

Healthcare Advocacy in the 2020-21 Year

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📎 4 attachments (2 MB)

cost_of_living.pdf; healthcare_transparency.pdf; petition_response_requested.pdf; state_of_healthcare.pdf;

TL;dr: Caltech administrators have refused to implement the majority of Caltech for Affordable Healthcare's (CAH) petition demands, which were co-signed by over 40% of the grad student body. They have instead severely cut our health benefits for the 2020-21 academic year and implemented no reforms to next year's plan selection process that would allow for greater student input. CAH has sent senior administrators an email urging them to, at the very least, respond in writing to our petition demands to provide a rationale for rejecting them and set up a short-term fund to cover students' out-of-pocket health expenses during this pandemic year. If you are interested in getting more involved please email caltechaffordablehealthcare@gmail.com, patelash29@gmail.com, or socialistsofcaltech@gmail.com.

Dear grad students,

We hope that you are finding ways to take care of yourselves and each other during this time of crisis, as the number of COVID-19 cases continue to rise throughout the United States and on campus. Several weeks ago, we all received an [email from the Benefits Office](#) to waive or enroll in the student health insurance plan for the 2020-21 academic year.

We wanted to take this time to update you on our advocacy efforts to secure a better health insurance plan for graduate students. All of our campaign documents, correspondences with administrators, graphics, and student testimonials are on our website: caltechgradhealth.com.

== Background ==

Caltech for Affordable Healthcare (CAH) formed as an emergency initiative of Socialists of Caltech (SoC) in early April, when members learned of planned drastic cuts to student health benefits during a pandemic. By the time that students at Caltech learned about the proposed cuts, the time for any formal student input into the decision was over, and our community was bracing itself for a deadly pandemic. CAH quickly grew in size to respond to these cuts, and soon afterwards became an autonomous campaign of the GSC Health Subcommittee. Many students in our community were [rightfully distressed by these cuts](#). Given that even before these cuts, the GSC found that 34.7% of grads were avoiding necessary medical care due to cost, there is a real fear that further harm will come to members of our community as a result of these healthcare cuts.

== The CAH Petition and Admin Response ==

After the cuts were proposed by the Faculty's Standing Health Committee on March 31st, CAH received feedback from 260 students before drafting a [healthcare petition](#), which was then signed by 553 grad students (42.6% of the student body!), and 231 Caltech-affiliated supporters including postdocs, faculty,

staff and undergraduates. The petition was also endorsed by 24 student groups. We also produced an [FAQ document](#) to answer the common concerns we encountered in speaking to students. We delivered this petition to senior Caltech administrators on May 1st, but on May 6th Dean of Graduate Studies Doug Rees announced that most of the cuts to our health insurance [had been finalized](#), without any warning and [without further consulting students](#). [Their claim that our stipend increase will cover the increased cost of healthcare is misleading](#), as the stipend increase was proposed by the GSC before we knew about the healthcare cuts, on the basis of other cost of living increases. Furthermore, the cuts will disproportionately affect chronically ill students who make frequent use of healthcare services and cannot be offset by an across-the-board stipend increase.

After the finalized cuts had already been announced, Dean Rees and Prof. Henry Lester, the chair of the Faculty Health Committee, agreed to meet with several members of CAH. During this meeting, while Dean Rees and Prof. Lester explained that they do not have final decision-making power on student benefits, they nevertheless committed to attending a student-run town hall on the insurance plan, the Caltech Emergency Fund, and related issues of student access to healthcare. We look forward to this town hall which we are planning for the Fall quarter.

However, after several months graduate students have still not been given any clarity from senior administration on their rationale or basis for [rejecting the vast majority of our petition demands](#). [We do not even know which administrators made the final decision](#). We believe that Caltech administrators owe the community answers, especially as the pandemic continues to rage in our community, so we are today sending them the following [email](#). We have asked for a written response within two weeks and, if we receive one, will share it with the entire grad student body.

== Outlook ==

In the coming months, the GSC Health Subcommittee and its CAH campaign will continue to advocate for greater student involvement in the selection of our healthcare plan. Currently the student participation consists of one or two nonvoting positions on the [Faculty Standing Health Committee](#), a purely advisory committee that does not even publish its meeting minutes. We are also calling on Caltech to develop a procedure for covering students' out-of-pocket health expenses in the short term, especially during this unprecedented health and economic crisis, the brunt of which will be borne disproportionately by the one third of our community who are chronically ill or disabled. In this we echo the demand of the X-campus network of graduate workers at over 70 universities—of which CAH is a proud member—that schools cover pandemic-related health expenses for all campus workers, as part of the national [Our Risk Our Choice campaign](#).

The last several months of student activity have demonstrated that we grad students have the power to advocate and take care of each other. We look forward to continuing these efforts, building our voices—and our power—together in solidarity. If you are interested in getting more involved please email caltechaffordablehealthcare@gmail.com, patelash29@gmail.com, or socialistsofcaltech@gmail.com.

In Solidarity,
Ashay Patel, Jane Panangaden, and Dawna Bagherian
On Behalf of Caltech for Affordable Healthcare

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