



## 2024 Quality of Life Survey Report

### Introduction

The ASGC Quality of Life Survey is distributed annually to Columbia's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences student body. The survey has been administered for nearly a decade, formerly by GSAC, and since 2019, by ASGC. The data collected through this survey is summarized in this publicly available report and will be used as the basis for graduate student government advocacy in the following year.

The survey was made and distributed on Qualtrics and was accessible on PC and mobile devices. It comprised 12 sections including demographics. Each section was presented to respondents conditionally, based on their affirmative answer to the first identifying question in the section. Median time to complete the survey was approximately 12 minutes. Section behavior was not randomized, so all participants answered questions in the same order. The final (12<sup>th</sup>) section on Unionization thus had no responses, which could be indicative of survey fatigue.

As in previous years, UNIs were only used for the purposes of distributing gift cards. Participation was incentivized with a \$10 Amazon gift card. Survey answers were not shared beyond designated members of the ASGC e-board, but anonymity and privacy were not emphasized in the survey design or introduction.

The only channel of distribution was through the ASGC newsletter on April 20, 2024. The survey closed on May 24<sup>th</sup> with a total of 186 valid responses. This represents a significant decrease from last year's response rate. The responses were too few to conduct a robust intersectional analysis between demographics and each student issue. It is also important to note that this survey was distributed at the end of a very tumultuous semester considering protests and police presence on campus. Results should thus be interpreted with this in mind.

The resulting report contains the statistical breakdown of answers to each question, summaries of each section, and summaries of extended comments. Questions were presented as binary/nominal options, 5-point Likert scales, or free response for comments. This executive summary includes a series of recommendations, made when appropriate, to various bodies within the university to improve the quality of life of GSAS students.

### Quality of Life Chair

Sreya Gutta, Biotechnology, MA

### Quality of Life Committee

### ASGC Executive Board



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## 1. Demographics

The survey closed with a total of 204 responses, of which some were empty or did not finish at least the first section, leaving 186 valid responses. The breakdown is 56 MA and 130 PhD students. GSAS has 3580 students (1982 Masters, 1598 PhD, as indicated on the webpage), thus the survey has a 5.1% response rate. MA students are underrepresented in comparison to PhD students. In both the MA and PhD programs, about 71% of respondents were in the Humanities, and about 29% were in the Natural Sciences.

The gender distribution in the sample is skewed toward those who identify as females (94 out of 186). 63% of the respondents identified as straight. The majority of respondents are White, with about 35% identifying as Asian or Asian American, 5% identifying as Hispanic or Latino/a/x, 2% identifying as Black or African American, 2% identifying as Middle Eastern/North-African, and under 1% identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native. This raises concerns about the extent to which this survey might be able to address concerns specific to racial and ethnic minorities in an intersectional manner.

Future surveys need to be distributed through more channels to both increase response rate and increase representation of a more diverse student body. Department representatives and ethnic/minority student groups on campus can be recruited for this purpose. The gift card incentive can also be augmented with a raffle, as well as prizes for the department/representative with the highest percent response rate.

## 2. International Student Services

71 respondents indicated being International Students.

27% are very concerned about future travel restrictions, and 24% are concerned with future travel restrictions.

70% did not have issue with obtaining proper documentation for visa statuses, but 47% are either very concerned or concerned

The majority of respondents are pleased with Columbia's resources for international students, although the satisfaction rate has decreased from last year. The vast majority of international students have not taken advantage of Columbia's resources for non-native English speakers. Those who have are satisfied with the resources, although multiple people in the comment section decried the lack of available appointments at the Writing Center.

The majority of respondents found Columbia to be welcoming to international students, although several students described their unfamiliarity with US culture as a significant barrier to inclusion.



The majority of respondents are pleased with ISSO services. There was no significant difference in responses based on gender identity sub groups, or race and ethnicity sub groups. In the comments, students asked for tax filing help, and decried their lack of ability to access information.

The ASGC Executive Board and the Quality of Life Committee make the following recommendations:

1. The ISSO should communicate its available resources to the students better, especially any tax help resources.
2. The implementation of an expanded orientation specifically addressing the cultural and logistical challenges faced by international students could help facilitate their integration.

### 3. Parental and Caretaker Accommodations

A total of 10 respondents are parents/guardians, with 3 being single parents/guardians. 3 respondents believe that Columbia doesn't provide enough resources and services for caregivers, and 2 are unsure. Of the 3 respondents who have indicated that they've requested leave/accommodations, 2 are dissatisfied with Columbia's response. Questions involving specific programs such as Back-up care were not asked to respondents. One commenter indicated that GSAS parental accommodation policies are too vague and have led to miscommunications regarding funding, and the other criticized the lack of a full semester of parental leave which made balancing TA duties and childcare difficult.

The ASGC Executive Board and the Quality of Life Committee make the following recommendations:

1. Review and update vague language in the GSAS policy for parental accommodation.
2. Conduct further survey/focus group research into the awareness and usage of Columbia child care accommodation programs.

### 4. Disability and Accessibility Services

13 survey respondents identified as having a disability. Of these students, 7 feel that Columbia's buildings are not accessible. 2 report experiencing issues accessing a room based on lack of ADA compliance, and 3 respondents report disability-related discrimination at Columbia. Results were inconclusive about whether their disabilities affected research. 4 students with a



disability have sought assistance from ODS. Students' experiences and satisfaction ratings with support from ODS and their home departments are mixed. 2 of the 3 comments mention that their specific departments provide no support. 1 comment mentions lack of understanding of obtaining documentation. Questions regarding privacy or disclosure of disabilities/accommodations were not asked.

The ASGC Executive Board and the Quality of Life Committee make the following recommendations:

1. The OADI can improve work with departments about conveying a culture of respect and support.
2. Review building accessibility information available online to ensure it is up to date.

## 5. Violence, Discrimination and Harassment

The board is aware that these numbers may be significantly higher or different in distribution from previous years, due to the political climate, intense Palestine/Israel protests and heavy police presence that took place on campus for most of the 2023-2024 academic term.

An alarming 92% of survey participants reported either having directly or indirectly witnessed, experienced, or having been affected, by instances of violence, harassment and discrimination at Columbia. Out of these students about 36% have directly experienced violence, harassment and discrimination, in the form of gender/sex-based misconduct (13 respondents), sexual harassment (4 respondents), racial discrimination (10 respondents), bullying (10 respondents), and political orientation (13 respondents). No significant conclusions about race/ethnicity or gender based differences in discrimination/violence experiences could be made from subgroup filtered results data.

80% of those affected by violence, discrimination or harassment at Columbia indicated that they did not report it to Columbia. Of those who did report it (21 respondents), 76% were not at all satisfied with the response from Columbia.

Of 77 respondents, 18 identified the NYPD (and 6 identified security) as the other party involved in their harassment/ discrimination or violence experience. 12 and 11 respondents identified staff members or faculty at Columbia as the other party respectively, and 8 identified a graduate student outside of their program.

When asked if they felt that Columbia University was committed to providing a safe working and learning experience, the 167 responses were mixed, with no significant differences between gender or race/ethnicity subgroups.



58% feel less safe on school campuses compared to previous years, with 36% feeling unsafe both physically (defined as both emotional and physical well-being) and academically (defined as repercussion to academic standing). 20% independently feel unsafe just academically and 15% independently feel unsafe just physically, as defined.

Lastly, regarding timely notification of violence and security on campus, 57% did not feel that they were adequately notified of security on campus (versus 31% who felt they were adequately notified), and 57% felt they were not adequately notified of cases of violence on campus (versus 23% who felt they were adequately notified).

Many took the opportunity in the comments section to convey their dissatisfaction and conviction that Columbia's priority remains to protect its reputation. Comments frequently mentioned NYPD on campus and protest-related violence and harassment, and lack of accountability from administration. Additionally, several participants commented on the failure of Columbia to adequately address and respond to the several instances of racial harassment, and violence against peaceful protests on campus over the past year.

One comment mentioned that a Title IX complaint they made was not followed-up and lacked communication between Barnard and Columbia, leading to a bad outcome.

The ASGC Executive Board and the Quality of Life Committee make the following recommendations:

1. Create a more transparent and supportive reporting system. Incorporate CAPS services into the response for each report so students feel supported.
2. Improve communication with the campus community about incidents of violence and harassment, as well as the measures taken to address them. Regularly update students about campus security and related incidents in a timely manner.

## 6. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Of 168 respondents, the results are mixed on whether they feel Columbia is committed to diversity and inclusion at the student level. No significant conclusions on any subgroup differences in this response, in terms of gender/sex identity or race/ethnicity, can be drawn. 39% feel Columbia is on par with peer institutes for DEI commitment, and additional 33% feel it ranks above peer institutes. This block lacked any further questions about other relevant DEI student experiences, such as faculty/admin commitment to DEI, new initiatives on campus or resources available on campus.

Comments touched upon a variety of DEI issues, ranging from need for more support facilities for First Gen/Low-income students, funding for Master's students and better representation on a



faculty level. Some comments mention noticing that Columbia seems to suppress voices of dissent. One comment mentioned that DEI initiatives seem disconnected from the students and the departments/personnel in charge of these issues.

The ASGC Executive Board and the Quality of Life Committee make the following recommendations:

1. Establish regular forums or advisory committees that include diverse student voices to guide DEI initiatives, ensuring they are aligned with the actual needs and experiences of the student body.
2. Increase the visibility and accessibility of resources specifically designed to support student subgroups, such as available workshops, mentorship programs, and dedicated support staff.

## 7. Housing

The committee feels that housing, and in particular, rent payments, are a significant source of stress due to students' lack of financial confidence and support from Columbia. This is consistent with findings from previous years.

Of the 168 respondents, 48% live on-campus and 52% live off-campus. Master's housing is not guaranteed, and consistent with this, 40% of Master's students respondents have not tried to apply for housing.

The median annual income expenditure on rent was 40-50% for PhD students, with 37% spending over 50% of annual income on rent. For Master's students, the median expenditure was 60-70% of annual income on rent, with 37% reporting spending over 70% of their income on rent.

73% of total respondents do not feel that the stipend rate of increase is proportional to the rent rate of increase. 51% are satisfied with Columbia housing and apartments, vs 21% who are not satisfied. However, there were mixed results for student satisfaction with the Columbia Housing Office, and moreover 72% of respondents feel that Columbia Housing does not provide accurate information about the rooms and apartments.

Of the 19 comments provided by respondents, 10 mentioned the lack of transparency and pictures/floor plans available to students through the housing portal, and 5 mentioned the proportional rate of rent versus PhD student stipend.

The ASGC Executive Board and the Quality of Life Committee make the following recommendations:



1. Comments should be passed on to the Columbia Housing Office.
2. A committee with a student representative could be made to communicate student needs more frequently with the Housing Office.

## 8. Income and Funding

Students were asked to indicate all types of funding and fellowships they receive. The results below are divided by PhD and Master's students.

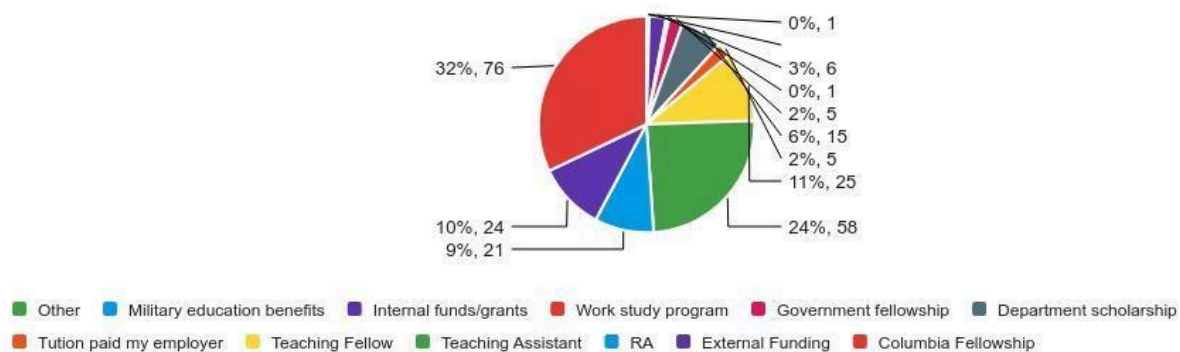


Figure 1: Breakdown of funding and fellowships received by PhD students. Percent and value labels are indicated

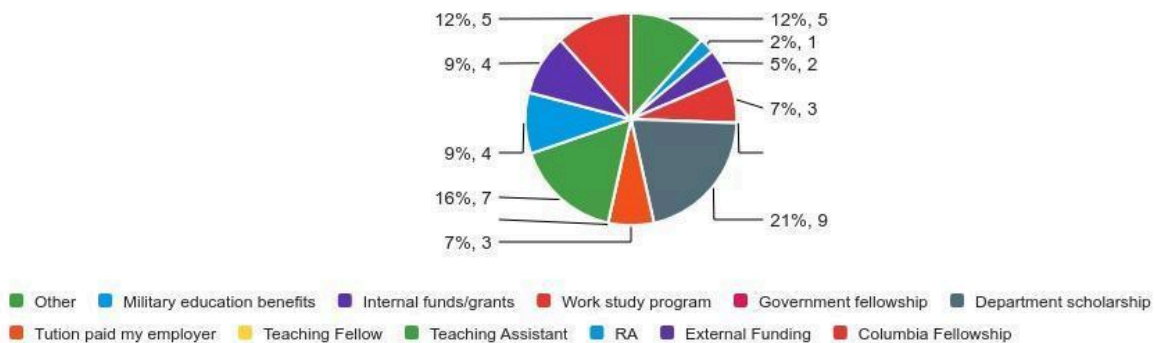


Figure 2: Breakdown of funding and fellowships received by Master's students. Percent and value labels are indicated

Students were asked to indicate whether they relied on alternative sources of income to accommodate their cost of living. The results below are divided by PhD and Master's students.



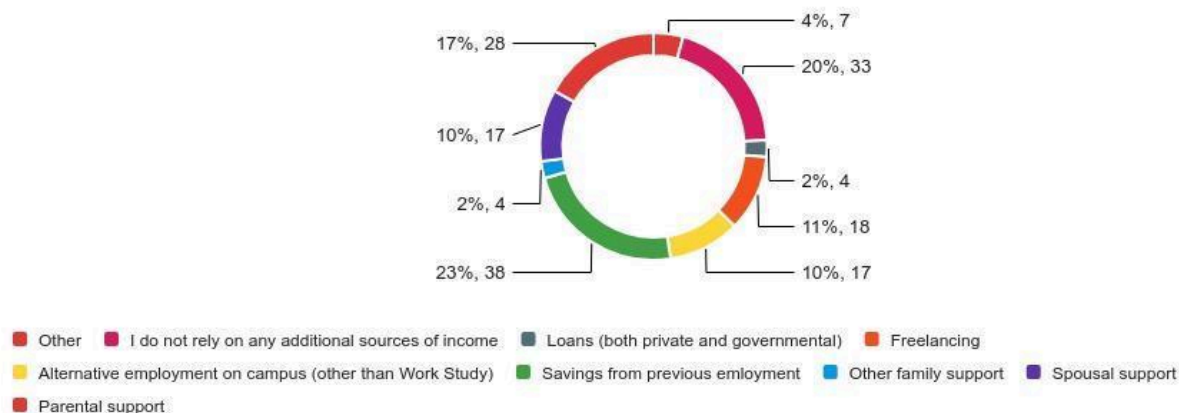


Figure 3: Breakdown of alternative sources of income used by PhD students

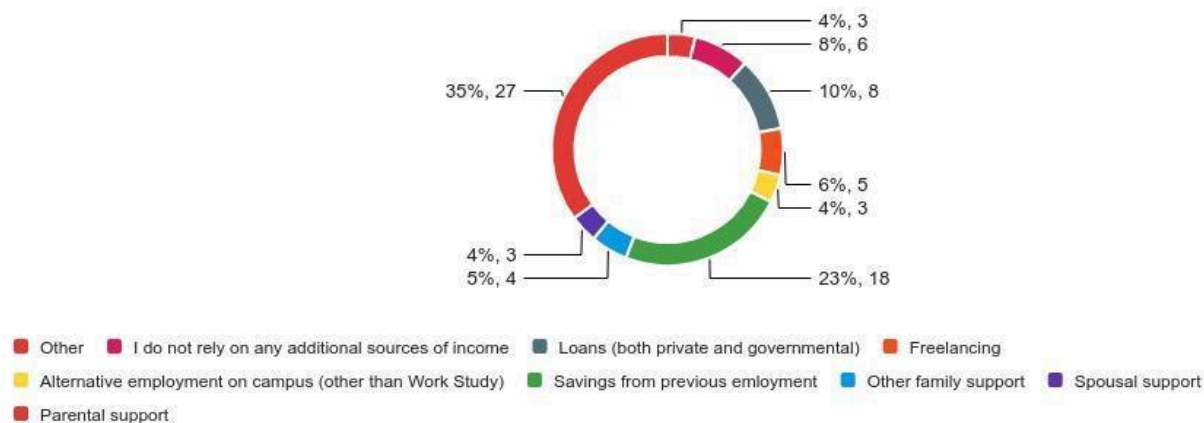


Figure 4: Breakdown of alternative sources of income used by Master's students

Students were asked to indicate all forms of payment error or delays they experienced. Of total respondents, 50 students indicated facing an issue with late payments, 70 indicated facing uncertainty about timely payment arrival, 57 indicated facing uncertainty about payment amount, and 38 indicated that the payment amount was different than expected.

Of the 19 comments, 14 expressed issues with late payments for either hourly work, TA work, stipends as well as long delays in reimbursement across multiple departments. A few comments mentioned running into either administrative hurdles, busy offices or understaffing issues with the office of financial aid when attempting to solve this issue. One mentioned that communication between the offices responsible for pay is poor. 2 comments mentioned sudden



change in the September pay schedule was not conveyed to them, and 2 others mentioned that new academic year rehire paperwork is slow, and the first paycheck is always delayed.

The ASGC Executive Board and the Quality of Life Committee make the following recommendations:

1. Develop a clear and consistent communication strategy to notify students about payment schedules, changes in deadlines, and required paperwork well in advance, particularly for the start of the academic year, consistent across departments.
2. Ensure students, especially PhD students across departments, are oriented well with the pay system and resources at the start of their program.
3. GSAS should address the issue of late pay and late reimbursement and ensure that the process for pay and reimbursement is streamlined.

## 9. Program Satisfaction

54% of respondents feel satisfied with their program, and 27% feel neutral about their program satisfaction. 59% of respondents feel that their degree requirements have been clearly communicated by their department, while 28% feel unsure of this.

80% of respondents have chosen a primary advisor or mentor, and of those, 76% feel that their advisor meets their expectations, with 75% being satisfied with their advisor. Median frequency of meeting with an advisor is once a month. 16% indicate that their research has been affected by the level of funding that their advisor received, with another 16% indicating they are unsure. Specific comments about some departments or advisors include needing more space/funding and making sure faculty and advisors are well-aware of all requirements to avoid graduation delays. Some comments include needing more funding for administrative staff or the department itself. A few comments were made about research being affected by lack of funding for a specific advisor or department, and that more internal funds need to be available for small scale circumstances like conference travel or tools such as Qualtrics.

The ASGC Executive Board and the Quality of Life Committee make the following recommendations:

1. Departments should ensure that all faculty, advisors, and administrative staff are fully informed of degree requirements and any updates to avoid miscommunication and delays in graduation. Provide clear and accessible documentation for students.



## 10. Workload

This block's results have been split into 3 sections for ease.

### *10.1 Workload and time management*

103 of the respondents indicate they have served as a Teaching Assistant at Columbia. 51 of 166 respondents hold at least one other job outside the requirements of their program, with 50% of Master's student respondents holding at least one other job outside program requirements versus 24% of PhD student respondents.

Median hours spent teaching per week was 11-20 hours, median hours spent on self- research was 21-30 hours, median hours spent on classes (both instruction and studying) was 21-30 hours, and median hours spent on administrative work was 1-10 hours. These responses were common between PhD and Masters students. A question about research for faculty or someone other than self was not asked. 58% of overall respondents indicate that their current program workload is manageable. Of the 20 comments received about program workload, 5 mention that the first-year workload is difficult to manage. 3 others mention that their jobs outside of Columbia are necessary but add to the workload.

The ASGC Executive Board and the Quality of Life Committee make the following recommendations:

1. Departments should review and adjust first-year coursework or program requirements to ensure they are manageable while maintaining academic rigor.
2. Department specific feedback can be passed along to the department head.
3. Ensure that teaching assistantship duties do not exceed the expected workload of 11–20 hours per week by conducting regular evaluations of TA responsibilities and hours.

### *10.2 Workspaces*

When asked to indicate all the spaces they usually worked (168 total respondents), 68 respondents worked at a library, 66 worked in a shared office or lab space, 28 worked from another on-campus space, and 122 worked from home. There were mixed results about the satisfaction of workspaces available on campus. Comments indicate that there is a large departmental variation on availability of workspaces. An example from comments: "SIPA has own library, ENCL does not have a private space." 3 comments mention lack of private space/Zoom space. Some comments mention current spaces are "intellectually isolating" or don't foster peer or faculty interactions.



The ASGC Executive Board and the Quality of Life Committee make the following recommendations:

1. Department specific feedback can be passed along to the department head.
2. Conduct a review of departmental workspace availability and ensure that all students, regardless of their department, have equitable access to adequate workspaces.
3. Maintain an updated directory of available workspaces (departmental and non-departmental) with information on access policies, locations, and facilities, ensuring students know where they can work effectively.

### *10.3 Principles informing course content*

Respondents were only asked to provide their commentary about how decisions about course content are currently being made and what they believe should be the driving principles in the future. Thematically looking through the comments, of the 21 comments received, 7 mentioned TA autonomy and TA input in the course content is needed. 3 comments mentioned tradition versus faculty liberty in choosing course content. 3 comments mention student feedback from reviews is not taken into consideration. 4 comments mentioned a need to increase diversity in the course content of some professors.

The ASGC Executive Board and the Quality of Life Committee make the following recommendations:

1. Department specific feedback can be passed along to the department head.
2. Establish formal channels for Teaching Assistants to provide input on course content and teaching strategies. Have TAs sit in for curriculum reviews.

## **11. Healthcare**

69% of respondents (168 respondents) indicate Morningside heights is their primary provider.

For short term physical health, 33% of respondents rated their access as moderate, with a significant number reporting higher levels of access (49%). Similarly, for long term physical health, 33% of respondents rated their access as moderate, with a significant number reporting higher levels of access (40%).

For short term mental health, 29% of respondents rated their access as moderate (29%), with a significant number reporting higher levels of access (49%). However, there was a difference for long term physical health, where 35% of respondents rated their access as moderate, and only 37% reporting feeling that there was a higher level of access.



47% of respondents don't believe that Columbia addresses stress in its policies for student well-being, and 35% are unsure.

The ASGC Executive Board and the Quality of Life Committee make the following recommendations:

1. GSAS should recommend departments to promote departmental level conversations around stress and work life balance.
2. Allocate additional funding to improve access to long-term mental health care, including therapy and psychiatric services, to ensure that students with ongoing needs are adequately supported. Improve awareness of existing resources on campus.

## 12. Unionization

No responses were received for this section. Future surveys should randomize block presentations to ensure some responses for each section.