

Graduate Associate Compensation and Benefits Committee
2008 Annual Report and Recommendations
The Ohio State University Senate

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Introduction

Formerly a committee within the Council of Graduate Students, the Graduate Associate Compensation and Benefits Committee (GCBC) was established as a standing committee of the University Senate in 2005. The general purpose of the committee is to act on behalf of funded graduate students at the university (a.k.a. graduate associates, graduate students with appointments) to ensure that the compensation provided to these students is sufficient and appropriate to their professional development. Specifically, the committee is charged with the following responsibilities (see Faculty Rule 3335-5-48.18):

1. Study the adequacy and other attributes of the university's policies and provisions including stipends, outside professional services, and supplemental compensation.
2. Conduct research and provide advice on economic support of graduate associates, professional development, quality and design of benefit programs, and appointment terms.
3. Make recommendations to the university senate, the council on research and graduate studies, and the office of academic affairs as appropriate.

The committee currently consists of twelve members, including six funded graduate students, two faculty, one staff person, and administrators from the Graduate School, the Office of Human Resources, and the Office of Research. A complete listing of the committee's membership is included at the end of this document.

Policy Recommendations: Summary

1. Health Care for Graduate Associates
 - a. Support the SHI committee's work towards increasing the prescription drug benefit and expanding the hours the Wilce Health Center is open.
 - b. Revise the Graduate Handbook to include both a 4th quarter fee authorization and 4th quarter health care subsidy for GAs with 9 month appointments.
 - c. Move forward with plans to divide the premiums and subsidies paid over 9 months rather than 12 to make budgeting and billing more streamlined regardless of the GA's appointment term.
2. Graduate Associate Stipends
 - a. Continue with the process of raising the minimum stipend to match the stipend of first year University Fellows (currently \$1256/mo.)
 - b. Revise the fellowship stipend on a more regular basis (e.g. every year or every 2 years) to keep up with inflation, assist with budgeting, and remain competitive with other universities.
 - c. In the future, continue to match the minimum stipend to this frequently adjusted fellowship stipend. (in line with HR compensation guidelines).
3. Consistency and Transparency for Incoming Graduate Students
 - a. Have a standard set of items to be included in letters of offer to prospective students. These items should include but are not limited to:
 - i. Number of years of guaranteed (e.g. non-negotiable later) funding
 - ii. Indication of whether a "year" of guaranteed funding is a 9mo. or 12 mo. appointment
 - iii. Explanation of all fees to be deducted from the stipend (Student activity, RPAC, COTA, health insurance, and when implemented, Union fee)
 - iv. Typical appointment frequency (e.g. yearly or quarterly)
 - v. OPERS eligibility
4. Reducing Upfront Costs for Graduate Associates
 - a. Give pre-tax deductions for all fees for which it is legal, regular monthly deductions for other fees.
 - b. These items should be implemented in the SIS project to come online in 2009.

Policy Recommendations

1. Health Care for Graduate Associates

GCBC wholeheartedly supports the SHI committee's work towards furthering the prescription drug benefit. For 2008-2009, the prescription drug benefit pays 90% of billed charges for generic, 80% for brand name with no generic available, 50% for brand name with generic available, for a 34-day supply, with \$10 minimum co-insurance. These rates apply for billed charges up to \$1250 at any pharmacy (including the Wilce pharmacy), with an additional \$500 maximum at the Wilce pharmacy only. Additionally, the Pharmacy Assistance Fund has been renewed for a third year. This fund makes an additional \$250 available to the first 200 students who have reached their \$1750 (\$500 + \$1250) maximum of billed charges whose income is less than \$16,000 per year. For graduate students, who are on average older than undergraduates and are also more likely to have families, any reduction in prescription costs, such as copays, would be extremely helpful. An expansion of the Pharmacy Assistance Fund to students with higher incomes would also allow more students to take advantage of the program.

GCBC also supports the SHI committee's work towards expanding hours at the Wilce Student Health Center. Currently, open hours are 8am to 6pm Monday through Thursday, and 8am to 5pm on Friday, during Autumn, Winter, and Spring quarters. Hours are 8am to 5pm Monday through Friday during breaks and Summer quarter. These hours are often problematic for graduate students, who tend to have full research and teaching schedules. Of particular concern is a lack of weekend and evening hours for urgent care incidents and for pharmacy access. The issue with the pharmacy hours arises because the current plan only has a "copay only" option at the Wilce Center pharmacy. The full cost of medications purchased at other

pharmacies must be paid in full and the student must submit a reimbursement claim to the insurer to recoup prescription drug benefit. Given the high costs of some medications, this can be cost-prohibitive and can result in the student waiting until the Wilce Center is open to refill an important prescription.

This committee's final and primary recommendation concerning health insurance is to provide the quarterly subsidy to graduate associates for 12 months even if they only have a 9-month appointment. This would be similar to the fourth-quarter fee authorization that is currently extended to GAs with 9 month appointments. A plan has been discussed that would deduct the health insurance premiums paid by the student and the subsidies paid by appointing units over the course of nine months rather than dividing the deductions over 12 months. This would be a simple way to implement a fourth-quarter health insurance subsidy while additionally simplifying budgeting for students and appointment units by making the yearly premium paid by the student and the subsidy provided by the unit equal for all students regardless of appointment tenure.

2. Graduate Associate Stipends

In its report last year, this committee recommended that the minimum stipend of Graduate Associates at the university be equivalent to the stipend provided by the Graduate School to first year fellows. There were a large number of reasons for this recommendation, most notably that the stipend which the Graduate School considers to be sufficient for fellowship recipients, who do not maintain employment at the university or elsewhere whilst receiving the fellowship stipend, should be extended to all Graduate Associates. The committee is disappointed in the lack of progress made towards this goal during the 2007-2008

academic year and is recapitulating this recommendation in the current report to underscore the importance of this objective. In its recent review of Ph.D. programs, the Graduate School noted that low stipends are a hindrance to attaining the highest quality in several of our programs, particularly those in the Arts and Humanities. This finding provides additional motivation to move forward and raise the minimum stipend as soon as possible.

In regards to stipends, the committee additionally recommends that the minimum stipend for fellows be permanently used as the minimum stipend for all Graduate Associates, and that this stipend be reviewed on a regular basis (at least bi-annually, preferably annually). Best practices for the Human Resources and the Office of Academic affairs stipulate that compensation should be reviewed regularly and at this time such a review is not being done consistently for GA stipends. The advantages of regular review of graduate stipends are great; budgeting for small increases is certainly easier than budgeting for large, infrequent increases, and a regularly adjusted minimum stipend will help programs stay competitive with programs at benchmark institutions.

3. Consistency and Transparency for Incoming Graduate Students

From discussions with Graduate Associates from a variety of departments, it is readily apparent to this committee that much heterogeneity exists across the Ohio State University campus with regards to the content of graduate student acceptance documents. One potential danger in this inconsistency is that departments of enrollment/employment are free to use somewhat deceptive language in order to entice potential graduate students to enroll at OSU. Lies of omission concerning required fees and contract terms are common deceptions in these documents. To ensure that all incoming students have the most complete information possible

when making the decision to matriculate to an Ohio State graduate program, GCBC recommends that specific guidelines be provided for graduate programs by the Graduate School detailing the minimum content that must appear in such acceptance documents/letters. Specifically, letters offering GA appointments to incoming graduate students should explicitly outline the following items:

1. The duration of funding guaranteed from the employing department
2. The frequency of guaranteed financial support (quarterly or yearly appointments)
3. A clarification of what constitutes a year-long appointment, if promised (that is, 9 or 12 months per academic year)
4. A detailed list of fees that are paid by the employing department, as well as a list of fees that are to be paid by the graduate employee
5. A clear, understandable explanation of the retirement fund options available to graduate employees and/or a hyperlink on the internet homepage of the Graduate School that clearly outlines the retirement fund options available to OSU graduate student employees. The committee's preference is that both of these will occur.

It should be noted that such guidelines could be implemented at absolutely no cost to the university, and that such guidelines would clearly inform incoming graduate employees of the terms of their employment. In the absence of a legally binding contract between graduate employees and the university, this committee feels that a more standardized acceptance document will provide the best assurance that both parties involved in the GA appointment know exactly what they are agreeing to.

4. Reducing Upfront Costs for Graduate Associates

Over the past few years, this committee has recommended that one critical area of GA benefits where improvement is needed is a reduction of up-front financial burdens, particularly for newly matriculated students. By up-front we are referring to fees and other expenses that must be paid in large lump sums at the beginning of each term (i.e. student fees) and particularly those due before stipends begin (i.e. fees for autumn quarters and for annual parking permits). This burden will only increase if the university moves to an academic calendar based on semesters in accordance with the University System of Ohio Strategic Plan, as an increase of at least 33% in each academic term's fees will be necessary to compensate for the smaller number of terms. While we recognize that these expenses cannot be eliminated, this committee feels that the financial burden on graduate associates can be greatly alleviated by implementing monthly pre-tax deductions for all fees for which it is legally permissible, and standard monthly deductions for other fees. These include fees for parking permits, the Recreation and Physical Activity Center (RPAC), Student Health Insurance Plan (SHIP) enrollment, Student Activity Fee, contributions to the Ohio Public Employees Retirement System (OPERS), and in 2010, the Ohio Union fee. The following fees are for the 2007-2008 academic year:

Parking – \$76.50 to \$606.00

RPAC – \$81.00 per quarter

Student Activity Fee – \$15.00 per quarter

SHIP – \$478.00 per quarter (\$71.70 after 85% subsidy)

OPERS – variable contribution

Currently, parking fees are not automatically included in GA paychecks and would therefore need to be incorporated with the paycheck. It is recommended that the aforementioned pre-tax and other deductions take effect when the Student Information System (SIS) project is fully implemented by Summer quarter 2009 in concordance with the beginning of the 2009-2010 academic year.

Conclusion

It is clear that in many ways, graduate students are the backbone of any research university. This committee has made these recommendations with a strong belief that because of the importance of graduate students to both the research and teaching missions of the university, it is critical to continue increasing the institutional investment made in our graduate associates each year.

We commend the university senate, administration, and deans their commitment to pursuing progressive graduate associate compensation and benefits policies over the past several years. It is clear that these initiatives have not only improved the health and well-being of our graduate associates, but have helped to make Ohio State a continually more competitive and productive institution. The committee believes that implementation of the recommendations it has put forward for consideration in this report will help produce more positive outcomes for Ohio State as we strive to become an institution of eminence.

Respectfully Submitted,

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