

REPORT ON GRADUATE STUDENT INSTRUCTOR LABOR CONDITIONS IN WRITING PROGRAMS



INTRODUCTION

In Fall 2017, the Writing Program Administration Graduate Organization (WPA-GO) Labor Taskforce surveyed 344 Graduate Student Instructors (GSI) of writing from 37 states in the United States, including 74 master’s-level GSIs, 36 MFA-level GSIs, and 234 PhD-level GSIs. We asked about their perceptions of the labor conditions in their writing programs—including salary, benefits, and leave policies. Thus, all data featured in this report is self-reported. In this brief report, we highlight the most urgent findings of the study as well as individual GSI responses to the questions. Our hope is that this report will spark conversations about the labor conditions of GSIs. A plain-text version of this report is available on <http://bit.ly/wpagolaborreport>. Please contact rosorio@odu.edu if you have any accessibility issues accessing the report.

GSI WORKLOAD

We asked GSIs how many hours they were contracted to work and how many hours they actually work. The respondents generally report working more than contracted.



62.8%
Work **more** hours than contracted each week



7.6%
Work **fewer** hours than contracted each week



25.9%
Work **the same number** of hours as contracted each week

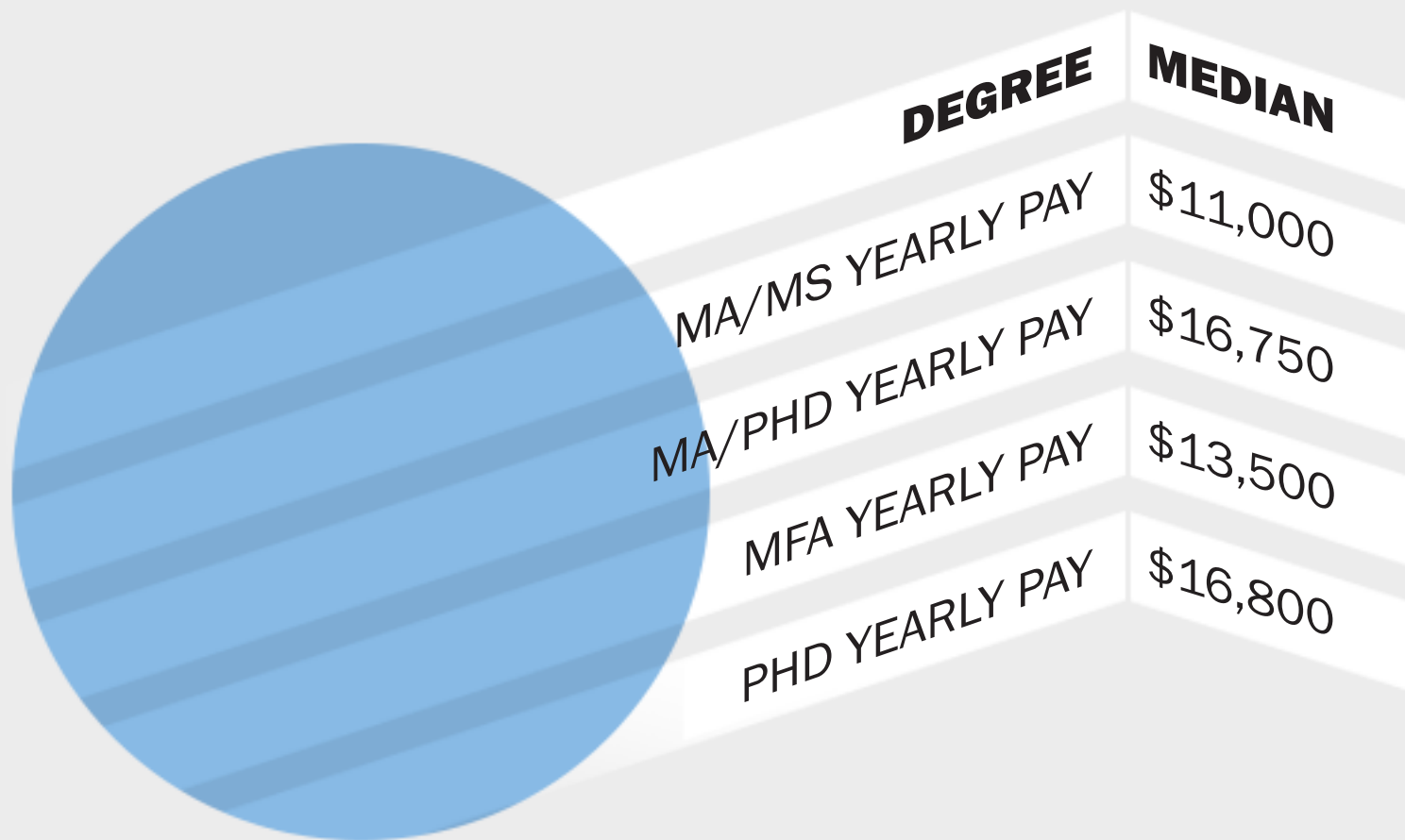
Hours Worked Reported by GSIs

| | |
|---------------|-----|
| <10 | <1% |
| 10-15 | 13% |
| 16-20 | 26% |
| 21-25 | 21% |
| >25 | 39% |

“It seems a certain generation of WPAs does not respect reasonable labor practices. Our WPA expects writing program assistants to work “as many hours as needed to do the job” (her words) without recognizing what is indicated in our contract (that are to work no more than 20 hours/week). Her reasoning is that WPAs should expect to work additional hours and that experiencing this as grad students professionalizes us and will help us get jobs. These expectations and logics are and perpetuate abusive labor practices. For these reasons, I resigned from my position as a writing program coordinator.”

SELF-REPORTED DATA ABOUT BASE STIPENDS FOR GSIS

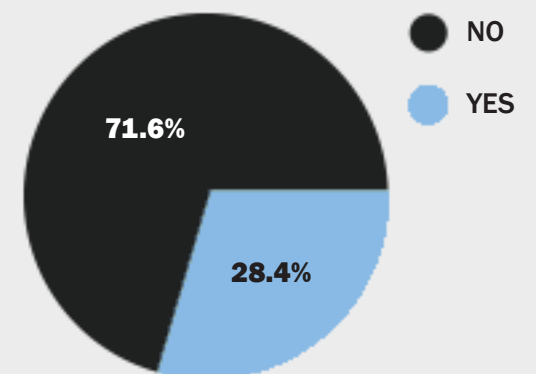
Students reported the yearly base pay for GSIs in their writing program. Here is the breakdown according to degree:



We also asked whether or not GSIs felt their yearly stipend was adequate to cover their living needs, and they overwhelmingly reported (71.6%) that it was not.

Is your stipend adequate for covering your living needs?

341 responses



“GSIs are simply not paid enough for the work and skills provided to the campus community. The low stipends are punitive for nontraditional, first-generation students who may also be single parents. Wages and benefits are exploitive, and only those who take on student loan debt can manage in the area facing increasing housing, heating, and food costs.”

“We deserve better pay and benefits for all the work we do. I love my job, but I’m not surviving financially, and I will no longer be continuing the program because of it.”

We also asked for how many years GSIs were typically fully funded. The following table reports the most common number of years for each:

| DEGREE LEVEL | NO. OF YEARS | % OF RESPONDENTS |
|--------------|--------------|------------------|
| MA/MS | 2 YEARS | 80.60% |
| MFA | 3 YEARS | 67.65% |
| PhD | 4 YEARS | 39.91% |
| PhD | 5 YEARS | 44.60% |

HEALTH INSURANCE

80% of GSIs surveyed report being offered health insurance through their program.

However, these programs are often limited: of all GSIs surveyed, **only 8.5%** are offered the same health plan as faculty and staff, while others are offered student health plans.

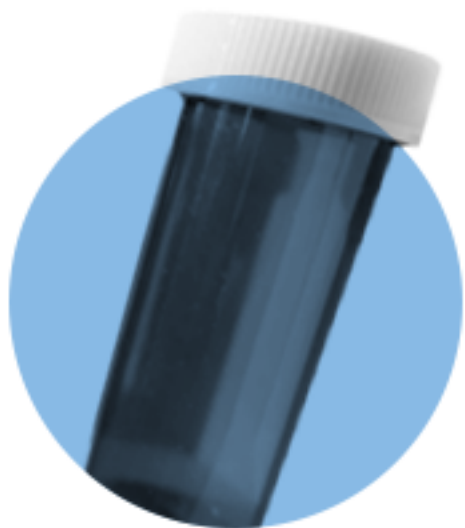
Nearly 15% of GSIs report not being offered health insurance or a stipend to cover health insurance.

When asked if the university health care plan is adequate for covering health needs,

54% said yes, 36% said no, and 10% did not respond.

The most commonly reported ways that health plans do not meet GSI needs:

- Costs (copays, deductibles, premiums) are expensive.
- Providers are limited. For instance, some student plans covered only doctor appointments at the campus health clinic.
- Offered plans do not cover/limit dental or vision health.
- Plans cover only the GSI and not spouses or dependents.



"I can really only use university medical services, which is convenient, but if I wanted to see a doctor off of campus, my medical bills would be outrageous"

"The resources on campus include a month+ long wait time and you can be rejected if you have certain diagnoses."

"Graduate student instructors are not given a health insurance option besides the student health insurance, which is outrageously expensive, especially considering our stipend and that we aren't guaranteed summer funding."

"Women's or trans procedures barely or not covered; insurance over the summer (3 months) is an extra \$600 on top of the academic yearly \$1,400 for two people."

WELLNESS, DIVERSITY, AND PROGRAM CLIMATE

In open-ended questions throughout the survey, GSIs shared stories of how programs do or do not promote wellness, diversity, and safety. Here is what a few said:



“These assistantship programs are designed for healthy, young, single students. They are not appropriate for students with non-normative households, health issues or a lack of familial support.”

“The professors actively abuse grad student labor & can be psychologically abusive as well. Several of the faculty in my dept. are guilty of sexual harassment of grad students. This usually incurs a conversation for a tenured professor. There is no recourse for sexual assault from within the dept., and if so, historically, no repercussion.”

“We get support through our medical insurance, but there is no paid leave available. Students are forced to keep working through mental health crisis (which has happened in our department), and then they put their progress in the degree at risk. Since there is no systematized departmental support for mental health needs, this emotional labor falls to the grad student organization in the department; grad students end up bearing the brunt of this emotional labor, unpaid and unrecognized, and the quality of the support given depends on who is currently in charge of our grad student organization and what their orientation to providing support and care is (which does not always turn out well).”

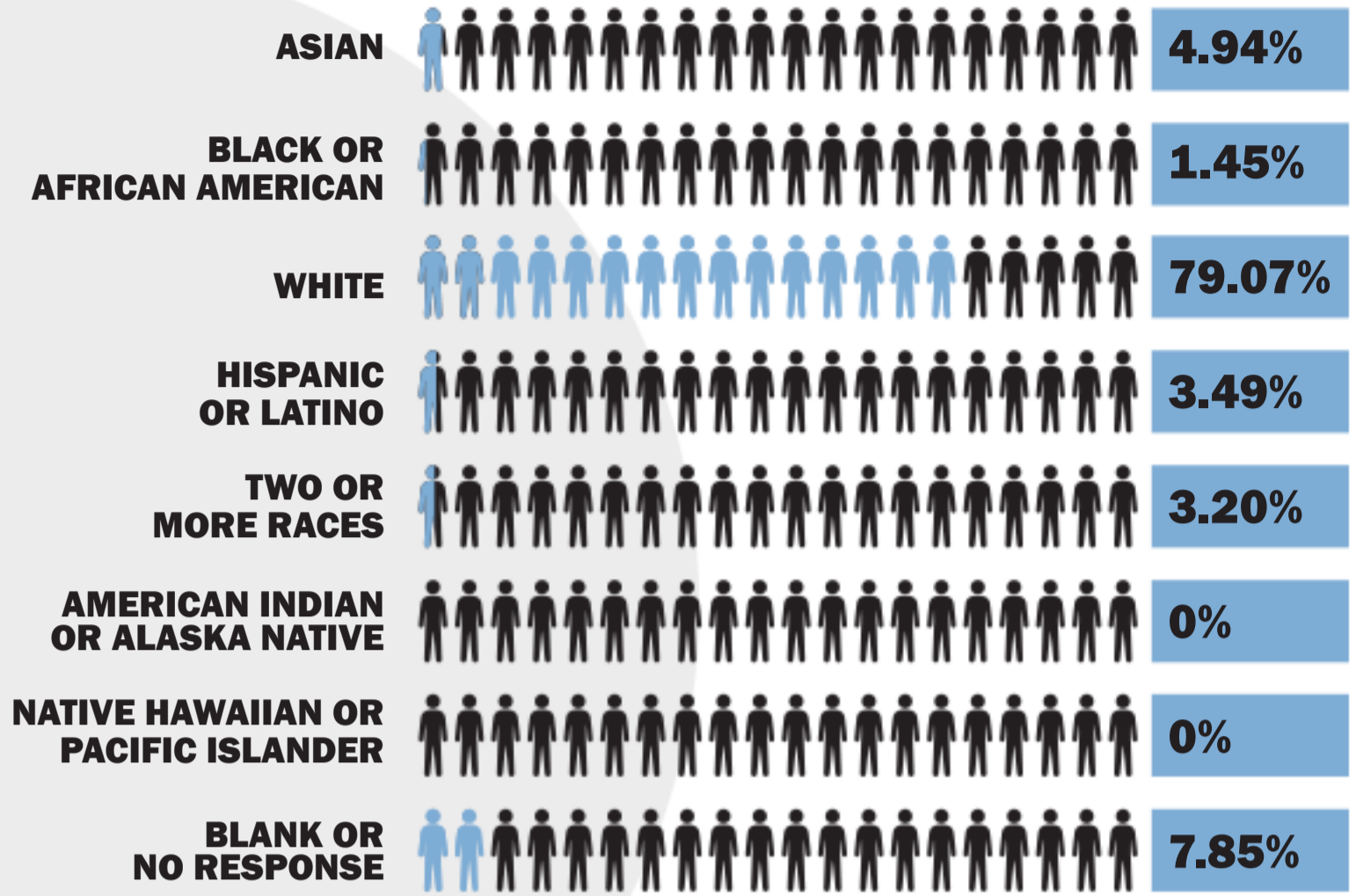
“There is mental health care available through the university, but my understanding is that it is understaffed and only available for short term care (there is a cap, for instance, on how many times you can visit a counselor/psychologist before being referred elsewhere). For this reason, I have never pursued mental health care, though I have come close a number of times (and would probably benefit from it).”

“Having children is also a blessing, but personally it puts me at a disadvantage when it comes to my teaching preparation and research. There is little to no support to mitigate this, and our university yanked dependent coverage from us last year which put more of a strain on our finances and time.”

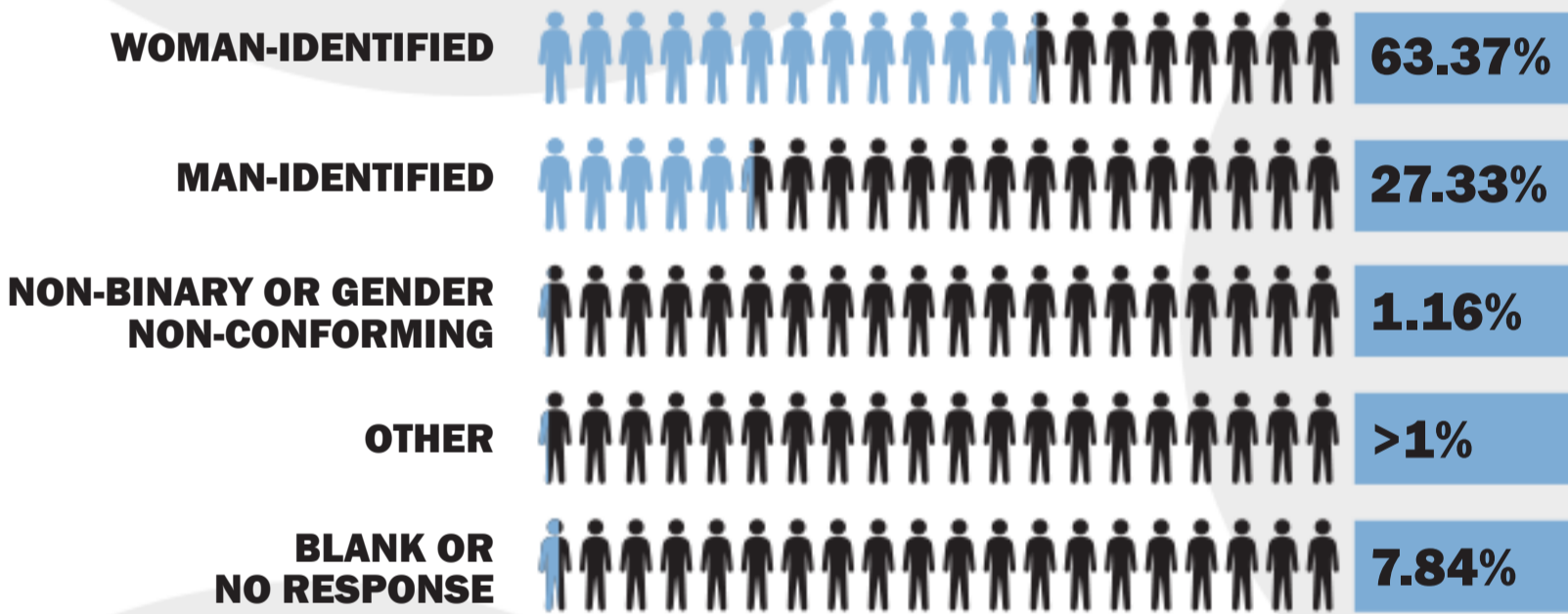
“There’s not enough awareness of how things like finding funding take a heavy toll on our mental and physical health. People give lip service to self-care and wellness, but it is not structurally built into the program at all.”

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

RACIAL IDENTITY



GENDER IDENTITY



SEXUAL ORIENTATION



DISABILITY IDENTITY



CONCLUSION

The takeaways from this report are relatively straightforward and evident in the simple, surface-level percentages and figures: the labor conditions of GSIs are woefully inadequate. Even though the pay for the labor that they have been contracted to do fails to cover the living needs of 71.6% of GSIs, the majority of GSIs (62.8%) still do more work than actually contracted for. The members of the WPA-GO Labor Census Task Force argue that writing programs must address this problem, whether in terms of re-evaluating the scope of the labor that GSIs are asked to do, or by re-evaluating the pay they receive for that labor.

While the remuneration of GSI labor often includes tuition waivers and some form of health insurance (at least for the GSI, if not for family members), the stories that we found dispersed throughout the survey highlight how these benefits are often not enough. It is significant that 36% of GSIs found their health insurance inadequate. Furthermore, we believe connecting their quantitative responses to the much more broadly representative qualitative responses under Wellness, Diversity, and Program Climate is worthwhile. Across the board, in staggering numbers, GSIs are reporting labor conditions that are detrimental to their mental health.

The demographic data tells us another important story: by far, the majority of survey respondents (nearly 80%) identify as white. We can think of two possibilities for why this is the case: (1) we did not prioritize diversity in the distribution of the survey and (2) graduate students instructors of writing are predominantly white. We believe the reality is a mixture of the two. As the field professes the value of diversity in the field, how do we ensure that the pipeline to the professoriate is fair, equitable, and humane? Therefore, we suggest that further research be conducted on the relationship between GSI labor conditions and racial diversity in the profession.

A note: It is worth noting that these preliminary findings are, themselves, the result of uncompensated yet sustained and intensive graduate labor. From GSIs discussing, designing, and drafting the survey; to GSIs appealing to various listservs and directors of graduate studies to pass on our survey, as well as directly soliciting other GSI participants; to hundreds of GSIs devoting time and emotional energies to completing the survey; to GSIs dividing up and replicating coding of the responses and quantifying the exploitation of other GSIs; to the constant emailing and checking in with other members of the Labor Census to ensure that we successfully saw the project through; to the final drafting of this report. Every GSI who contributed labor to the process that led to this document did so while dealing with the kinds of labor issues that this document represents, and many more besides.

