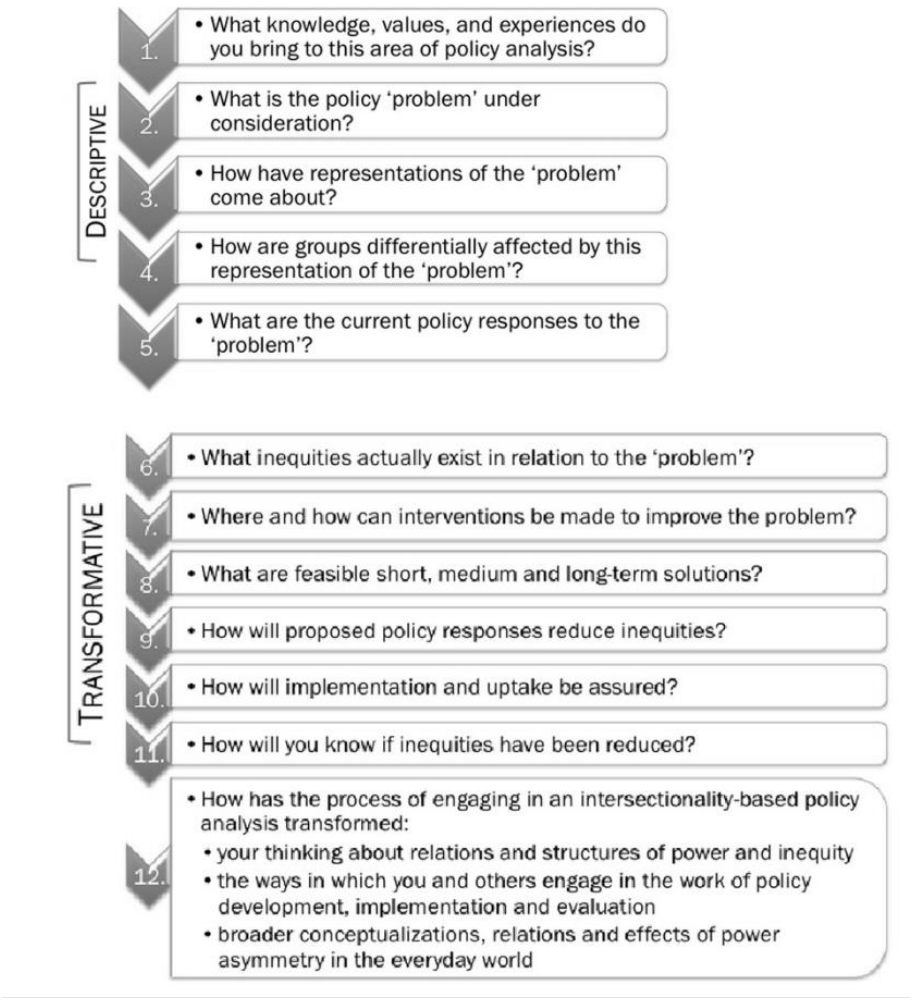


Figure 1. *Hankivsky et al.'s (2014) Descriptive and Transformative Questions of the Intersectionality-based Policy AnalysisFramework*

The second framework, Swarbrick and Yudorf's (2015) Wellness Framework, was used to inform the data analysis (Figure 2). The framework identifies social, financial, occupational, emotional, environmental, physical, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions of wellness. It has been used by others, including University of Guelph researcher Dr. Andria Jones-Bitton (2020), to outline the key elements of student wellbeing.

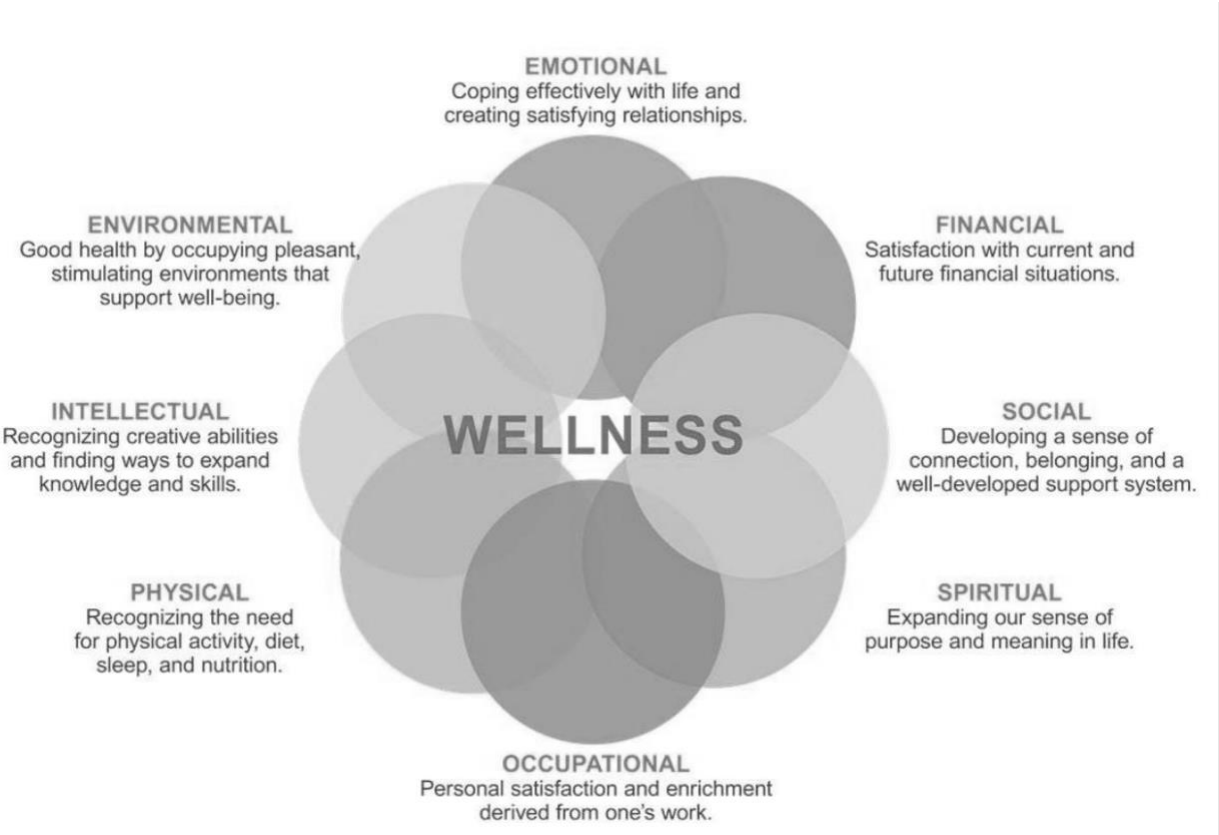


Figure 2. *Swarbrick and Yudorf's (2015) Wellness Framework*

The study began with members of the Graduate Issues Working Group identifying and categorizing existing sources of data from 2016-2022 that explore the diverse experiences of graduate students across the University of Guelph's seven Colleges (Objective 1). In total 17 sources were identified (Appendix A), including 9 qualitative sources (i.e., student letters, reports, interview data) and 8 quantitative sources (i.e., student surveys). Of the 9 qualitative sources, five were included in this review. Others could not be included either because the files were inaccessible or because reports were yet to be completed and raw data required REB amendments (see Table 1). Diverse graduate students and groups from the University of Guelph contributed to the data sources that were analysed. These include Black, Indigenous, and racialized students, student organizations

advocating for the Black, Indigenous, racialized, and international students, CSAHS Graduate Student Advisory Council, and graduate students who are parents (or "student-parents").

Table 1. Data sources included in thematic analysis

Reference	Data Source
A	CSAHS & COA Mentorship for BIPOC Graduate Students Program DevelopmentResearch Student Consultation Findings
B	Black Students List of Demands for Administration
C	CSAHS Graduate Student Advisory Council Meeting Notes
D	Indigenous Initiatives Strategy Report of the Campus Environment and CulturalSafety Working Group
E	Student-parents at University of Guelph

A deductive thematic analysis of these five sources was undertaken. This analysis involved coding and organizing these data according to the different dimensions of wellness (Swarbrick & Yudorf 2015). An intersectional and equity-centered approach was used to further guide this analysis.

Overview of Findings

Based on this analysis, five dimensions of support required to improve equity and wellbeing for graduate students at the University of Guelph emerged, including: 1) social belonging and connection, 2) campus environment and program structure, 3) financial, 4) academic, and 5) health. For each dimension, students identified specific challenges and concerns impacting their wellbeing, summarized below:

1. **Social Belonging and Connection:** Black, Indigenous, racialized, and international graduate students have felt alienated, isolated and disconnected from both faculty and the broader student community. They see inadequate representation of diverse identities amongst faculty members. Student-parents have also felt isolated and unable to incorporate their families into their academic lives in meaningful ways.

2. **Campus Environment and Program Structure:** Graduate students have identified environmental and structural gaps that challenge their access to information, resources, and support. Graduate students from equity deserving groups described alienation from equity, diversity, and inclusion-related decision-making and conversations on campus, including limited community consultation. Graduate students from equity deserving groups also identified gaps in programs and accessible physical spaces that recognize and honor graduate student diversity. For example, Black and Indigenous graduate students experienced erasure of their realities in curriculum and across campus.

3. **Financial:** Black, Indigenous, racialized, and international graduate students experienced inadequate opportunities for financial support, as well as a lack of clear communication about funding. Financial insecurity, leading to food insecurity and housing challenges, was identified as a key barrier to the academic success of international graduate students.

4. **Academic:** Many graduate students face barriers to completing their degrees on time (e.g. research ethics approval) and pressures to be productive, both challenges are often exacerbated for graduate students from equity deserving groups. During the pandemic, and more generally, graduate students have called for clearer and kinder policies on program extension.

5. **Health:** Graduate students do not have access to the health support they need on campus. Specifically, Black, Indigenous, and racialized students identified a lack of mental health service providers using a culturally-appropriate,anti-oppressive, intersectional framework.

Students provided specific recommendations to the University of Guelph, detailing the action needed across each dimension of wellbeing, outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Overview of recommendations for improving graduate student experiences of equity, diversity, and inclusion at the University of Guelph

Student Wellbeing Dimension	Recommendations
Social belonging and connection	• Recruit, retain and advance, consider the pipeline with the goal of improving representation of Black, Indigenous, racialized, and marginalized faculty and students keeping in mind its importance for relational well-being. • Ensure sustenance of programs that offer peer-to-peer support (including programs for Black, Indigenous, and racialized students) for better communityexperience
Campus environment and program structures	• Increase pedagogical representation of students with diverse identities (curriculum, programs offered) • Provide administrative and financial support for anti-racism initiatives • Mandatory anti-oppression and equity training for all students, faculty, staff, andadministration • Student consultation for decision-making on equity, diversity, andinclusion • Improve Black and Indigenous visibility on campus • Improve accessibility of change stations in washrooms for student-parents
Academic	• Obtain demographic data on student academic progress to understandgaps • Create clearer and kinder program extension protocols • Resolve REB delays for timely program completion • Explore opportunities for flexible academic programming options (i.e. hybrid and online degree programs) • Provide communication around productivity expectations amidst and beyond the pandemic for faculty and graduate students • Develop more academic and professional resources for skill development
Health	• Increase culturally-appropriate mental health services • Clear communication on accessing health services on campus for students on official academic leave • Faculty training for communicating with students reporting challenges
Financial	• Offer free and subsidized education for Black and Indigenous students • Target funding opportunities for Black, Indigenous, and racialized students andstudents with compounding disadvantages • Subsidize summer tuition, including compulsory fees • Create additional supports targeting housing, employment, and food security for international, Black, Indigenous, and racialized students • Make it easier to access financial resources such as bursaries (reduce the numberof administrative hurdles)

Communications: Graduate students also provided overarching recommendations related to communication across the dimensions of wellbeing, including:

- encouraging consistent and clear information sharing from departments about funding, resources, and academic changes;
- developing a landing page on the University of Guelph website to centralize information about supports and resources (on- and off-campus);
- improving Graduate Program Coordinators' awareness of their communication role;
- developing confidential and clear pathways for providing feedback and making complaints; and
- consistently sharing information on actions taken for the raised concerns with the student community.

Summary and Future Directions

This analysis reveals that graduate students at the University of Guelph have *already* identified many challenges to their overall wellbeing. These challenges fall into two categories: first, inadequate supports in multiple areas, and second, inadequate information on accessing supports that are already present. These challenges are not experienced equally by graduate students, and their effects vary depending on students' diverse and intersecting identities. The data included in this study highlight the experiences of some Black, Indigenous, racialized, and international students, as well as student-parents; however, the perspectives of disabled students, students experiencing language barriers, LGBTQ2S+ students, and students with different identities are also needed to inform future action. Additionally, we suggest that further data collection should be informed by what data is already present and a complete assessment of the status of challenges and recommendations that are already identified (e.g., asking question five of the Intersectionality Framework, "what are the current responses to the problem?"). Findings show that diverse student groups would like to be more active participants in decision-making processes on policies related to equity, diversity, and inclusion. A deliberation informed by participatory-action research principles might therefore be useful to inform students about the status and progress of action towards their recommendations before collecting more data.

Ultimately, we suggest that the University of Guelph measures progress towards improving equity and wellbeing for graduate students using the following equity-centered outcomes – outcomes rooted in graduate student experiences and existing recommendations:

1. **Social Belonging and Connection:** Graduate students from equity deserving groups feel connected to the broader community of students and faculty, including faculty with shared identities and experiences.

2. **An Equitable Campus Environment:** There are a range of programs and spaces that hold space for, centre, and support graduate students from equity deserving groups. These graduate students play an active role in making decisions related to equity, diversity, and inclusion – and are adequately resourced to do so.

3. **Financial Wellbeing:** There are more and better opportunities for financial support, specifically for graduate students from equity deserving groups. Information about these supports is accessible and clearly communicated, resulting in more graduate students from equity deserving groups receiving financial support from the University of Guelph.

4. **Academic Wellbeing:** Graduate students complete their degrees in the timeframe that they determine, receiving clear and kind support throughout the duration of their studies.

5. **Physical and Mental Wellbeing:** Graduate students have improved access to health services on campus, including culturally safe mental health services for graduate students from equity deserving groups. There are multiple pathways for graduate students to access information about health services, which are clearly communicated to students.

6. **Communication:** Across these dimensions, there is enhanced, clear, and centralized communication about the resources available to support all aspects of graduate student wellbeing, with an emphasis on supports for equity deserving groups.

A Call to Action

In response to this report, we are seeking feedback and action from groups across campus. For student and other groups already working towards enhancing equity and inclusion for graduate students at the University of Guelph, what do you think about the findings of this report? What is missing here? What short-and long-term solutions for the identified well-being areas could we work on together? For those in administration across the college and departmental levels at the University of Guelph, we invite you to consider your role in achieving these outcomes, commit to taking measurable action, and share these commitments with the GenEq Graduate Issues Committee. What can you commit to in moving towards these outcomes? What short-and long-term solutions for the identified well-being areas could we work on together?

To share your feedback or contact us about this report, please reach out to: Marsha Hinds Marie, Postdoctoral Fellow with the GenEq Advisory Group (mhindsmy@uoguelph.ca). We welcome your insights.

References

Hankivsky, O., Grace, D., Hunting, G., Giesbrecht, M., Fridkin, A., Rudrum, S., ... & Clark, N. (2014). An intersectionality-based policy analysis framework: critical reflections on a methodology for advancing equity. *International journal for equity in health, 13*(1), 1-16.

Swarbrick, P., & Yudof, J. (2015). Wellness in Eight Dimensions. *Collaborative Support Programs of NJ Inc.* Accessible at: http://www.center4healthandsdc.org/uploads/7/1/1/4/71142589/wellness_in_8_dimensions_booklet_with_daily_plan.pdf

Appendices

Appendix A: Data sources detailing graduate students' lived experiences at the University of Guelph from 2016-2022

ID	Source Description	Date of Source	Type of Source/Current State of Source
A	COA & CSAHS BIPOC graduate students mentorship program	2020	Qualitative: Report
B	University of Guelph Black Students List of Demands for Administration	2016	Qualitative: Report prepared by Laurie Schnarr, Director, Student Life Cara Wehkamp, Manager, Office of Intercultural Affairs
C	CSAHS Graduate Advisory Committee	2020-2022	Qualitative: Meeting Minutes
D	Indigenous Initiatives Strategy – Report of the Campus Environment & Cultural Safety Working Group	2021	Qualitative: Report
E	Student-Parents	2021	Qualitative: Report and Literature Review
F	Black Graduate Sociology and Anthropology Students	June 2022	Qualitative: Letter (the link to letter was broken)
G	Graduate Student Impact Open Letter to OGPS	May 2020	Qualitative: Letter (the link to the letter was broken)

H	UofG Indigenous Student Perspectives – Research with Kim Anderson CRC in FRAN	2020	Qualitative: Report (in development) (Raw data would have required REB amendment and could not get access to final report)
I	Community Engaged Scholarship Institute and University's Fighting World Hunger	2020	Qualitative: Report, Food Security Report: Hungry for Education (Most up-to-date copy of report was not available; website content was considered alongside a student dissertation on food insecurity in both undergraduate and graduate students.)
J	Guelph Institute of Development Studies (GIDS) – Anti-Racism Working Group	2020-2022	Quantitative: Survey data
K	College of Biological Sciences Students – Equity Diversity and Inclusion Survey	2022	Quantitative: Survey data
L	Fall 2020 Covid Survey	2020	Quantitative: Survey data
M	Graduating Students' Exist Survey	Ongoing	Quantitative: Survey data open to all graduating students
N	Census	Collection started 2021 – ongoing	Quantitative: Survey data open to all students
O	Canadian Graduate and Professional Student Survey	2019 & 2022	Quantitative: Survey data open to all students – asks about all student experience & professional development items (including supervisor relationship)
P	Graduate Student Association Survey	April 2020	Quantitative: Survey of all graduate students (mix of close and open ended questions)
Q	Graduate International Student COVID impact survey	April 2020	Quantitative: Survey of international graduate students (mix of close and open ended questions)