Dear all,

We are writing to urge you to address the critical and unique needs of doctoral students in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on academic progress. While we appreciate the Provost's Graduate Student Support Working Group established last week per this April 16th memo, we worry that the unique needs of doctoral students remain overlooked. Doctoral students are at the forefront of research advancement and are integral to the maintenance of the USC community. Doctoral students travel to USC from across the globe to conduct high-impact research that advances dozens of interdisciplinary fields, secure external funding grants that boost the University’s ranking and reputation, and serve as Teaching Assistants to undergraduate and graduate students.

Many doctoral students are supported by stipends that are guaranteed by four/five-year funding contracts. While this is generous under normal circumstances, the current global health crisis has upended doctoral students’ research progression and the current funding
contract warrants serious attention. **All current doctoral students should be automatically granted an additional year of guaranteed funding.**

USC has already recognized this temporal logic in its one-year extension of the tenure clock for junior faculty. On March 25th, Provost Zukoski issued a [memo](#) to USC faculty that stated:

> "All faculty are affected by the disruptions related to COVID-19. We know that many faculty members will experience some level of delay to research productivity, especially as this crisis continues for the rest of the semester. And for many, the problems are compounded by having to care for elderly relatives and/or look after young children, among other pressing matters.

> In order to ease some level of apprehension for probationary faculty who are concerned about how the ongoing, evolving public health crisis will affect their tenure dossiers, and after much discussion, we are **granting a blanket approval for all tenure-track faculty to have one additional year on the tenure clock.**"

This exact rationale can be directly translated to doctoral students, whose research and productivity will similarly be delayed due to changes in University operations, caretaking responsibilities, and other serious effects on mental health. Graduate workers also deserve a guaranteed one-year extension. This sentiment is shared by many within the University community, including students in the [Cinema and Media Studies Department](#) and the [American Studies and Ethnicity Department](#), as well as other universities, such as [Harvard](#), [Princeton](#), [Yale](#), and [Stanford](#) who have started “stop the clock” petitions.

Specifically, doctoral students' degree progress will be delayed by several reasons listed below:

1. **Doctoral students now face physical barriers to completing their independent research projects.** This applies to those whose research requires access to laboratories, libraries, fieldwork placements, or archives. Additionally, even with strong prevention measures in place, it is likely that some students will become ill with COVID-19, which would significantly interfere with work required for degree progress.

2. **Graduate students' teaching and grading responsibilities drastically changed** with short notice since the University switched to online coursework, and have not been provided with adequate resources. Adapting to these changes has consumed a considerable amount of time that could have otherwise have gone toward degree progress.

3. **Recent data shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has had significant impacts on mental health.** Decreased mental wellness leads to difficulty concentrating, changes in sleeping and eating patterns, and exacerbation of chronic health problems, all of which interferes with doctoral students’ ability to participate in intellectually-demanding research. This is especially true for international students whose home countries have been severely affected by the pandemic, those with family members or loved ones in high-risk categories, and those with pre-existing anxiety disorders. Further adding to
these unprecedented increases in stress, many universities, including USC, have implemented hiring freezes, which will undoubtedly affect the job market and employment opportunities over the next several years.

4. **The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted reliable access to basic needs**, resulting in housing insecurity, food insecurity, financial burdens, and increased caretaking responsibilities. Doctoral students that care for dependents and/or elderly relatives lack access to necessary resources. Time and energy spent responding to these needs could have otherwise been allocated toward research necessary for degree progress.

Therefore, it is imperative that the University **guarantees a year-long program extension, a corresponding adjustment of degree milestones, and an additional year of funding to all PhD students at the current contract salary/stipend, without exception.** The Provost’s Graduate Student Support Working Group has expressed openness to relaxing degree milestone deadlines, such as qualifying exam procedures, to reduce student stress, but not to extension of guaranteed funding. These two accommodations must be implemented in tandem; while a student may want to take advantage of a delayed timeline, they may not be able to do so if there is no guarantee of funding.

The Office of the Provost’s [letter](#) to all graduate students on April 16th stated that:

> “because PhD funding comes from a number of different sources, the university cannot guarantee additional funding related to any delays,” such that “students should discuss funding concerns with their advisors.”

**This rationale is insufficient for two primary reasons:**

1. Case-by-case evaluations will: produce an amount of casework that will be difficult for the university’s schools themselves to process, place the burden of proof on students who, in some cases, may struggle to provide documentation of how this crisis has disrupted their work, unfairly privilege the students of specific faculty and specific departments, and leave the students in a protracted state of uncertainty that will be even more detrimental to their mental health.

2. Faculty salaries are also funded through a “number of different sources.” If individual faculty members are unable to secure enough external funding, the University allows them to teach courses to supplement their salaries. This same approach could be applied to doctoral students by allowing them to serve as Research and Teaching Assistants during this one-year guaranteed funding extension.

We simply ask that graduate students be supported in the same way as faculty given the vital role doctoral students have in our university’s structure and day-to-day operations. Even if each school has its own funding sources, the Graduate School must commit to working with each department - and **departments must remain in ongoing conversations with their students, per the CSLC/CAMS/ASE letters referenced above to address other needs** - to ensure that all doctoral students have access to an additional year of guaranteed funding by supporting all department-specific needs and requests to accomplish this goal.
In closing, we ask for a year-long program extension, a corresponding adjustment of degree milestones, and an additional year of guaranteed funding to all PhD students at the current contract salary/stipend, without exception to align with the nature of academic hiring schedules and in light of the disruption to the academic job market, which will affect at least one full academic year if not more. We urge you to trust that we, as graduate students, best understand the needs of our fellow graduate students and to strongly consider the validity of our request outlined in this letter.

We recognize that you, like everyone else, are under severe strain due to the current crisis, and wish to extend our support in helping to resolve funding-related issues. We believe that prompt communication to the students about your plans with regards to funding is of utmost importance to provide relief for many living under duress and living with uncertainty.

Sincerely,

Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC)
Graduate Student Government (GSG) Executive Board

The following groups and individuals have signed in support of this letter:

Groups and Organizations:

Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE)
Annenberg Communication Graduate Student Association (ACGSA)
Dornsife Graduate Student Association (DGSA)
The Row-LA – Church without Walls
Service Employees International Union, Local 721
Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) of Southern California
Union de Vecinos
USC College Democrats
Zéro de Conduite; Cinema and Media Studies Graduate Association

(if your group/organization would like to sign on please email hatrick@usc.edu indicating as much)

To see a list of Students, Faculty, Staff, and Alumni of the University who have signed the letter please see below the google form or click here.