

Report to the Faculty of Arts & Sciences
on the Graduate School of Arts & Sciences
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Unlike previous years when I outlined the incremental improvements GSAS has made, I am going to look at the “big picture” in PhD funding, so that we can start thinking about where we go next.

Next year (2005-06) will be the first year that all of the classes in the “fellowship years” (years 1 through 5) of the PhD programs in the Arts & Sciences are “fully enhanced”. This mainly represents a change in the Humanities and Social Sciences Departments. This means that

- 1) all but a tiny minority (about 5%) of the entering students have received five-year fellowship packages or, in the case of advanced standing students, four-year packages. The remaining 5% of the students receive deferred packages, meaning that they are not supported in the first year, but they are afterwards – typically for 4 years.
- 2) There is a standard package for all students who have TAing responsibilities.
- 3) Students do not teach in their first year, and have a dissertation year where they also do not teach. All students, first years, dissertation fellows, research and teaching fellows receive the full stipend.
- 4) Our 9-month stipend is competitive with that of any graduate school in the U.S. This increase in stipend is the only item of the enhancement plan that benefited the Natural Sciences departments.

Where do we go from here? That is the big question. To give you an idea of the magnitude of the financial effort the Arts & Sciences have made to make the enhancement plan become reality, let’s compare the increase in the GSAS financial aid budget from academic year 1996-97 to academic year 2001-02 with the increase in the A&S instructional budget and in College financial aid over that same period. The Arts & Sciences instructional budget increased 26%, i.e. an average of 4.7% a year. The College Financial Aid budget increased 52%, for an average annual increase of 8.8% a year. GSAS financial aid increased 151%, for an average annual increase of 20% a year. In 96-97 the GSAS financial aid budget and the College financial aid budget were roughly the same. By 2001-02 the GSAS financial aid budget was nearly double the College financial aid budget. We are talking about nearly \$30,000,000 added to the GSAS budget.

Before I return to the big question: “where do we go from here?”, let me address the question: why has the enhancement plan proven to be so expensive?

The enhancement plan was only supposed to support students in their fellowship years (usually years 1 through 5). This is not what has happened. This year, for example, only about 75% of the supported students in the Humanities and Social

Sciences were on their multiyear fellowships, while the remaining 25% of supported students were on teaching appointments past the fellowship years. One of the assumptions of the Enhancement plan was that the time-to-degree would drop because the students were better funded. This has not proven to be the case in most departments in the Humanities and Social Sciences (nor has it been true nationally). The time-to-degree is still about 8 years. This time-to-degree is higher than that of our peers (by a year or even two), and is, in part at least, an unintended consequence of our funding system. Indeed, after the “fellowship years” we continue to give students the same stipend if they are needed for instructional purposes. Thus students have an incentive to hang on for as long as possible because in many of these departments (where the job market has historically been bad), they are otherwise looking at the possibility of being an adjunct. As many of you know, adjuncts receive significantly less money (on the order of 40% less and no health benefits) for teaching a course at Columbia than do the graduate students who are serving as TAs. We have made it foolish for a graduate student to defend if he or she does not already have a full time position lined up.

The departments are complicit in this long time-to-degree. Departments either do not have a time-table laid out for their students that will allow those students to complete a PhD in 5 or 6 years or they do not insist that students adhere to that time table.

Another factor contributing to longer-than-planned time to degrees is that students regularly violate GSAS policy that they should not be working on the outside. I routinely look at fellowship applications from students who proudly record that they are teaching a full class (not just TAing) at neighboring colleges, even though they were supported by Columbia on a full fellowship at the time. They are doing this additional work for a small fraction of their Columbia stipend. This defeats the purpose of a full fellowship – which was to free them from outside work in order to give them enough time to focus on academics. We need strong faculty voices to tell the students that it is counterproductive financially to spend large amounts of time working on the outside and therefore prolonging their time in graduate school rather than concentrating on getting their PhD as quickly as possible.

Finally, as you know, we put in place guidelines so that TAs would not be overworked: the assignment of a graduate student TA for every class with more than 30 or 35 undergraduate students (assuming the TAs run discussion sessions). This has become the standard for classes with 30 students or more, so that classes with around thirty students that used to run without teaching assistants now request them. Thus, the number of TAs required to cover our classes in Arts and Sciences has increased faster than the number of students, an unexpected consequence of our normalization of teaching fellowships. Departments also expand the number of teaching assistants needed in order to fund students who would otherwise run out of funding.

Next let me dispel a myth: graduate students are an inexpensive way to provide teaching. In fact – let me do a quick computation using stipend and fees levels for 2004-5. Graduate students over the course of their 5 fellowship years will TA 6 courses, and their total package from the university, excluding tuition and housing, will be between

\$110,000 and \$120,000. This is not inexpensive. Similarly, students past year 6 are not inexpensive. As I have said for several years, rather than support a student as a TA for two years at about \$22,000 a year (when you throw in health benefits), would it not be better to support a full time lecturer or post-doc (freshly minted PhD) for twice that amount? This would provide a great incentive for students to finish.

So where *do* we go from here?

First we need to reorganize our teaching so that we are less dependent on students in years 6 and above. In fact, we must reorganize to make our programs less dependent on graduate student teaching generally. This could be done by creating positions of “teaching post-docs” – term-limited full-time positions available to our own new PhDs. This model exists at other schools: for example the University of Chicago. In fact most of our peers do this.

This is especially needed in three areas. First the Undergraduate Writing Program, which is staffed almost exclusively by graduate students in English and in the Writing Program in the School of the Arts. We need a larger cadre of more permanent instructors. The same is true for the foreign language departments. In both instances there is a disconnect between the aspirations of the PhD students – who want to teach literature - and the needs of the undergraduate programs – which need specially trained pedagogues in these areas. To a lesser extent this is true in the core curriculum – Literature Humanities, Contemporary Civilization, Music Humanities and Art Humanities. Those four classes give extraordinarily valuable training to the graduate student instructors, and teaching them two years allows the instructors to perfect their teaching. Creating teaching postdocs (for the very best new PhDs in these areas) would stabilize and improve the teaching of these courses, and provide a reward for those graduate students who excel at it. These post-doc positions would offer to our newest graduates the opportunity to have a full time job in academe and earn a full-time salary while they are continuing to search for positions both inside and outside of academe. We like to say that our graduate students are our future colleagues – let us make them our current colleagues.

The bottom line is that we need a smaller, better funded graduate school where the students finish more quickly. We can get smaller by decreasing the number of years we fund students (my own preference) or by decreasing the number of entering students. The alternative is a larger school where each individual student is less well funded and where we are therefore not competitive when we recruit.