In light of continued rent increases over the past two years at the Aspire at West Campus apartment complex, the Graduate Student Senate has the following statement:

For over fifty years, the University of Iowa operated apartment complexes specifically for students with families and for graduate students. These apartments, Hawkeye Drive and Hawkeye Court, offered affordable housing solutions with easy access to campus through the CAMBUS system. In April 2011, given the age of the buildings and the damage suffered in the 2008 floods, the University decided it would be necessary to either replace the buildings or discontinue offering these housing opportunities. The goal in replacing these apartments was “to continue serving the populations currently living in Hawkeye Campus housing.”[1] After exploring the available options the University decided to avoid constructing apartments that would require charging rental rates above market rates and thus partnered with Balfour Beatty Campus Solutions to construct Aspire at West Campus apartments. The Iowa Board of Regents noted that “BBCS will make the new units as affordable and attractive as possible to tenants.” [2]

When Aspire at West Campus first opened in 2014 there were already concerns about the prices, as noted in the University Housing & Dining annual report for fiscal year 2013: “It appears that our staff’s fear that rates will be beyond the financial means of the people who used to live at Hawkeye Court - our single and married graduate students who are on graduate assistantships - will be realized.”[3] Since 2014, rates have increased at a pace that is unsustainable for graduate students and students with families. At the planned rental rate increases for Fall 2016, a one-bedroom/one-bath apartment will cost $959 per month, far above average market rates. A two-bedroom/two-bath apartment will cost $1239 per month. These rates are 9.6% and 12.6% higher, respectively, than the rental rates just two years ago. Not all graduate students are fortunate enough to receive graduate assistantships to help fund their education, but even those who receive these assistantships can expect to pay as much as 63% of their assistantship pay on rent alone if they live in a one-bedroom apartment at Aspire at West Campus.

BBCS has failed to replace the old family/graduate housing options with newer apartments that maintained the affordability of these living options for their intended market. The University opted for the private partnership to avoid offering apartments that would need to be rented at rates above the market rates. However, despite the private partnership, Aspire at West Campus rates are above market rates for their location. The deal successfully privatized graduate student housing options and absolved the University of responsibility for skyrocketing costs of living, but did little to aid graduate students in finding suitable, convenient, and affordable living arrangements in Iowa City.

We strongly urge Aspire at West Campus to reconsider the planned rent increases. Although it may be too late to construct apartments that are as “affordable and attractive as possible,” the least that can be done is to stop the price gouging of graduate students to maximize profits. In contracting with the University to build replacement family/graduate student housing, there should be some obligation to respect the income of the typical graduate student and the high expenses of students with families.

We are pleased that University administrators seem to be willing to encourage Aspire at West Campus to keep costs low, and we are eager to see continued action from the University on these issues.