REPORT OF
THE GRADUATE ASSISTANT SUCCESS TASK FORCE
JANUARY 2014
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INTRODUCTION

Overall Goals

The task force examined graduate student and graduate assistant policies with the following goals in mind:

1. To recruit and retain graduate students of the highest quality.

2. To optimize the experience and success of graduate students at the University of Houston (UH) and, indirectly, the undergraduate students that they teach and mentor.

Specific Tasks

The specific tasks of the task force were:

1. To review current policies for graduate assistants and graduate students across the colleges at UH, including matters such as stipends, employment conditions, mentorship, professional development, and tuition and fees.

2. To recommend improvements in policies to achieve the goals listed above.
GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT POLICIES

Stipends

Issues

Competitive stipends are key to recruitment and retention. Unless we are competitive in our graduate support, we cannot attract and retain top students.

While stipends vary widely across the University, on the whole UH stipends have not kept up with the national market or regional peers (see Appendix A). This problem is exacerbated by the substantial fees our students must pay that are not covered by the DSTF/GTF. Because stipend levels are not regularly reviewed, they have stagnated, in some cases remaining constant for ten or more years. In the STEM fields, they have also not kept up with levels established by agencies such as the NSF.1 (The increase this year to TA stipends for instruction in core courses, allocated by President Khator, is acknowledged and appreciated.)

The perceived inadequacy of stipends by students in our programs drives some to seek outside employment, distracting their attention from their academic careers and contributing to extended time in program.

Annual allocations for stipends (and supplemental support such as Presidential awards) are not always communicated within a timeframe that enables competitive graduate recruitment for departments and colleges.

Recommendations

1. Identify resources to provide more competitive stipends, and make graduate support a funding priority for the University.

2. Review stipend levels on a regular basis, preferably every three years, to assess their competitiveness and (if appropriate) make recommendations for change. The Teaching Assistant and Teaching Fellows Subcommittee of the Graduate and Professional Studies Committee, in conjunction with relevant administrators, might be an appropriate review body.

3. Provide accurate stipend allocations to colleges in a timely way (during the Fall semester for the following academic year), so that units enter the recruiting season with a full understanding of their resources for graduate support.

4. Provide colleges with up-to-date and time-sensitive information on administrative policies or processes.

5. Maintain flexibility in stipend rates within the institution, since different disciplines and units have different needs, resources, and contexts for competitiveness.

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1 The NSF Graduate Research Fellowship Program offers students a three-year annual stipend of $32,000 along with a $12,000 cost of education allowance for tuition and fees.
Employment Conditions and Opportunities for Professionalization

Issues

Graduate Assistants gain valuable experience and professional development in their fields through research and teaching employment. At the same time, the benefits of employment must be balanced against the time that it takes away from a graduate student’s studies and research. Work conditions at UH are inconsistent, and in some cases workload detracts from the competitiveness of our programs (Appendix B).

The committee discovered that, while 20 hours per week is the official maximum work requirement for 0.5 FTE graduate assistants, in some units the duties required of Teaching Fellows exceed this mark. An imbalance between work and study can have a negative impact on graduate students’ time to completion. In addition, heavy workloads for graduate Teaching Fellows impact undergraduate success as well since larger class sizes are known to inhibit undergraduate success.

UH currently does not offer a combination of employment and fellowship (non-employment) funding to support doctoral students, apart from the Dissertation Completion Fellowships supported by the Houston Endowment. The most competitive institutions and programs offer such combinations.

Teaching Assistantships are largely (though not entirely) confined to lower-division undergraduate classes within a graduate student’s own home department. This limits the types of experience students can gain toward their professionalization. There are also complications in obtaining tuition fellowships in association with stipends if a student’s employment is outside his or her home department.

Recommendations

1. Review workloads across programs so that actual work hours more accurately reflect the official workload of 0.5 FTE for graduate assistants. The types of work required in different units and even among students in a program varies greatly; units should continue to have latitude regarding duties, but also take care in managing graduate student workloads.

2. Develop more opportunities for merit-based, non-employment stipends for graduate students, especially in the first year of graduate study and the final year (dissertation fellowships). Ensure that current programs, like the Dissertation Completion Fellowships, do not end when the Houston Endowment support is no longer in place.

3. Consider creative ways for providing other types of work experience for graduate students throughout the university beyond TA/TF/IA or research assistant (RA) in the home department. Alternative experiences could include working with support services, publications, tutoring, or even partnering with outside entities in community outreach initiatives. Such experiences could be beneficial for graduate students’ professional development and address current trends in post-graduate school employment.
**Intended Outcomes**

1. Increased national competitiveness, allowing UH to recruit top graduate students who choose UH over other schools for their training.

2. Better retention, degree completion, and postgraduate success as students receive adequate and competitive stipends, merit-based fellowships, enriched working conditions, and opportunities to develop professionally.

3. Improved communication between administration and colleges and streamlined administration processes.

4. Improved commitment of graduate students to UH and increased numbers of active alumni after graduation.
MENTORSHIP AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Inadequate Training for Job Seeking

Issue

Data collected by the Survey of Earned Doctorates\(^2\) suggests that some PhD students might not be as professionally prepared as they need to be in order to pursue their careers. This survey is a part of the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago (NORC). Ph.D. graduates are surveyed soon after degree completion, and response rates are very high. The most recent data (2011) relevant to this issue is Postgraduation commitment of doctorate recipients, by broad field of study: Selected years, 1991–2011. Of 49,010 Ph.D. graduates in the US in all fields, 34.5% indicated ‘No definite commitment for employment or postdoctoral study’, a fraction that is not significantly different across disciplines. We find this figure to be troubling, because arrangements for post-Ph.D. employment or study should be made at least 6 months in advance. These data suggest that Ph.D. students are either unaware of opportunities available to them, or unable to effectively pursue them.

Recommendations

1. Increase job-seeking opportunities for students
   a. Host events (by discipline) to acquaint students with academic and non-academic career opportunities
   b. Even one or two events for all department PhD students would ‘dissolve some of the alienation and loneliness they feel.’
   c. Track careers of graduate students
      i. Perhaps the graduate school could pair with the alumni association to keep this list updated
      ii. Providing a list of employers would broaden horizons of current students
   d. Archive web resources and employment opportunities
   e. Add a graduate specialist to the staff at the University Career Services center
   f. Create more Dissertation Completion Fellowships perhaps through the Graduate School, that allow students to solely work on projects that will enhance their CV by reducing other workload

2. Train students to give job talks:
   a. Organize opportunities to practice and receive feedback from faculty (e.g., brown bag talks)
   b. Perhaps a new, centralized center (with similar spirit to CTE/DTAR) within the Graduate School that requires that all graduate students (or just those who will be

\(^2\) http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/srvydoctorates/
TAs or TFs) participate in a 1-hour semester-long course that teaches presentation skills that will benefit students who give symposium presentations, poster presentations

i. This entity could also serve as a “training the trainer” location for departments who wish to do their own separate and/or additional work.

3. Increased travel reimbursement for conference presentations

4. Earlier approval of recruiting visitation funds

   a. Students often choose programs based on strong mentoring possibilities, which can be conveyed with a face-to-face visit

5. Provide training in:

   a. The academic publishing process
   b. Pursuing tenure
   c. Writing grant proposals
   d. Conference presentations and poster sessions

6. Individual development plans (IDPs)

   a. This could be provided through the Graduate School
   b. Web-based tools to plan graduate studies around a student’s interests and strengths
   c. For example: [http://myidp.sciencecareers.org/Overview/Summary](http://myidp.sciencecareers.org/Overview/Summary)
Training of Teaching Assistants and Fellows

Issue

Instructors are not trained to teach. Better-trained instructors directly influence undergraduate student success, enhance the quality of life for Teaching Assistants and Teaching Fellows, and potentially justify higher stipends.

Recommendations

1. Provide training and resources for Teaching Assistants and Teaching Fellows on pedagogical strategies, classroom management, grading, etc.

2. Perhaps a new, centralized center (with similar spirit to CTE/DTAR) within the Graduate School that requires that all graduate students (or just those who will be TAs or TFs) participate in a 1-hour semester-long course that teaches presentation skills that will benefit
students who give symposium presentations, poster presentations, and who teach. Such training is required at many other institutions. The CTE’s efforts in TA training have just been discontinued, and we should strive to retain the instructors, infrastructure and materials so that these are dispersed.

### Mentorship of Graduate Students

**Issue**
In addition to didactic learning in a professional discipline, there are ‘apprenticeship’ aspects that would enhance the application of these skills.

**Recommendations**

1. Provide a formal, official mentorship system wherein senior graduate students mentor junior graduate students. The University’s Graduate Student Organization might be a group to lead in development of this effort.
2. Provide support in the form of references and tools made available on the University’s Graduate School website.
3. Provide internship or networking opportunities
   a. Maintain a central repository of these opportunities, organized by discipline
   b. Make effective use of social media to market to targeted audiences.
4. Train new faculty in mentoring – add this to the new faculty orientation (Olenchak at Faculty Development and Faculty Affairs is in charge of this orientation)
5. There is a University Career Center – more consistently bring in recruiters to a career day for graduate students
6. Create award for graduate mentorship
   a. This award would be measured by:
      a. Students applying for fellowships/grants
      b. Student letters of recommendation
      c. Quality of positions students have after graduation
      d. Presentation at conferences
      e. Co-authoring publications and presentations with graduate students
7. Emphasize mentoring in annual faculty review

### Language Barriers

1. There is anecdotal evidence that TAs with uncertain English skills are teaching undergraduate sections. While the university community welcomes its international diversity, it is important that teaching staff be well-practiced in the Language of Instruction at UH.
2. University policy requires that TAs have score of 25 or greater on the speaking part of the TOEFL, or score a 50 on the SPEAK test (there are few exclusions to this requirement). Some colleges are exempt from this requirement, and instead rely on in-house systems to determine English competency. Our experience with these TAs indicates that such local
systems are not effective. The university must begin enforcing its language requirements campus-wide.

3. There is no requirement for a minimum TOEFL speaking score for admission. We recommend this be established at 20, and that students admitted with scores between 20 and 24 be required to take the SPEAK test.

4. International students with degrees from English-institutions are exempt from meeting language requirements. This exemption should be removed.

5. International students who require more English training at the UH Language and Culture Center should be encouraged to do so, and perhaps part of their tuition for the language course could be paid by the college or university.
Definitions & Context

According to the university website, “graduate tuition and fees vary depending on department…residence status…graduate level…and courses (taken).” The website directs students to 4 different hyperlinks “for a full picture of what you’ll pay.”

Tuition

For graduate students, tuition is calculated and assessed as a cost per semester credit hour (SCH). For example, the Fiscal Year 2014 tuition rates for masters’ students ranged from $334 (CLASS 2) to $673 (Business) per SCH for residents and $688-$1,027 respectively for non-residents.

Fees

The structure of fees for graduate students is divided into three categories: (1) Required Graduate Fees, (2) Miscellaneous Fees and (3) Optional Fees. In FY 2013, the Required Graduate Fees (Extended Access, Recreation & Wellness Center, Student Services and UC) totaled $798 per semester. An additional Health Insurance fee of $554 per semester was assessed to international students. The Miscellaneous Fees and Optional Fees vary.

Addition fees are assessed at the college level and vary accordingly. Examples include:

1. Consolidated Incidental Fees
   [http://www.uh.edu/financial/graduate/tuition-fees/tuition/tuition-table-2014/]
2. Lab Fees, ABD Fees and Study Abroad Fees
   [http://www.uh.edu/financial/graduate/tuition-fees/college-fees/]

Observations

While a policy could not be identified regarding fees, the Graduate Tuition Fellowship (GTF) appears to be the university policy specific to tuition benefits/awards for graduate students. It is our observation that the policy is subjected to 3 very different views and interpretations (university, college business offices & students), resulting in varied outcomes for students and their respective colleges. By definition, GTF provides a monetary award that exclusively covers University Designated Tuition.

Issues

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3 [http://www.uh.edu/financial/graduate/tuition-fees/]
4 [http://www.uh.edu/financial/graduate/tuition-fees/required-fees/]
A number of issues have been identified:

1. For the graduate student population, there is a large degree of variance in the financial benefits, as well as the financial burdens, associated with the GTF.

2. Because graduate students are responsible for paying the Consolidated Incidental Fees, Required Graduate Fees, Miscellaneous Fees and Optional Fees, they incur substantial financial responsibilities specific to fees, depending on their college/program, non-resident status and number of SCHs taken. [See illustration provided.]

3. Issue #2 makes it difficult for programs to clearly convey to graduate students their financial responsibilities. This has direct implications for the recruitment of graduate students, particularly highly qualified graduate students who apply to other programs that are able to provide more accurate estimates of awards and financial responsibilities/out-of-pocket expenses.

4. Over the past two years (or since the revisions to GATF), several colleges have been notified by the university that they incorrectly allocated GTF funds to “unqualified” expenses (e.g. college designated tuition) and were responsible for returning the funds. This resulted in financial burdens for colleges and students in that some colleges directly absorbed the costs, while others passed these costs on to the students.

5. It appears the funding amounts for GTF have not increased over the years; however, tuition and fees have consistently increased, thereby resulting in increased out-of-pocket financial responsibility for graduate students. For those academic units that offer masters and doctoral programs, some were forced to support only doctoral students in the context of the Tier One initiative, thus withdrawing support of masters students.

Recommendations

The GTF award should include (1) university designated tuition, (2) consolidated incidental fees and (3) required graduate fees at a rate of 9 SCHs per long semester (Fall/Spring) for graduate students who are granted the award by their college/program.

This recommendation is not a new one for the University of Houston in that it mirrors most aspects of the prior GATF that was replaced by DSTF/GTF. Our recommendation proposes to modernize or update the former GATF in a manner that better addresses the rising costs of fees for graduate students.

We would like to examine data that would allow a comparison of graduate students’ semester bill balances during GATF to their balances post-GATF (once DSTF and GTF were implemented). We believe that an examination of the proportion of <bill balance> to <tuition award> would reveal a much lower rate during the GATF time period than now under GTF/DSTF.

Benefits

We believe benefits will be realized for students, colleges/programs and the university. They include:

1. Increased ability of UH to recruit highly qualified graduate students by allowing programs to offer financial packages that cover tuition as well as the majority of fees associated with enrollment
2. Improved marketability of GA, RA, IA, TA and TF as awards

3. A reduction in the financial burden for graduate students who are awarded the GTF would make their graduate studies more affordable. This could reduce their need for outside employment and improve time-to-completion rates.

4. For colleges that assign GTF recipients undergraduate teaching responsibilities, there are implications for undergraduate student success.

**DATA**

1. College-level estimates of semester bill balances for graduate students once the GTF amount has been applied…what percentage of a student’s semester bill is represented by what GTF does NOT pay?
2. Tuition Awards of peer institutions
3. GATF information

**ILLUSTRATION FROM GCSW** - Fall 2013, Ph.D. Student, 9 SCHs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Costs/Rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuition-GRAD-RES-GCSW</td>
<td>$2,970.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fees-GRAD-GCSW</td>
<td>$413.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation/Wellness Center</td>
<td>$84.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Services</td>
<td>$240.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Center</td>
<td>$135.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Semester Bill</strong></td>
<td><strong>$3,843.00</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GTF-FALL 2013 Award</td>
<td>-2,536.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Financial Obligation ($3,843.00 - $2,536.83)</strong></td>
<td><strong>$1,306.77</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Graduate Student Financial Obligation after GTF ($1,306.77/$3,843.00)</td>
<td>33.98%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this illustration, fees represent one third (33.98%) of this student's financial obligation. As a Research Assistant in the GCSW, this financial obligation represents approximately one month of salary. Alternatively stated, this student must use 11% of the RA stipend to pay fees. This illustration does not include other likely fees such as parking, lab fees, ABD fees, etc.
APPENDICES

Appendix A

Stipend Rates at UH Relative to National Averages

Comparison between Teaching Assistant (TA) stipends (2012-13) at UH and at other universities. Each point represents a different doctoral program. If UH stipends were aligned with national trends, we would expect the points to fall on the dashed line. On average, UH stipends are 18% lower than those at other Universities.

UH Programs
CLASS: Economics, Creative Writing, History, and Psychology.
EDUC: Curriculum and Instruction, and Educational Psychology.
ENGR: Chemical Engineering and Electrical Engineering.
NSM: Biology, Chemistry and Mathematics.

National Averages
Appendix B

Class Sizes in First-Year Writing Courses

Comparison between enrollment caps in first-year writing courses equivalent to ENGL 1303 and ENGL 1304. Lighter colors indicate a range. For example, as of 8/27/2013, 50 sections of ENGL 1303 and ENGL 1304 had an enrollment of 27–29 students. Approximately 77% of these courses are being taught by TFs this fall.

Of 230 schools surveyed in 2010 by Richard H. Haswell, Professor Emeritus, Texas A&M University, Corpus Christi, for the Writing Program Administrators Listserv, only 11 have course caps as large as or larger than UH’s (27) (http://comppile.org/profresources/classsize). The National Council of Teachers of English recommends a class size of 15. The Conference of College Composition and Communication Writing Program Certificate of Excellence, a distinction long sought by UH, is not awarded to any program with more than 20 students in a class. (http://www.ncte.org(positions/statements/whyclasssizematters)