



GRADUATE COLLEGE

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MEMO

RE: Final Recommendation from the Graduate Student Support Issues Task Force

Background and Context

Oklahoma State University (OSU) faculty, students, staff and administrators have identified the lack of competitiveness of our graduate student financial support packages as the most pressing graduate education issue. This concern is well founded in anecdotal evidence and peer survey data noted throughout this report. For example, according to the 2010 National Science Foundation *Survey of Earned Doctorates* (NSF SED), OSU graduate students have longer median times to degrees since starting graduate school in science and engineering fields (S&E; 7.6 years) and non-S&E fields (11.2 years), compared to the national averages for doctoral/research institutions (7.0 and 10.4 years, respectively). Indeed, even when the all-field comparisons are made only against “high research” institutions as classified by the Carnegie Foundation — 9.3 (OSU) versus 8.7 (high research) and 7.7 years (all) — the concern remains.

There are numerous issues that arise when it takes students longer to complete degrees, such as the lack of degree completion and the potential loss of human capital. One issue that has rightfully received significant attention recently is student debt. In the graduate student population, this problem was exacerbated by the loss of government-subsidized loans in July 2012 – interest now accrues during graduate study. The 2010 NSF SED also shows that OSU graduate students take on more debt than their peers – 38.3% (OSU) versus 47.5% (high research) and 52.3% (all) without debt.

Two obvious contributors to OSU graduate student debt and time to degree concerns are lack of competitive tuition waivers and stipends. For example, many OSU units/departments have graduate student stipends below the 25th percentile compared to national data or select “peer institutions.” Moreover, OSU’s graduate student tuition waiver program does not cover a full course load (9 credit hours) even with a full-time assistantship (0.5 FTE). Even though our current discount rate for graduate tuition (nonresident and resident) continues to increase, — 74% in FY12; up from 51% just ten years ago — we are not offering competitive financial packages for graduate students.

To begin to address these issues, the Graduate Student Support Issues Task Force (GSSI; membership below) was formed with representative membership across OSU. Working with the full support of central administration, the Task Force started its work last spring, shortly after the Internal Revenue Service issue concerning graduate assistants employment definitions came to light. For several months, GSSI Task Force members spent considerable time and effort looking at peer data, national best practices, and crafting a set of solutions to address Oklahoma State University’s (OSU’s) ability to attract outstanding talent within our fiscal realities, which are a

significant limiting factor. The focus was on four broad categories, employment definitions, stipends, waivers and appointments, that are not independent from one another.

On Wednesday, June 27, 2012, the GSSI draft recommendations were sent to all members of the OSU Faculty Listserv by the Provost's Office. That list serve and numerous other communication tools, such as the Graduate College Monday Memo, were used to widely advertise the university-wide Forums. There were five Forums from July to September that were well attended by faculty, staff and students. In addition, committee members offered and met with program groups, departments, faculty groups, graduate coordinators, Graduate Council Groups, college leadership groups, Graduate and the Professional Student Government Association, etc. over the last four months. Numerous committee members attended the Forums to ensure we captured the essence of the conversations.

Taking into account the feedback in the Forums and other meetings, below are the GSSI Task Force's final recommendations. These were developed through a series of thoughtful and difficult deliberations that attempted to balance our desire to provide appropriate financial resources to support talented, high-caliber graduate students and to improve time-to-degree and degree-completion, all within our very real budgetary constraints. There is a conscious decision not to dilute our limited resources but to support graduate students in a more comprehensive manner. These recommendations reflect a very challenging balance between providing benefits and available resources, and there is strong consensus and support across the Task Force and, more important, the OSU community for them.

Given the complexity of our graduate student financial support structures, these recommendations cannot be implemented immediately, but will require a thoughtful Implementation Plan be developed, as noted below.

Graduate Student Employment Definitions

New graduate student employment definitions that were designed to be more inclusive and compliant with federal regulations were endorsed at all levels (Graduate, Faculty, Instruction and Deans' Councils) and were implemented in fall 2012. They are Graduate Teaching Assistant/Associate (GTA), Graduate Research Assistant/Associate (GRA), and Student Worker, and the use of "assistant" for master's-level and "associate" for doctoral-level GTA and GRA appointments. The more general Graduate Assistant (GA) title was retired.

Graduate Student Stipends

Using Oklahoma State University (OSU) Institutional Research and Information Management (IRIM) survey data, Graduate Teaching and Research Assistants (GTAs/GRAs) stipends were compared to the national level and "peer institutions." For "peer institutions," we selected those that our graduate programs might routinely compete with for students *and* who also participated in the annual IRIM survey. Therefore, some obvious institutions could not be included due to a lack of data. Our "peer institutions" were Auburn University, Clemson University, Kansas State University, Louisiana State University, North Carolina State University – Raleigh, Texas Tech University, University of Nebraska – Lincoln, and University of Oklahoma.

In comparing OSU graduate student stipends, it was obvious that whether we examine the national data or our select "peer institutions" many units/departments have stipends at or below the 25th percentile. If OSU is to attract talented students and faculty, we need to increase

graduate student stipends. Moreover, being able to recruit outstanding graduate students means that we will have better qualified teaching assistants which will in turn help address undergraduate retention issues. The potential to enhance undergraduate student retention was a compelling reason that general university funding has been committed already.

Stipend Recommendations

1. For GTA offers being made during Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, for admission during FY 2015, all OSU units/departments/colleges pay stipends no less than the average rate determined based on selected “peer institutions.” A plan is being finalized to invest ~\$1.8M in GTA stipends from general university.
 - a. Note: \$500,000 of this total has already been secured from general university. Pending the availability of the funds, the additional \$1,300,000 in reoccurring funds will be available for distribution to current GTAs in fall 2013 (FY 2014).
 - b. Note: Because of the nature of GRAs, no general university funding is committed.
2. Differential pay for more experienced GTAs and GRAs should be adopted by all units or continued where it is already employed. This differential pay within a unit should be at least 15% higher for students who have master’s degree in the academic discipline or who are post-candidacy in the OSU PhD program.
3. GRAs in good standing, whether funded internally or via external sources, should be paid no less than an equivalent-level GTA (differential pay and/or other unit-level criteria apply).
 - a. Note: Current research grants would be grandfathered until expiration.
4. The University-wide minimum level of GTA/GRA support will be set to match the unit whose stipend based on selected “peer institutions” is the lowest across all OSU units/departments. This minimum will be updated by the Graduate College on an annual basis.
5. The Dean of the Graduate College in collaboration with the Associate Deans for Research (ADRs) and Administration and Finance will provide the oversight to ensure graduate student stipends remain competitive. At least once a year, the Dean of the Graduate College will discuss graduate student stipends with the ADRs and representatives from other relevant units, such as the Director of IRIM. Prior to this meeting, the ADRs should perform an internal audit of all units/departments within their colleges to evaluate the actual stipend being paid to all GTAs and GRAs. During this meeting, trends in OSU GTA stipends versus selected “peer institutions” will be examined to ensure that we continue to offer competitive stipends.
 - a. Note: This group would also be responsible for monitoring the impact and potential unintended consequences of the other recommended changes in graduate student financial support packages.

The Task Force strongly believes that providing more competitive GTA stipends relative to selected “peer institutions” within two years is an achievable goal; however, it is also widely believed that for OSU to continue to attract the outstanding talent and thereby meet the teaching, research, and outreach missions of this land-grant University, it is imperative that we continue to find ways to move GTA and GRA stipends beyond this initial increase.

Graduate Student Tuition Waivers

As noted above, OSU’s tuition waiver program does not support decreased student debt and time-to-degree. Moreover, the structure of OSU’s graduate student tuition waiver program is

overly complex, a struggle to articulate accurately in graduate student offer letters, and a challenge to manage by units and colleges. It does not provide competitive waivers for graduate students, even though our current discount rate for graduate tuition (nonresident and resident) continues to increase – 74% in FY12. Note, by State rule (Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, OSRHE, *Policy and Procedures Manual* 4.18.6), fees are not eligible for discount, and tuition waivers refer to the applicable resident and/or nonresident graduate tuition.

Given the issues with the tuition waiver program, several “peer institution” programs were examined. In comparison to our OSRHE Peer Group (Iowa State University, Kansas State University, Texas Tech University, University of Kansas, University of Missouri – Columbia, University of Nebraska – Lincoln, University of Oklahoma, University of Texas – Austin, and West Virginia University), OSU’s graduate resident tuition and mandatory fees are one of the least expensive, and the nonresident rate is near the middle. Using websites, phone calls and email, information on “peer institution” waiver policies concerning eligible courses, appointment terms, full-time and part-time appointments (full-time equivalent, FTE) requirements, courses or programs restrictions, resident versus nonresident status, etc. were obtained. Because the information source was different, selected “peer institutions” are not identical to those used in the stipend survey. In this case, they were Colorado State University, Iowa State University, Kansas State University, Louisiana State University, Texas A&M University, Texas Tech University, University of Arkansas, University of Kansas, University of Missouri – Columbia, University of Nebraska – Lincoln, University of Oklahoma, and University of Texas – Austin. There is overlap between the lists – Kansas State University, Louisiana State University, University of Oklahoma, University of Nebraska – Lincoln, and Texas Tech University.

Analogous to the stipend survey, trends emerged in the comparisons. Taking into account those findings, our stipend needs, our financial realities and our goals, the initial recommendations were developed. Given the concerns raised during the Forums concerning the 0.25 FTE assistantship tuition waiver benefits being discontinued, additional data was examined. Institutional Research and Information Management (IRIM) in collaboration with Administration and Finance provided financial projections for a variety of tuition waiver scenarios. From a financial viewpoint, nonresident waivers present the greatest challenge. For example, in FY 12 OSU committed \$12.3M on nonresident and \$3.3M on resident graduate student tuition waivers in addition to \$1.2M in graduate student tuition waivers through special programs, such as McNair, Academic Scholars, spousal nonresident waivers and MOUs, for a total of \$16.8M. Just to add an additional three credit hours to the tuition waiver program, which would allow 0.50 FTE graduate assistants to take a “full” load, results in a projected \$17.1M graduate tuition waiver budget. This \$0.3M net increase in waivers also includes eliminating waivers for assistantships that are less than 0.50 FTE and is on top of the \$1.8M stipend investment. To add even a 50% discount in the resident and nonresident tuition for 0.25 to 0.49 FTE assistantships would increase the graduate student tuition waiver budget to \$19.5M.

Unfortunately, OSU does not have the financial resources to continue the 0.25 FTE tuition waivers and address mission-critical stipends and needed tuition waiver program changes that support degree completion in a timely manner. Our current waiver program that has grown from \$6.7M (51% discount rate in FY03) to \$16.8M (74% discount rate in FY12) in the last ten years is not financially sustainable and fiscally responsible. However, the Task Force certainly recognizes that there are at least a couple of programs with specific challenges, such as

accreditation and student workload requirements, that significantly hindered students from being able to have 0.50 FTE appointments. Therefore, it is recommended that specific procedure for program exceptions be developed during the Implementation Phase for these very rare circumstances.

Tuition Waiver Recommendations

6. Graduate students who are admitted to and enrolled in any OSU graduate degree granting program may be awarded a qualifying GTA or GRA that may have resident and/or nonresident tuition waiver benefits associated with the appointment.
 - a. Current Policy: Tuition waiver eligibility applies to all OSU master's and doctoral degree programs.
 - b. Current Policy: Students in graduate certificates, non-degree seeking students (aka special students), etc. are not eligible for GTA or GRA positions or associated tuition waiver benefits.
 - c. Current Policy Clarification: Courses eligible for tuition waivers are defined as those graduate courses directly relevant to the student's degree program (i.e., Plan of Study, POS, or proposed POS).
 - d. Recommendation: Once enrolled, good academic standing (i.e., not on academic probation; beyond probationary admission) is a requirement for OSU tuition waiver eligibility.
7. Recommendation: OSU graduate tuition waivers would apply to 0.50 FTE GTA/GRA positions, with academic programs being able to apply for an exception for their program with compelling justification.
 - a. GTA/GRA positions with less than a combined total 0.50 FTE would no longer qualify for tuition waiver benefits, only graduate student health insurance.
 - i. As mentioned above, OSU does not have the financial resources to continue the 0.25 FTE tuition waivers and address mission-critical stipends and needed tuition waiver program changes that support degree completion in a timely manner.
 - ii. At least one academic program made a compelling case during the Forums and discussions that made it clear to the Task Force that there is a need for program exceptions. During the Implementation Phase, the procedure for program exception requests will be developed.
 - iii. Given our existing commitments, the Implementation Phase will include a thoughtful transition plan.
8. Recommendation: OSU tuition waivers are limited to the number of hours in the degree program.
 - a. Note: This eliminates the current semester 6/6/3 credit-hour restrictions.
 - b. Note: There is no intention of leaving graduate students without access to tuition waivers. The Implementation Phase will need to address current students and academic policies that create a buildup of credit hours beyond their degree programs.
 - i. Any Graduate Faculty advisor with a graduate student with specific issues still may request special consideration under the new policy.
9. Recommendation: OSU tuition waivers are based on the length of qualifying appointment.
 - a. Recommendation: At a minimum, a qualifying appointment is defined by the academic calendar terms and sessions.

- i. For example, the definition of a fall or spring semester is 16/17 weeks (classwork begins to classwork ends or when finals week ends).
 - b. Recommendation: OSU tuition waivers are prorated when a student does not complete the assignment/term/session/etc.
 - i. Note: Currently, the entire waiver is rescinded.
 - c. Current Policy: Full-time enrollment is required for a graduate student with a qualifying assistantship to be eligible for a tuition waiver.
 - i. Recommendation: For those graduate students with an assistantship, full time is defined as minimum enrollment in 6 credit hours in the fall or spring semester and 2 credit hours in a summer term.
 - a. Note: This would be a reduction of 1 credit hour in the summer (3 to 2), to better align with the summer enrollment requirements for the student FICA exemption.
10. Current Policy: Current eligibility with respect to OSU graduate student health insurance coverage is retained.
 - a. Note: Analogous to Recommendation 9a above, a qualifying appointment would be dependent on the length of the appointment, not number of hours worked.
 - b. Note: Graduate student insurance would continue to be available to those on a qualifying appointment of least 0.25 FTE.
11. Current Policy: Current OSU policy that prohibits concurrent use of Faculty/Staff Tuition Waiver and GTA/GRA tuition waiver is retained.
12. Current Policy: Current OSU policy with respect to Graduate Student Spouse Tuition Waiver is retained.

Graduate Student Appointments

The aforementioned changes require an alignment of the policies concerning graduate student appointments. Moreover, over the past year there have been several issues that have come up with respect to appointments that require clarification. For example, there have been several instances where graduate students are employed more than 100%, including a case exceeding 140%. In addition, OSU Human Resources has noted that some appointment combinations are not appropriate with respect to Federal regulations. Therefore, the Task Force examined graduate student appointments keeping these issues in mind, as well as the aforementioned goal of supporting and attracting outstanding talent.

Appointment Recommendations

13. Current Policy: GTAs/GRAs need to be admitted to and enrolled full time in a graduate degree program in order to be eligible for a tuition waiver and benefits.
 - a. Recommendation: For those graduate students with an assistantship, full time is defined as minimum enrollment in 6 credit hours in the fall or spring semester and 2 credit hours in a summer term.
 - i. Note: This would be a reduction of 1 credit hour, from 3 to 2, to better align with the summer enrollment requirements for the student FICA exemption.
14. Current Policy: GTA/GRA appointments are a minimum of 0.25 FTE and a maximum of 0.50 FTE during the spring and fall semesters. During the summer, GTA/GRA appointments are allowable up to 0.75 FTE. Stacking of appointments (GTA/GRA) is allowed up to those limits.
 - a. Recommendation: GTA/GRA appointments are made in 0.25 FTE increments.

- a. Current Policy Clarification: Irrespective of the FTE or combined FTE, graduate student assistantships are not benefit-eligible positions with respect to OSU’s standard employee benefits package. Graduate students are provided graduate-student health insurance options with certain qualifying appointments. Note that provisions in the Affordable Care Act may require additional clarifications.
- 15. Current Policy Clarification: Due to Federal employment regulations, stacking of “hourly” and “exempt” positions is not generally permitted, unless the two positions are *significantly* different. All GTA and GRA positions are considered exempt positions. (We were able to address the vast majority of these issues this fall in a manner that was mutually satisfactory for all.)
- 16. Current Policy: The expected work load for a 0.25 FTE position is generally 10 hours per week on average and 20 hours a week on average for a 0.50 FTE appointment.
 - a. Note: Hours exceeding these averages or FTEs not aligning with the workload is a common complaint and very serious concern.
- 17. Current Policy Clarification: Any exceptions to GTA/GRA appointments, such as appointments exceeding the maximums allowed, need the prior approval of the Dean of the Graduate College before any offer of appointment is made.

Moving Forward

After the final GSSI Task Force recommendations are adopted, the multifaceted work will begin on developing an Implementation Plan. Given the complexity of these issues, it is not possible to immediately apply these policies. The Implementation Plan will address academic policies that need to be updated to align with the recommendations, honor prior commitments, determine grandfathering needs, set a transition schedule, and be sensitive to changes in resources and planning that may be required. Examples of academic policy issues that must be addressed are those that lengthen time to degree, have students taking credit hours in excess of those stipulated by their degree programs, etc. The overarching goal of the Implementation Plan remains the same as the original Task Force – to attract and retain outstanding graduate students and to facilitate their successful, timely degree completion through more comprehensive financial support.

As with any policy, there are always need for consideration of exceptions, especially give the rich disciplinary and interdisciplinary diversity that exists in graduate education. The Dean of the Graduate College will continue to review and provide policy exceptions as necessary.

Endorsements

- Graduate Council November 16, 2012
- Instruction Council December 7, 2012
- Faculty Council (Accepted) December 11, 2012
- Deans Council December 13, 2012

GSSI Membership

- 1. Bruce Benjamin – interim vice provost, Center for Health Sciences
- 2. Lee Bird – vice president, Office of Student Affairs
- 3. Julie Berg – assoc. director, Scholarships and Financial Aid
- 4. Mary Bryans – director, Budget Operations
- 5. Lowell Caneday – vice chair, Graduate Council; COE

6. Gary Clark – vice president and general counsel, Office of the President
7. Rachel Eike – president, Graduate and Professional Student Government Association; CoHS
8. Rich Frohock – associate professor, English; CAS
9. Linda Good – assistant director, Scholarships and Financial Aid
10. Christie Hawkins – director, Institutional Research and Information Management
11. Regina Henry – coordinator of immigration, Office of International Students and Scholars
12. Jodie Kennedy – fiscal officer, Graduate College
13. Clint Krehbiel – chair, Faculty Council; CASNR
14. Christa Louthan – assistant chief human resources officer, Human Resources
15. Tanya Massey – assistant director, Residential Life, Office of Student Affairs
16. Jim Pappas – assistant professor, Management; SSB
17. Jean Sander – dean, Center for Veterinary Health Sciences
18. Matt Short – professional, Scholarships and Financial Aid
19. Jeff Simpson – past president, Graduate and Professional Student Government Association; COE
20. Dan Storm – professor, Biosystems and Agricultural Engineering; CASNR/CEAT
21. Keith Teague – head, Electrical and Computer Engineering; CEAT
22. Sheryl Tucker – dean, Graduate College
23. Jean Van Delinder – associate dean, Graduate College
24. Ron Van Den Bussche – associate dean, College of Arts and Science
25. Stephan Wilson – dean, College of Human Sciences