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Student Needs in the Time of COVID-19
Report by the Student Representatives
on the ACSP Governing Board

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Executive Summary

In preparation for the spring 2020 Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) Governing Board meeting, student representatives on the board conducted an online survey about graduate student needs during the time of COVID-19. This report describes the results of this survey and presents recommendations about how ACSP and member institutions can address student needs.

The survey was shared with graduate students in April and additional information on international student needs was collected in May. The survey collected information on issues faces by students during the pandemic, the resources provided to them by their institutions, what role they think ACSP can play in supporting them, and what other issues they would like the student representatives to consider.

Some common issues that students reported included uncertainty about future funding, loss of productivity, reduced employment opportunities, and mental health concerns. Institutions are providing student with varying degrees of support, including limited funding opportunities, technology assistance, and access to faculty and staff. Many respondents indicated that ACSP can support them by advocating for institutions to provide funding support, continue hiring processes, and to be flexible about curriculum and degree timelines. Students also highlighted the need for ACSP to reduce or waive conference registration fees, provide information regarding available jobs and postdoctoral positions, and lead conversations on the planning response to the pandemic. International students expressed similar concerns to other students but highlighted the unique challenges they face in accessing funding and employment opportunities.

Based on the survey result, the student representatives recommend the following to support Ph.D. students at this time.

1. Share and expand existing resources regarding jobs and postdoctoral opportunities with students.
2. Allow student members to volunteer at the annual planning conference in exchange for a waived registration fee.
3. Collaborate with the ACSP Committee on the Academy and interest groups to create a space for virtual learning and discussion.
4. Identify opportunities for fostering discussions on planning in the time of COVID-19 at the annual conference.
5. Share best practices and where possible, advocate for member institutions to address Ph.D. student needs during this time.
6. Continue exploring the option of ACSP pursuing a STEM designation for planning as a discipline in response to international student needs.

Survey Background

The survey was shared with graduate students through ACSP membership communication channels during the month of April, including the Bowling League listserv and the ACSP interest group listservs. In addition to questions about ACSP membership status and home institution affiliation, the survey asked the following questions:

1. What issues and concerns are you facing as a student during the pandemic? How is this impacting your academic and professional work?
2. What resources and assistance are your institution providing to you during the pandemic?
3. How can ACSP support you as a student member during the pandemic?
4. What other concerns or issues would you like the ACSP Student Representatives to consider?

In total, 65 graduate students from all regions responded to the survey. All responses were anonymous, and this report removes any potential identifying information. All survey questions were open-ended; thus, survey responses were coded based on common themes. Additional information was gathered from international Ph.D. students in May to assess their unique needs.

Survey Respondent Information

In total, 65 students responded to the survey. Of these students, 41 (63 %) were current ACSP student members, 16 (25%) did not know about their membership status, and the remaining 8 were not ACSP student members (Figure 1). Survey respondents belong to all the ACSP Membership Regions as shown, with one student from a corresponding member school and two students who did not indicate their institution (Figure 2).

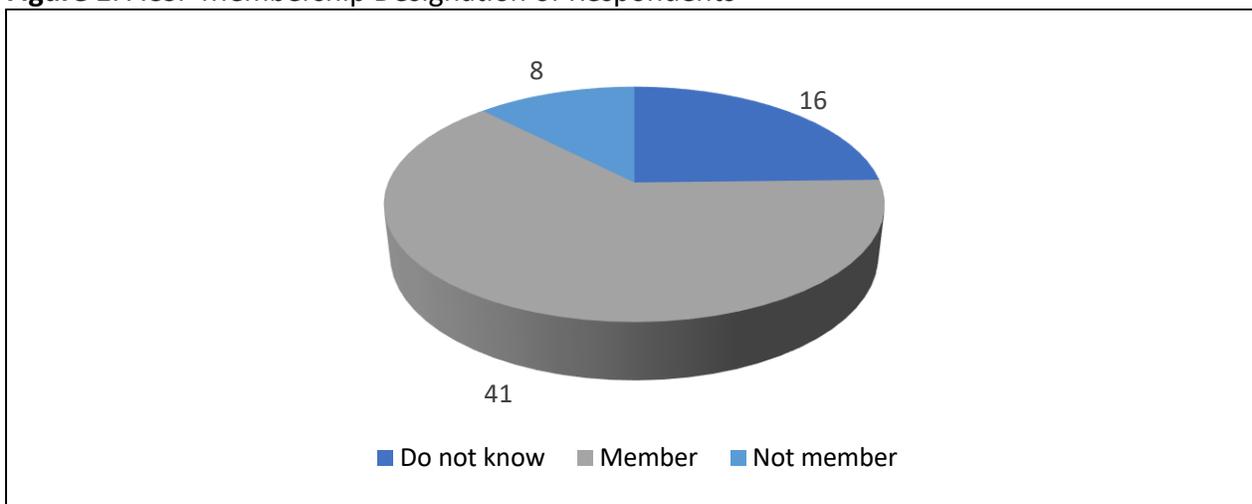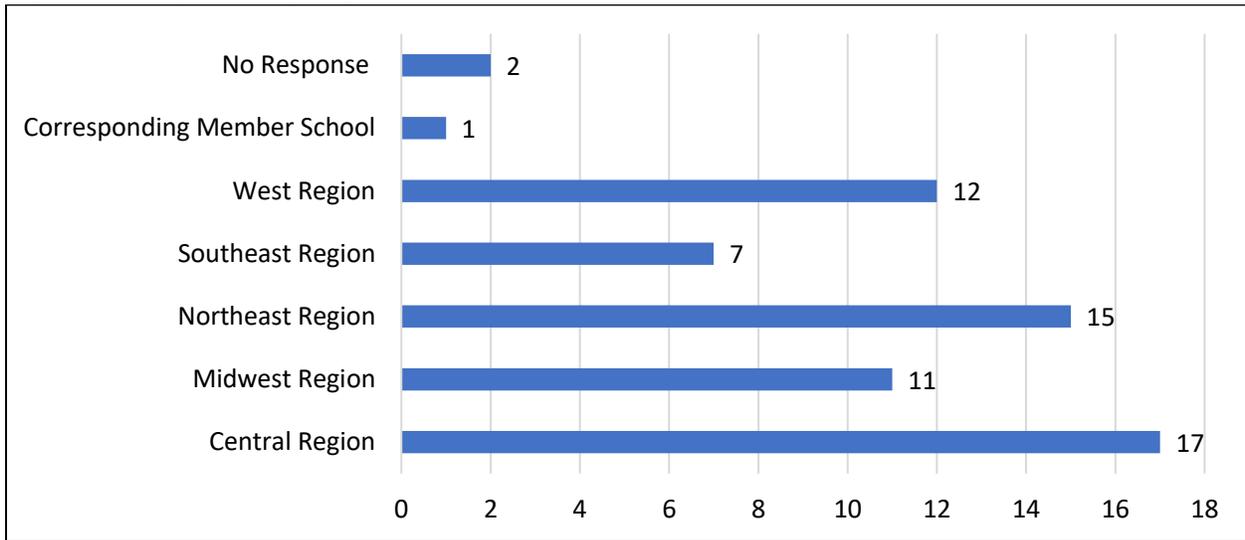**Figure 1**: ACSP Membership Designation of Respondents

Figure 2: Responses by Region

Issues and Concerns

The students who responded to the survey indicated a number of issues and concerns they are facing in the time of COVID-19, but the most prevalent issues were uncertainty about future funding, the loss of productivity, fewer employment opportunities, and mental health challenges (Figure 3).

More than 32 percent of the students indicated that they were worried about funding for the summer or the fall semester because it had either been rescinded or was uncertain. Nearly 12 percent of students indicated that they had lost funding for the current semester. Two students indicated that they were facing a loss of household income since their partners became unemployed because of the pandemic. Survey responses across most questions overwhelmingly indicated that students are worried about current or future funding.

"I live in a small apartment with my partner and child, all activities are suspended, my child is not going to school, neither do I. It is not possible to keep the study rhythm the same, but most of the professors don't realize about that kind of limitations."

Approximately, 28 percent of the students indicated that they were unable to be as productive during the pandemic as usual. Most of these students also explained that despite this loss in productivity they were expected to perform their work and educational duties as before. Several students indicated that this expectation increased their stress and anxiety. Overall, 23 percent of all students said that they were stressed or facing mental health concerns due to the pandemic.

In addition, more than 26 percent of the students indicated that they were worried about future employment opportunities due to the pandemic. A significant number of these students are in the job market right now and worried that the number of available academic positions have decreased as institutions establish hiring freezes.

Figure 3: Issues and Concerns Faced by Students
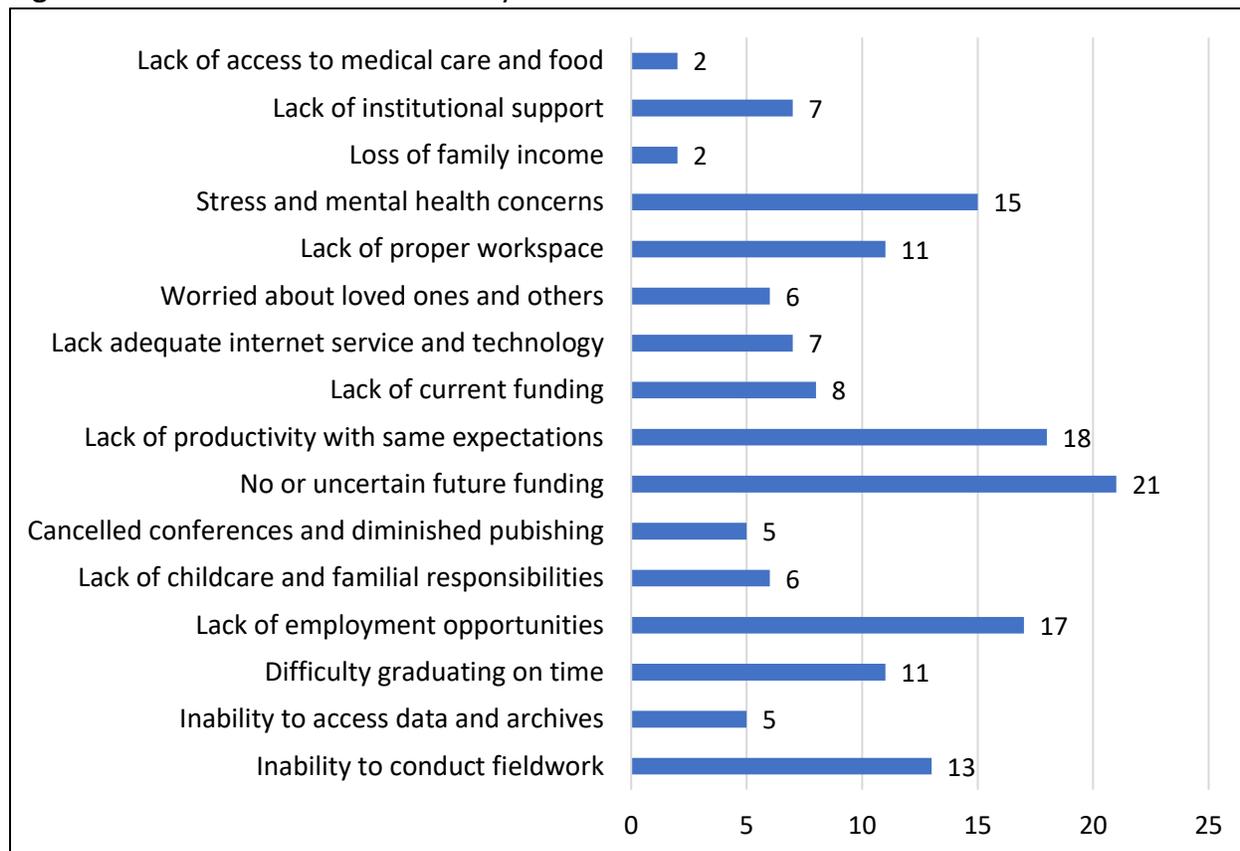
Available Institutional Resources
Students shared an array of resources that their institutions have offered in the time of COVID-19 (Figure 4). These responses highlighted that institutions are either providing students with no support or limited funding support. Several students explained that they are talking with administrations in their institutions to provide expanded funding and other resources.

Out of the 65 students who took the survey, 61 students responded to this question. Over 25 percent of the respondents indicated that their institutions were providing no support in this time. It is worth noting that 7 students mentioned that their institutions were allowing them to work remotely when asked what support was being provided to them. This indicates that students responding to the survey may have varied understanding about what counts as support from their institutions, since most educational institutions in the United States were allowing

students to work remotely when this survey was conducted. In addition, 3 students indicated that they did not know what resources were available to them.

More than 22 percent of the students responding to this question indicated that their institution was providing some form of future or emergency funding to support them in this time, including funding for an extra semester, summer funding, one-time assistance, emergency travel funding to go home, grant funding, and some form of work-based funding. Four students also highlighted that their funding for the current semester was being continued.

"I think (the institution) gave out a $75 check, no confirmed or universal assistance for summer funding, although we're having discussions to figure out what this will look like for us."

Approximately 14 percent of the students who responded to this question also shared that their institutions were providing some form of technology support during this time, including providing laptops and access to software. Another 14 percent indicated that they had full access to communication with the faculty and staff in their institution.

**Figure 4**: Support from Student Institution
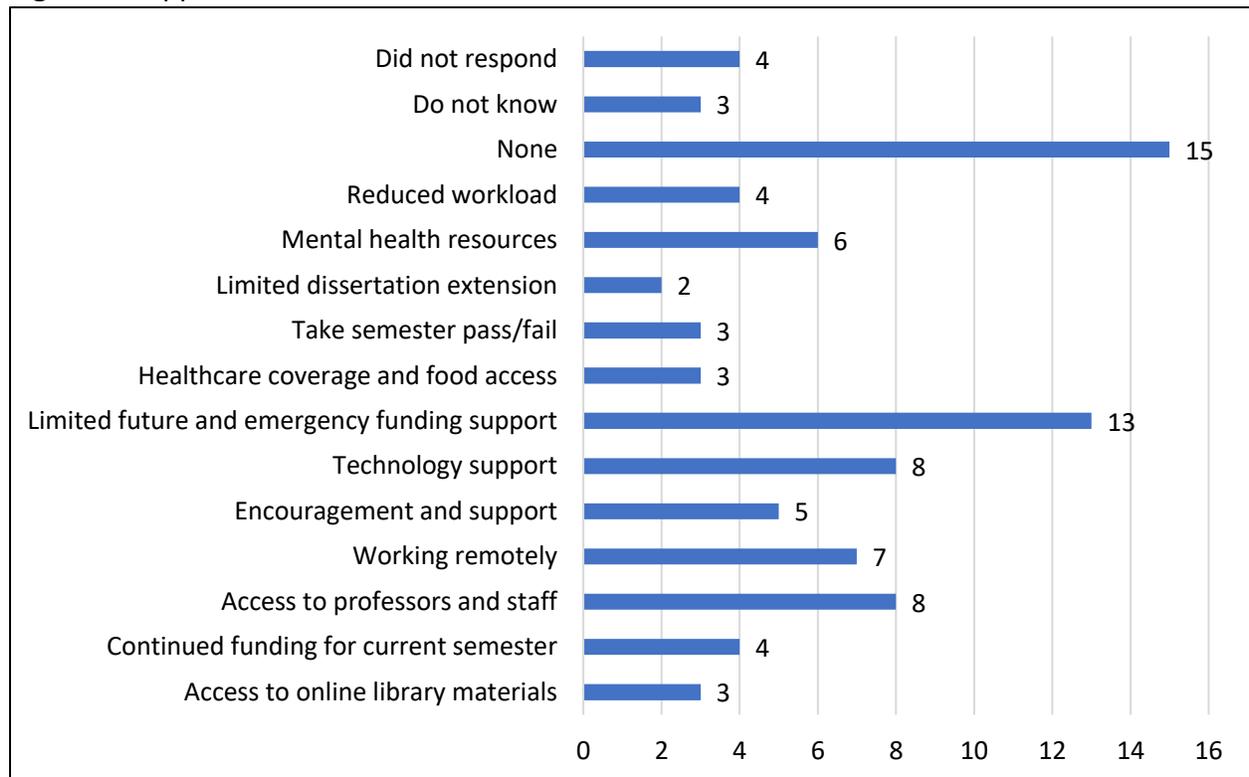
ACSP Support

Students had varied responses regarding how ACSP can support them during this time, with many acknowledging the limitations the organization faced (Figure 5). Most students indicated that ACSP can best support them by advocating for their institutions to provide funding support, continue with hiring processes, and provide flexibility regarding curriculum and degree timelines to accommodate student needs. Students also highlighted the need for ACSP to reduce or waive the conference registration fee and provide information regarding available jobs and postdoctoral positions.

51 students responded to this question, with 8 students responding that they did not know what role ACSP can play. More than 25 percent of those responding asked that ACSP advocate on their behalf for institutions to provide more students with funding support in the coming semesters.

"Please advocate for an extension of funding and benefits for doctoral students. Or, advocate for leniency in program completion."

Overall, nearly 43 percent of the students suggested that ACSP advocate on their behalf on various issues, including continuing the hiring process, providing flexibility with course and curriculum requirements, and extending the deadlines for graduating from the doctoral program, apart from increased funding support.

Figure 5: Ideas about Support ACSP can Provide to Students
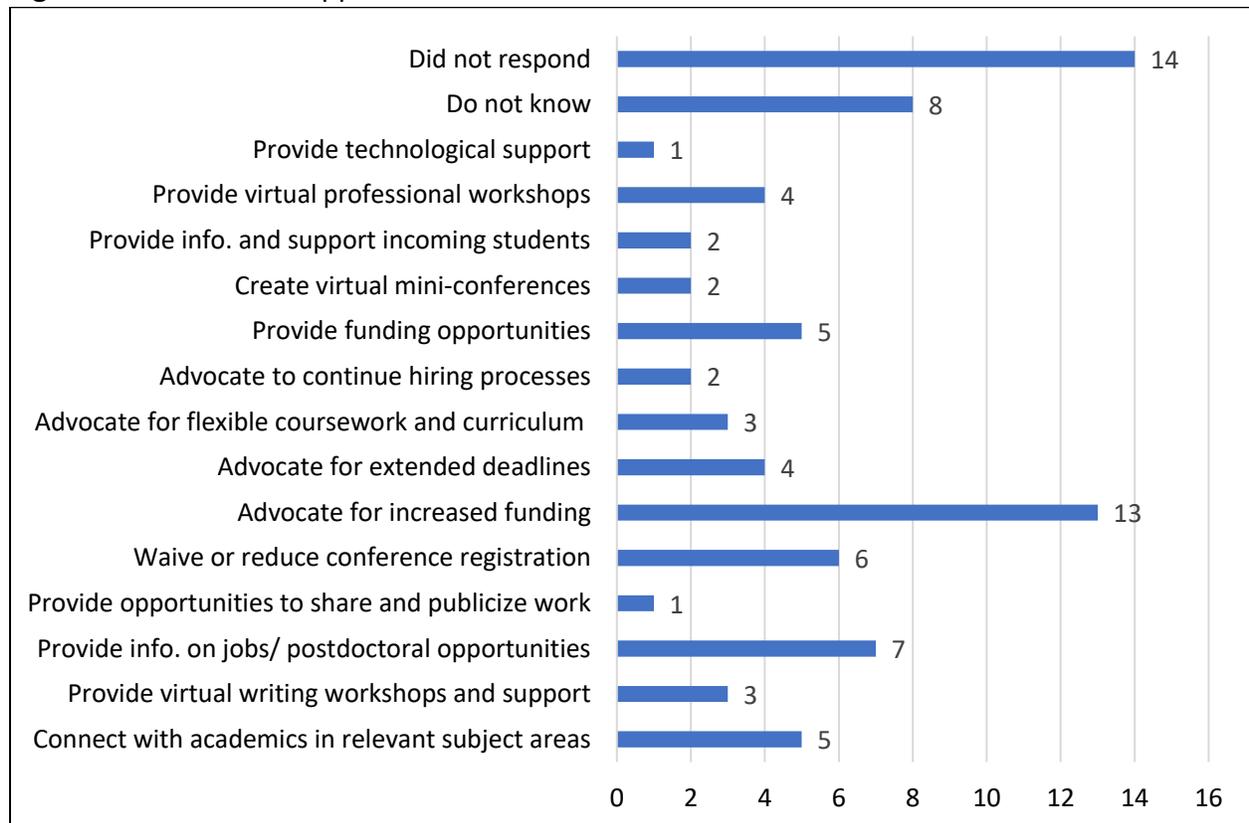
Approximately 14 percent of the students responding to this question recommended that ACSP provide information on available employment and postdoctoral opportunities. In addition, nearly 12 percent of the students suggested that ACSP waive or reduce the registration fee for the 2020 annual conference, along with a little less than 10 percent of the students highlighting the need to create funding opportunities. Students also recommended that ACSP facilitate virtual workshops and provide opportunities for academics to connect around COVID-19 and other issues facing planning.

Other Student Concerns

Students were given the opportunity to share any other concerns that they had in the time of COVID-19. Only 22 students responded to this question and shared various concerns and recommendations. The most common response reiterated the need for ACSP to advocate for increased resources for students, with 6 students emphasizing this. An additional 3 students asked that ACSP advocate for institutions to provide flexibility during this time. students stressed the need for resources on how to navigate the job market during this time.

"When this is all over, our grades won't reflect our intelligence or work ethic - they'll only represent which ones of us were lucky."

"There's the need for a round table on the next ACSP conference to talk about the degree of vulnerability a student has in this kind of situation."

Students also highlighted the role ACSP can play in leading conversations on the response of planning academia to the pandemic. They suggested bringing together academics working on the issue to discuss the future of planning in the time of COVID-19. A few students recommended facilitating conversations on the impact the pandemic has had on students and how this will change the future of the academic job market.

International Student Concerns

International Ph.D. students shared similar issues to general student concerns. In addition, they highlighted some of the unique problems faced by them, that have been exacerbated during the time of COVID-19. International students highlighted how their funding concerns, even though similar in nature to those of all students, were intensified due to their immigration status. International students are limited in the employment opportunities available to them as students and are mostly restricted to on-campus jobs. With a decrease in opportunities during the pandemic, they are struggling to secure funding for the summer and fall.

Summer travel has also been impacted by the pandemic, with many students having to abandon travel plans faced by cancelled flights and rescinded travel funding. Many students have not been fully compensated by airlines after cancellation and others have been impacted by a restriction on using institutional funds for international travel. Like other students, they are worried about family and loved ones in their home counties with little ability to join or help them. This is particularly challenging as international students have been stranded with fewer social supports during a particularly difficult time.

International students who are graduating from their programs and entering the job market are particularly concerned about their prospects. Securing employment in a timely manner is critical for these students to maintain their immigration status and explore future immigration options. Planning students in programs that

"My program does not entitle me a summer funding this year and I am supposed to work to support my family during the summer. However, following the pandemic the likelihood finding a job is almost none. Hence, I do not have any means of living for the upcoming summer. Sadly, I am only allowed to work only in the university as an international student further reducing the likelihood of finding a job in the summer. The consequent mental instability I am experiencing at the moment forced to focus less on my studies and research."

are not considered STEM programs have particularly condensed timelines within which to secure employment and pursue immigration options. The hiring freezes enacted during the pandemic can have grave impacts on the ability of these students to seek employment and navigate the immigration system.

International Ph.D. students highlighted many of the same concerns as other students in the time of COVID-19. However, they have also indicated how these issues are magnified due to their immigration status and the particular challenges they face in securing funding, gaining employment and traveling. These issues are reducing their productivity during this time and adding to the stress and mental health concerns faced by them.

Recommendations

The findings of the survey suggest that ACSP can play a key role in supporting students in the time of COVID-19. However, there are limitations on how effective ACSP can be and it is imperative for member institutions to address some of the student needs highlighted in this report.

To support Ph.D. students during this time, the student representatives recommend that ACSP consider the following:

1. Share the link to the ACSP Career Center with student members to remind them that this resource is available to them. In addition, send out a call for institutions to share any job and postdoctoral opportunities that are still available with ACSP staff.
2. Continue the practice of allowing student members to volunteer at the annual planning conference in exchange for a waived registration fee.
3. Work with the ACSP Committee on the Academy and interest groups to create a space for virtual learning and discussions on various planning topics.
4. Identify opportunities for fostering discussions and presentations at the annual conference that focus on planning in the time of COVID-19. The student representatives will similarly identify opportunities for student led discussions.
5. Share best practices and where possible, advocate for member institutions to address Ph.D. student needs during this time, including providing funding support, extending degree completion deadlines, and reducing workloads.
6. Building on the ACSP Enrollment Task Force Report on Masters Degrees, continue exploring the option of ACSP pursuing a STEM designation for planning as a discipline.

Conclusion

The findings of this survey indicate that like other groups, graduate students are experiencing substantial hardships during the time of COVID-19. Students are struggling with academic expectations, loss of funding, a decrease in employment opportunities, and mental health concerns. They are also receiving varying degrees of support from their institutions, with most indicating that they lack the resources they need.

Students indicated that ACSP can play a key role in addressing some of these concerns by advocating for member institutions to address student needs, sharing employment opportunities, and providing conference registration support. International students are further impacted by the pandemic and face unique challenges with accessing funding, gaining employment, and traveling home.

The student representatives recommend that ACSP consider sharing resources regarding job and postdoctoral openings, creating volunteer opportunities at the conference and providing registration support, facilitating planning conversations virtually and at the annual conference in response to the pandemic, advocating for Ph.D. student needs where possible, and continuing the conversation regarding pursuing a STEM designation for planning as a discipline. Addressing the concerns highlighted in this report can help Ph.D. students face the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and provide them with much-needed support during this time.