

Graduate Stipend and Benefits Task Force Report

In early February 2005, John A. Koropchak, Vice Chancellor for Research/Graduate Dean, called together a task force to examine stipend rates and benefits for graduate assistants at SIUC in relationship to our peers. He also requested that the group provide a set of recommendations and/or action items. David L. Wilson, Associate Dean and Director of the Graduate School, chaired the group, including Kevin D. Bame, Executive Director of Finance, Professor David W. Kammler, Department of Mathematics, Professor Sharon A. Shrock, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Professor Lizette R. Chevalier, Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, and Erin Logan, Graduate and Professional Student Council.

SURVEY

The committee, with the assistance of Dr. Shrock and Ms. Logan, prepared a brief survey of departments with 14 respondents. Departments estimated that they were losing 20% of their master's students to other programs because of low stipends (12% because of inadequate health benefits) and 27% of prospective Ph.D. students for the same reason (14% because of inadequate health benefits). A more complete analysis of the survey is appended.

STIPEND LEVELS

Approximately half of the graduate students admitted to SIUC graduate programs receive an assistantship that includes modest financial support to cover living expenses and a partial or full tuition waiver in exchange for work involved with teaching, research, or administrative activities (1602 in Fall 2004). The assistantship's monthly stipend level is a key factor affecting the decisions made by students on which university to attend, much the same as a salary level, is one of the most important factors affecting the evaluation of competing job offers. Benefits, such as health care coverage, can also impact a student's decision. The task force's survey data suggest that low stipend levels are having a negative impact on attracting high quality students to our graduate programs.¹

Comparing graduate assistant stipends to other institutions is difficult because there is no national database that collects such data. We do have information from several different sources that strongly demonstrate that current stipend levels at SIUC make it difficult for our graduate programs to compete effectively with peer institutions for the highest quality graduate students.

¹ SIUC does have some cost advantages for graduate students because of its location in a rural area. The cost of housing, transportation, car insurance, etc., is much lower than in a metropolitan region. The task force believes that SIUC needs to develop a mechanism to provide comparative cost-of-living data to prospective graduate students so that they can make informed decisions. This information would also be useful for prospective tuition-paying graduate students.

“Stipends are Key in Competition to Land Top Graduate Students” reads a headline in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (September 28, 2001). The article noted substantial differences in stipend rates between public and private institutions. However, a graduate student could expect a stipend of between \$11,000 and \$12,000 in the humanities and social sciences for an academic year and as much as \$20,000 in some science disciplines, rates considerably higher than those offered by SIUC at the time. The *Chronicle* (October 15, 2004) revisited “The Stipend Gap” and stipend levels continue to be substantially higher at our peer institutions compared to SIUC’s rates, based on comparative data published by the *Chronicle*.

A study by Oklahoma State University (OSU) for academic year 2000-2001 showed that SIUC’s university-wide stipend average ranked 11 among the 17 IBHE peer institutions that participated in the study. Of the nearly 10,700 graduate students included in the survey, 6,926 (65%) had stipends higher than SIUC graduate students. For a nine month assistantship, the average stipend was more than \$1,300 higher than the average SIUC stipend. In certain disciplines (e.g., mathematics, physical sciences, and biological sciences), the disparity was even greater. In mathematics, SIUC stipends were roughly \$2,500 lower than the average in the OSU study for peer mathematics departments. The OSU study for 2003-2004 shows no improvement in SIUC stipend levels compared to peer data. In fact, the disparity in mathematics has grown to over \$3,000, even though SIUC stipends have been increased each year from 2001-2004.

The *National Survey of Graduate Assistant Stipends, Graduate Fellowships, and Postdoctoral Fellowships, 1999-2000* (Office of the Dean of Graduate Studies, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2001) indicated similar disparities in stipends. The minimum and maximum stipends in mathematics for a graduate research assistant at University of Missouri were between \$12,000 and \$16,000 as compared to SIUC’s maximum of \$9,684 for the same period. SIUC needed to increase the stipend for mathematics by more than 25% to achieve the 75th Quartile in the Nebraska study. The maximum stipend for SIUC chemistry research assistants was \$10,313. To achieve the median rate (\$12,008) would have required an additional \$1,694 (a 16% increase); to achieve the 75th quartile (\$14,408) would have required an addition of \$4,094, almost a 30% increase.

In 2003-2004, *The Binghamton University: Graduate Stipend Survey* replaced the *National Survey*. The maximum rate in chemistry at SIUC is now \$12,078. To achieve the median rate (\$14,620) would require \$2,542 (a 21% increase); to achieve the 75th quartile (\$16,824) would now require \$4,746, close to a 40% increase. The situation at SIUC is clearly deteriorating. This study is appended.

Data provided by the University of Illinois budget office in 2002 provided an equally bleak picture. SIUC average graduate stipends were almost \$500 less than the lowest Big Ten School average stipend and \$5,000 less than the highest. SIUC stipends were approximately \$2,500 under the average for Big Ten Schools. At that time, the average graduate stipend at UIUC was \$2,300 (18.5%) more than the average stipend paid at

SIUC. The *News-Gazette* (January 9, 2005) recently reported that the average stipend at UIUC is now \$14,423, or \$3,461 (24%) more than the average stipend paid at SIUC.

The University of North Dakota “2004-2005 Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) Stipend Survey Results,” March 29, 2005, is the most recent data available to the group. Thirty-five institutions participated in the survey and provided data on ten disciplines--participants included SIUC, one SIUC peer, and one aspirational peer. SIUC stipends were 7% under the mean at the master’s level and more than 10% under the mean at the doctoral level. Indeed, the gap was close to 20% in chemistry and mathematics. This study is appended.

Clearly, the figures show how difficult it is for SIUC graduate programs to offer compensation packages attractive enough to compete effectively for the best graduate students in this market environment. The situation will continue to deteriorate without significant action as inflationary increases are added to the higher stipends of competing institutions. Overall, SIUC needs to increase current stipends by an average of 11% of the FY05 budget (\$11,151,367), adding \$1,226,000 to the FY06 budget to begin to close the stipend gap. Based on the Chancellor’s initiative to increase graduate enrollments over the next five years, SIUC needs to add at least 250 assistantship lines at a cost of approximately \$2,900,000. SIUC needs to increase the assistantship budget line more than \$4,000,000 over the next five years if we wish to achieve the enrollment goals listed in *Southern at 150*.

FELLOWSHIPS

While not a direct part of the task force’s charge, fellowship stipends are also a growing problem. Fellowships must be paid out of other-than-salary dollars and thus have not received annual increases for more than a decade. Currently, master’s fellows receive \$1,000/month for 11 months while Ph.D. fellows receive \$1,100/month. The master’s and doctoral monthly stipend rates are well below what a student receives as a graduate assistant. To increase the 18 MA fellowship stipends to \$1,250/month for 2005-2006 would require an additional \$49,500 and to increase the 21 Ph.D. fellowships to \$1,350/month for the same period would require \$80,850, totaling \$130,350/year.

The PROMPT assistantships and the Graduate Dean fellowships support students from underrepresented groups. PROMPT awards require the department to match the Graduate School award with an identical award. PROMPT is an assistantship award and is made at the stipend rate in effect within the college in which the program resides. Given the impact of the match, we recommend increasing the number of these awards offered by the Graduate School from 8 to 16 (at a cost of approximately \$96,000/year). The eleven-month Graduate Dean Fellowship requires that departments guarantee a nine-month assistantship in the second year. Two of these fellowships are reserved for doctoral students and four are reserved for master’s students. We would need \$18,700 to raise stipend rates to \$1,250 and \$1,350/month.

The Morris Doctoral Fellowship, SIUC's most competitive fellowship, is not open to SIUC graduates and is the only fellowship that we offer as a five-year package, with the Graduate School guaranteeing the first three years and the departments covering up to an additional two years at the Morris stipend rate. We offer three of these fellowships a year for a potential total of 15 fellows on campus at any one time. Morris fellows currently receive \$1,500/month (\$18,000 annually) a modest annual book, and a travel allowance of \$1,000. NIH and NSF fellows currently have a stipend of \$2,500/month. To increase the Morris to \$2,000 per/month would require \$18,000 additional dollars each year for three years. We also suspect that the Graduate School will need to subsidize departments, at least for dollars above their assistantship rates, for the final two years. Thus, to remain competitive, the Morris Fellowship program needs an additional \$90,000/year.

SIUC fellowships can only be increased by cannibalizing existing fellowship lines or through an infusion of dollars from the income fund. Indeed, in 1997, the Graduate Council voted to establish a differential tuition rate for graduate students with the goal of increasing both the number of awards and stipend rates for graduate fellowships. The Graduate School received \$100,000 to add several fellowships and increase stipends by \$100/month four years ago. To make our fellowships competitive, we need at least \$335,000 in new dollars to keep the same number of fellowships and to add 8 PROMPT assistantships. We also need to find a way to increase fellowship stipends annually to keep up with inflationary pressures.

In keeping with the goals of *Southern at 150*, we need to identify the means to make our fellowships more competitive and also to increase the number of fellowships to attract high quality graduate students to SIUC. To add 10 doctoral and 10 master's fellowships will require an additional \$286,000/year. To increase the number of fellowships and to make them competitive will require a budget increase of more than \$600,000 over the next several years.

HEALTH BENEFITS

Looking at health benefits for graduate students is quite similar to comparing stipend rates in that there is no national database collecting such data. The best data we have are from the North Dakota survey and these data suggest that SIUC is far behind its peers. All thirty-five participants reported that a health care plan was available to graduate students. Of those, 13 institutions paid the full premium, 12 paid part of the premium with the student paying part, and in only 6 did the student pay the premium (including SIUC). Data from four campuses are confusing in that they indicate that graduate students have access to health care, but not as a part of an institutional plan and it is not clear who pays. According to the data, 26 institutions had coverage for spouses and children with the student paying the premium in 20 schools and both institution and student paying in six. Twenty-two institutions had maternity coverage with the students paying in six, the institution paying in six, and both paying in ten.

SIUC requires that all students pay two medical fees, \$153 for SMB Primary Health Care and \$174.20 for SMB Extended Care, for a total of \$327.20 each semester. In summer, the SMB Primary Care fee is \$87.00 and the SMB Extended Care Fee is \$80.40 for a total of \$167.40. Students who paid the SMB Extended Care fee in the spring do not have to pay that fee in the summer. Hence, the full amount for health care for a student continuously enrolled is \$741.40/year.

With the assistance of Kevin Bame, the group put together a cost estimate for SIUC to pay all or part of the health care costs for SIUC graduate students (see appendix). The estimate assumes that SIUC will pay the full amount for 50% appointments and half the amount for 25-49% appointments. SIUC would need approximately \$1,008,000/year to cover health care fees under such a plan. Cost estimates are also provided for a plan that splits the costs with students. We expect that approximately 30% of these costs could be recovered from non-state grant accounts, i.e., PIs would need to start adding health benefits for research assistants to their grants.

SIUC's Student Health Programs currently offers an Optional Spouse Plan for students. The plan costs \$174/semester and \$104 in the summer. This plan covers on-campus health delivery and does not cover major medical or off-campus services. Information from the Health Service suggests that only a few students take advantage of this plan.

SIUC does not offer health coverage for dependent children of students. In fact, to offer such coverage would require a pool of at least 200 individuals. The Health Service has expressed interest in considering such a program if there is a large enough pool. The income of graduate students with children, however, is usually low enough that they qualify for KidCare, a Health Insurance Plan for Illinois Children funded by the state. The children of international students are not eligible for KidCare and 30% of our graduate assistants are international students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

SIUC faces a serious problem that will not be easy to fix, especially in light of plans to increase substantially the number of graduate students on campus over the next five years. Graduate stipend levels at SIUC compared to peer institutions have continued to deteriorate over the past four years. In addition, a number of institutions also pay all or part of health care premiums for their graduate assistants. This fact makes the picture even more dismal when we look at stipend levels for our students. Departments on campus are losing many of their best prospective students to programs with more attractive benefit and stipend packages. To increase stipends for graduate assistants and fellows, to increase the number of assistantships, and to provide health care benefits will require that SIUC invest a minimum of \$6,000,000 in continuing dollars over the next five years. We recommend the following steps be considered:

- SIUC must continue to use the RAMP process aggressively to increase stipend levels of graduate assistantships on state accounts by an average of 8% in addition to regular stipend increases and also to seek funds to add at least 250

new TA lines over the next five years; this will require a budget increase of more than \$4,000,000 over the next five years.

- The administration needs to invest additional dollars from the income fund to increase stipends and the total number of graduate teaching assistantships (over and above the \$1.2 million already committed).
- SIUC needs to find a way to provide health benefits to graduate assistants at a cost of over \$1,000,000 (The group believes that stipend increases should be given priority, at least in the short term.).
- The campus needs to increase fellowship stipends and the number of fellowships at a cost of over \$600,000. Fellowships could be identified as a part of the endowment fund campaign.
- Grant writers should be strongly encouraged to request funds for tuition, fees, and health care benefits for graduate research assistants.
- As research increases on campus, PIs need to be encouraged to increase the number of research assistantship lines in their proposals.