

## **Graduate Student Statement to BoV Finance Committee**

**May 7, 2020**

**Presented by D. Ryan King, Graduate Student Representative**

Thank you for this opportunity to speak today.

I know the primary purpose of my speaking time is to provide a graduate student perspective on tuition and fees, but I would be remiss to ignore the current financial situation that faces graduate students. So first, I would like to give a brief statement regarding the present financial situation of graduate students.

When we met on March 26, 2020, I expressed the concern that graduate students on 9-month assistantships would not be financially stable this summer. In a typical year, graduate students on 9-month assistantships participate in summer internships or find wage work during the 3-month

period from May to August. At Dr. Shushok expressed at yesterday's executive committee meeting, most of these jobs will not exist this summer - and this means many of our students still have no idea how they will afford to make it through the summer. To help offset the financial burden, the Graduate Student Association requested that the administration refund comprehensive fees for graduate students this semester. This morning, we were disappointed to learn this request has been denied. From here, the most straightforward option is to add a summer extension to the 9-month assistantships for those students who have financial need. Unlike the student emergency fund, this money would not be a grant, but rather money for employment. The cost of this extension would be \$1,000,000 per month (or \$3,000,000 total for the summer). Graduate students need the university's support in this matter and thus far we feel as though we have not received it.

I think it's important to state that the graduate school, and Dean DePauw, have been phenomenal in fielding questions where they can, but the graduate school does not make financial decisions at these levels. The graduate school has extended academic deadlines and advocated for summer employment on behalf of graduate students throughout this pandemic. Too many decisions regarding graduate students have been left at the discretion of individual departments/programs/advisors and the non-uniform message creates a lot of confusion among students - we need, and deserve a university wide response focused on graduate students.

**In regard to tuition:** any year an increase in tuition and fees is hard on our entire student body, but our graduate students are particularly hurting this year. Students who rely on summer employment to finance their education are going to have difficulty securing work and are going to find themselves in more of a financial hole in August 2020 than usual. I would like to board to

consider freezing graduate tuition and comprehensive fees for the upcoming year to help offset this burden.

**In regard to graduate assistantships:** On several occasions over the past year, I have spoken with many of you regarding graduate assistantships. Today, I am happy to comment on stipends to the full finance committee. There are three primary issues graduate students raise with our current stipend system - pay rate, the 9-month nature of the assistantship, and non-guarantee of continued assistance.

In the upcoming slide deck “Discussion of Compensation for Graduate Assistants,” you will hear that the average monthly stipend for full-time graduate assistants is \$2,156. What you will not see, but is very important, is that the range of monthly stipends varies from \$1,461 per month to \$2,745 per month (9-month salary: \$13,149 and \$24,705, respectively prior to payment of comprehensive fees). Our average net stipend is ~\$15,900/year

- you cannot afford to live in Blacksburg, Roanoke, or the DC area on \$15,900/year. As several of the university's key performance indicators directly rely on increased graduate student output (increasing undergrad enrollment requires more from GTA's, increasing faculty citations and publications requires more from GRA's) we feel that being "middle of the road" compared to our peer institutions isn't good enough.

At Virginia Tech, only 12.4% of our graduate assistantships are offered as 12-month appointments (448 of 3626 total assistantships). This leaves the majority of graduate students in an uncomfortable position for summer months. As the COVID19 pandemic has brought to light, having to rely on finding summer jobs every year is not a sustainable model. This is particularly difficult for our international student population who are limited in their employment choices due to F1 student visa restrictions. We believe the university would in fact benefit from offering more 12-month assistantships as it would allow graduate researchers to continue their research into the

summer months and increase the rate at which discoveries occur, are published, and are eventually cited - directly lending itself to achieving our KPI's in these areas. Many graduate students would prefer to continue our research through the summer months as this would allow us to decrease our total time to degree and graduate faster. In a meeting earlier this week, with UVA graduate student leadership, I learned that the majority of their assistantships are offered as 12-month assistantships. We would not be setting a precedent in supporting our graduate students with 12-month assistantships, rather following suit with other R1's.

Lastly, we are offered no guarantee of continued assistantship on a year to year basis. Many other universities present incoming graduate students, particularly those pursuing PhD's, a contract guaranteeing funding for x-number of years depending on their field, again UVA is one such institute. It is not fair for the university to ask students to give a multiyear commitment

to a graduate program if the university is not willing to equally commit to the graduate students enrolled in the program.

Thank you,

Ryan King