



# Task Force on Graduate Student Funding

Executive Summary

# Executive Overview

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The Task Force on Graduate Student Funding was established by Dean Tom Reynolds in the fall 2017 with the following charge:

*Examine the state of graduate student funding at UNC Charlotte and make recommendations surrounding two critical aspects of graduate student support:*

1. *Secure sustainable and scalable funding for graduate students.*
2. *Make the most effective and efficient use of internal and extramural resources.*

During the 2017-18 academic year, the Task Force reviewed best practices, conducted a series of open forums to solicit input from students, faculty and staff, assessed the nature and scope of graduate student funding at UNC Charlotte, collected, reviewed and synthesized relevant data, and developed a set of mutually agreed upon goals and principles to guide its work and discussions.

Key findings related to assistantship stipends and wages, workload, tuition support, and the research agenda drove the creation of a series of interconnected recommendations to help build a new scalable and sustainable model of graduate student funding at the University.

## TASK FORCE MEMBERSHIP

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### Co-Chairs

Johnna Watson, Graduate School  
Rick Tankersley, College of Liberal Arts & Sciences

### Members

Claudia Flowers, College of Education  
Benjamin Gordan, Student Representative, Doctoral Candidate, Biological Sciences  
Jose Gamez, College of Arts + Architecture  
Christine Haynes, Graduate Council Chair  
Richard Leeman, Faculty Council Chair  
Heather Lipford, College of Computing and Informatics  
Annette Parks, Graduate School  
Heather Smith, College of Liberal Arts & Sciences  
Tony Schmitz, College of Engineering  
Michael Thompson, College of Health and Human Services

## GOALS

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We believe that graduate student funding, including stipend and tuition support, should be utilized to strategically support the broad mission of UNC Charlotte, specifically to:

- Recruit, retain and graduate **exemplary** master's and doctoral students of **diverse** backgrounds and experiences;
- Support the academic **success, professional development, and well-being** of graduate students;
- Support the **research mission** of the University, including funding, publications, engagement, and other scholarly and creative work;
- Enhance the undergraduate and graduate **teaching missions** of the University; and

- Maintain a broad and growing portfolio of **productive and reputable graduate programs**.

We acknowledge that these goals are **interrelated**. Recruiting the best possible graduate students will support high-quality teaching and research. Healthy, successful students contribute to the research, scholarship and creative activities and productivity of the university and advance the reputation of its academic programs and faculty. Healthy, well-regarded programs with successful students are in turn able to effectively recruit, retain and graduate high quality students, enrich research and teaching across campus, and contribute to the state, region, and nation.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

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**Transparent:** Funding policies and decisions, both at the Graduate School and within each program, should be as transparent as possible, with clear policies and guidelines for faculty and students.

**Scalable and Sustainable:** Policies governing graduate student support should be both scalable and sustainable. At the institutional level, this includes adjustments to funding needs based on managed changes in program size due to growth, graduation or attrition, the number of programs offered by the University, and institutional priority. Graduate funding policies should provide positive incentives for resource-generating programs and enterprises (i.e., encourage extramural funding) and should provide clear benchmarks by which programs and students can continue to obtain institutional support and funding.

**Equitable:** Funding policies for graduate students should be equitable. Equitable funding starts with a baseline stipend level for all graduate assistantships to support students at a level commensurate with the cost-of-living and the cost-of-attendance (including healthcare, tuition, tuition increments, fees, housing, food, instructional materials, and other costs associated with full-time graduate study. Equitable funding above the baseline level is established to meet the competitive market demand for high quality students. This baseline level of stipend support should be indexed and adjusted as the cost of living changes. Relevant external benchmarks should be used to adjust this level as markets change over time.

**Balanced:** Funding policies for graduate students should be balanced, reflecting the desire for a full complement of programs across disciplines and academic levels (master's and doctoral levels) that attract and retain students from different regional and national backgrounds. Balance must be maintained as new programs are added and as existing programs move through their life cycle. The University should strive for consistency in funding to ensure balanced support provided to programs across campus, and even between students in the same program.

## BEST PRACTICES FOR GRADUATE STUDENT SUPPORT

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1. Multi-year support packages that include a competitive salary/stipend and full cost of education (i.e., tuition, fees, increments, health insurance, summer support) are used to attract and recruit the most talented and qualified students. Support is renewed annually based on an assessment of student performance and progress.
2. The duration of support is limited to the expected time-to-degree for the program (e.g., two years for master's, five years for doctorate), thereby encouraging students to make timely progress through their academic program.
3. Stipend/salary levels are assessed periodically and compared to peer institutions and programs as well as national averages to calibrate levels of support and ensure competitiveness.

4. Decisions on the distribution and availability of graduate student support (number of GA positions, tuition awards, etc.) are made early in the academic year, enabling programs to make timely offers to the most competitive applicants.
5. Meritorious and often prestigious graduate fellowships/assistantships are used to recruit and attract the most talented and highly qualified students.
6. Service-free summer fellowships are awarded on a competitive basis, enabling students to devote full-time effort to thesis or dissertation research.
7. The development and allocation of new GA positions are tied to undergraduate enrollment and instructional needs, including initiatives and interventions designed to promote undergraduate student success.
8. The allocation of graduate student funding, including new GA positions, stipends, and tuition awards, are linked to positive program performance metrics and student outcomes, such as productivity, persistence, completion, and time-to-degree.
9. Supporting students on extramural grants is encouraged and incentivized by reducing the impact on award budgets, often through institutional cofunding of tuition, fees, and health insurance or by returning additional F&A funds to PIs.
10. Programs are encouraged/incentivized to move students from institutionally funded positions (e.g., TAs) to ones supported with extramural funds (e.g., RAs), thereby freeing up support for other students and/or new recruits.
11. To incentivize “good practices”, successful and healthy programs are rewarded with one-year fellowships to support existing students as they approach graduation, thereby freeing up GA positions for new recruits.
12. Programs and institutions are open and transparent in publicizing and communicating the full cost of attendance, time-to-degree, graduation rates, and post-graduation employment outcomes (e.g., job placement). They also communicate the program’s policies regarding the availability, level, and anticipated duration of any financial support.

## FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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### A. Graduate Assistantships from Intramural/Institutional Funds

#### Findings:

- Management of institutional GAs is decentralized, resulting in a diversity of funding models and policies governing eligibility, duration of support, salary, and workload. In many cases, programs are not following standard or best practices.
- Most GA positions are funded with institutional funds. The relative contribution of extramural funds to graduate student support has declined in the past five years.
- Institutional funds for student stipends come from a variety of sources, including general funds, tuition increments, and summer receipts. However, the relative contribution of each source varies by College.
- To reach full-time status (20 hr/week) and to be eligible for tuition assistance and other centralized funding, graduate students often piece together multiple part-time assistantships,

including TAs and extramurally funded RAs. This practice often inflates students' workloads and results in students reporting to multiple supervisors.

- Since GA stipend awards are frequently separated from tuition support, Program Directors are unable to offer support packages at the time of acceptance that include stipend, tuition, and health insurance, making it difficult to effectively recruit the most competitive applicants.

## Recommendations:

- A1. Programs should manage GAs as "positions" that are tied to specific instructional or research needs of the department, program, or unit.
- A2. Stipends for new and existing GA positions should be managed by the Colleges and, when appropriate, tied to instructional needs. This includes funds currently awarded to programs from the Graduate School.
- A3. All tuition support should be managed by the Graduate School. Policies governing the distribution of resident tuition awards and the non-resident differential should be designed to incentivize programs to develop sustainable funding models and implement best practices (See Section D).
- A4. GAs provided by programs and units should be multi-year packages for a fixed period of time (i.e., time-limited) that is consistent with the expected time-to-degree for the program. The "standard time-to-degree" should be established by programs in consultation with the Graduate School and communicated to students prior to enrollment. Annual renewal of GA support should be contingent upon the student making satisfactory academic progress and receiving satisfactory performance evaluations.
- A5. Colleges or units, not the Graduate School, are expected to fully fund new GA positions, including positions needed to establish new graduate programs. New full-time GA positions that are funded at or above the minimum stipend level (see section C1-2) must include stipend, resident tuition, and health insurance. Budgeted tuition is coupled to the position but managed by the Graduate School.
- A6. Allocation of GA stipends, including funds for new GA positions and increases in stipend levels for existing positions, should be tied to program performance metrics, including persistence and completion rates, productivity, application pressure, selectivity, and yield.
- A7. The Graduate School should establish a university-wide GA workload policy governing all GAs. The policy is intended (1) to provide guidance to Chairs and Graduate Program Directors in making assignments and estimating staffing needs and (2) to standardize the effort, responsibilities, and workloads of students holding similar or related GA positions.
- A8. Programs and units should conduct an annual workload analysis for each position to ensure consistent and equitable workloads among GAs.
- A9. Changes in the number and salary/stipend levels of GA positions should be communicated to Graduate Program Directors in the fall semester so they have the information they need to manage their program and recruit a new cohort of students for the following fall semester.
- A10. The Graduate School should establish an online performance appraisal and evaluation system for all GAs. The system should include a standard evaluation form, performance measures, and guidelines for delivering feedback. The system should also include a mechanism for students to provide feedback on their work experience.

## B. Graduate Assistantships from Extramural Funds (Grants and Contracts)

### Findings:

- The number of graduate students supported on extramural grants has not increased proportionately with increases in award funding.
- Supporting a graduate student on a research grant or contract is cost-prohibitive, especially when compared to the cost of hiring other full-time personnel, including technicians or post-doctoral researchers.
- Some funders, including non-profits and industry partners, are hesitant (or unable) to cover the cost of student tuition, fees, and health insurance on awards or contracts.
- The term of an extramural grant/contract is often shorter than five years, making it difficult to guarantee doctoral students funding for the full duration of their degree program.
- The average duration of student support on extramural awards is often short (3-6 months) and concentrated during the summer months when PIs are not required to pay tuition and fees.

### Recommendations:

- B1. The University must establish policies that lower the financial burden and encourage/incentivize PIs to support graduate students on extramural grants and contracts. Recommended approaches include:
- Reduce the overall cost of supporting a student by providing institutional funds to cover the cost of attendance (tuition and health insurance), including the tuition differential for non-resident students. New contributions to GASP funds to cover tuition costs are expected to come from F&A funds generated on all extramural research grants.
  - Increase the percentage of F&A funds returned to faculty on indirect cost receipts generated by graduate student stipends.
  - Reward programs/units that support multiple students on extramural grants with additional, temporary GA lines.
  - Waive the requirement that F&A be charged on graduate assistant stipends, tuition, fees, and health insurance.
- B2. The University should establish policies that encourage PIs to provide longer-term support for graduate students funded with extramural grants and contracts. For example, provide service-free summer fellowships to students supported on a grant funded RAs during the academic year.
- B3. Each College should establish stipend levels/wages for grant funded RAs that are equal to or greater than those set for GAs supported with institutional funds (see section C)
- B4. The Office of Research and Economic Development should establish a bridge-funding program that provides short-term financial support to faculty to span a temporary period or gap in extramural support. Bridge awards could be requested to fund salaries for RAs during the bridge period.

## C. Stipend Levels, Wages, and Duration of Support

### Findings:

- Stipends for many graduate are far below national averages and have not increased substantially over the past 10 years.
- Stipends for many graduate programs fall below the poverty level. Nearly all programs fail to provide stipends that are above a living wage for a single adult living in Charlotte. As a result, students must seek supplementary work off campus and/or leave their programs for jobs prior to completing their degree.
- Stipend levels vary significantly both among and within programs and are only loosely correlated with discipline and academic program.
- The lack of competitive stipends has made it difficult for programs to attract and retain the most qualified applicants.
- The minimum stipend to be considered for tuition support (\$7,000/9 months) is insufficient to cover the cost of student fees once withholdings are subtracted from earnings.

### Recommendations:

- C1. The University should establish a campus-wide minimum wage for all graduate students, including students employed less than full-time (< 20 h/week). Colleges may establish higher, program-specific wages and associated stipends that are benchmarked against national and peer data.
- C2. The minimum wage should be indexed and periodically adjusted by the Graduate School so that it is at least 25% above the state or federal minimum wage (whichever is higher) assuming full-time employment. Based on the current federal minimum wage (\$7.25/h), the Graduate Student Minimum Wage would be \$18.13/h ( $\$7.25 \times 1.25 \times 40 \text{ h} = \$362.50/\text{week}$  or  $\$14,138/9 \text{ months}$ ; effective hourly rate = \$18.13/h).
- C3. All programs should strive to provide stipend levels (9-month, 0.5 FTE appointment = 20 h/week) that are at or above the average stipends for comparable programs (based on CIP code) from the Oklahoma State University's Annual Survey of Graduate Assistant Stipends. Average stipends, including both master's and doctoral levels, for select programs from the 2016-17 OSU Survey include:

(1)	History	\$14,172 (\$18.17/h)
(2)	Philosophy	\$14,728 (\$18.88/h))
(3)	English	\$14,977 (\$19.20/h)
(4)	Business Administration	\$15,543 (\$19.92/h)
(5)	Public Health	\$16,579 (\$21.25/h)
(6)	Educational Assessment, Evaluation Research	\$17,115 (\$21.94/h)
(7)	Biological Sciences	\$17,800 (\$22.82/h)
(8)	Computer Science	\$18,649 (\$23.91/h)
(9)	Bioinformatics	\$18,794 (\$24.09/h)
(10)	Engineering (General)	\$18,967 (\$24.32/h)
(11)	Physics/Optical Science	\$19,337 (\$24.79/h)
(12)	Health Services Administration	\$19,647 (\$25.19/h)

- C4. Colleges should standardize and manage stipend levels by establishing “pay bands” for comparable programs. Pay differences may be based on market value, discipline, academic program, degree sought, and completion of important milestones (e.g., advancing to candidacy).
- C5. GA stipends and wages should be reviewed in the fall semester by the Graduate School (minimum GA wage) and Colleges (program-specific GA stipends) so that any anticipated changes can be included in the Colleges’ annual budget requests.
- C6. Changes in stipend levels should be communicated to Graduate Program Directors at the beginning of the academic year so they have the information they need to effectively recruit students for the subsequent fall cohort.

## D. Cost-of-Education: Tuition, Fees, Increments, and Health Insurance

### Findings:

- Enrollment growth and the addition of new graduate programs, especially doctoral programs, has placed a strain on the resources available to support students in existing programs, especially at the master’s level.
- Master’s students supported on GAs are not eligible for GASP support. Thus, their stipend support is often returned to the University as fees, tuition, and tuition increments.
- GASP funds have not increased proportionally with increases in graduate tuition and enrollment.
- The proportion of GASP funding provided to non-resident students has increased substantially over the past 10 years, resulting in a significant increase in the dollars required to support the non-resident differential.
- The absence of tuition support policy, aside from a minimum \$7,000/AY stipend, has created significant inequity in the distribution of tuition support among programs.
- Increases in the cost-of-attendance, especially fees and health insurance, have outpaced increases in student stipends and wages.
- Many graduate students enroll on a part-time basis and are therefore ineligible to hold a GA . Strategic funding is frequently provided to help recruit and retain part-time students.
- Domestic students borrow significant amounts of federal dollars to fund or offset the cost of attendance, resulting in debt levels approaching \$100,000.
- Graduate Program Directors are challenged to manage funding for students in their programs without access to the information necessary to do so (i.e., system with student progress data, funding nominations, award details).

### Recommendations:

- D1. The Graduate School should work with Colleges and the Bursar’s Office to develop a public website for prospective students that provides an itemized accounting of the full cost-of-attendance (tuition, fees, increments, health insurance, etc.) for each graduate program.
- D2. All tuition support (i.e., GASP) should be managed by the Graduate School and be available to both doctoral and master’s students.



- D3. To incentivize programs to support students on full-time GAs, only students employed for 20 h/week, 15 weeks/semester (regardless of the source) for an academic year should be eligible to receive tuition support. Tuition support cannot be prorated.
- D4. GASP tuition support should be divided into three funds and managed independently: resident tuition, non-resident differential allocations, and full-tuition allocations for extramural RAs.
- D5. Resident tuition support (9 credits/semester) should be coupled to all full-time GA positions (20 h/week, 15 week/semester for an academic year) supported with intramural funds. The hourly wage/stipend level must be at or above the Graduate Student Minimum Wage (see Section C).
- D6. A limited number of non-resident differential allocations should be distributed annually to programs by the Graduate School based on program performance and history of attracting, enrolling, and graduating non-resident students.
- D7. When establishing new full-time GA positions, colleges/units must budget for the cost of resident tuition, in addition to the stipend. The tuition is coupled to the position but managed by the Graduate School (See Section A5).
- D8. Resident tuition and the non-resident differential (if needed) should be automatically granted to all full-time GAs supported on research grants and contracts (see Section B).
- D9. The funding source of the stipend should pay the non-resident tuition differential for graduate assistantships paid with institutional funds (aside from the continuing or new allocations provided to programs each September).
- D10. Tuition support, like GA positions, should be limited to the expected time-to-degree for the program (see Section A).
- D11. To sustain and scale tuition support to meet future enrollment, annual increases in available GASP funds should be tied to anticipated increases in (1) tuition and (2) the number of new GA positions. Thus, funds should be added annually to each source of tuition (see D3) to compensate for increases in resident and non-resident tuition costs.
- D12. Tuition packages (i.e., resident tuition and non-resident tuition differential allocations) should be available to Graduate Program Directors at the beginning of the academic year so that they can be used to retain and recruit the most complete applicants.
- D13. The University should continue to provide health insurance for all full-time GAs. However, the University should consider charging a nominal fee (\$50-\$100/semester) to encourage students with alternative health care benefits to waive the University provided insurance.
- D14. Graduate Program Directors should continue to nominate new and continuing students for small Graduate School Grants to encourage enrollment and retention of students enrolled part-time.
- D15. Graduate Program Directors should work with the Office of Student Financial Aid and the Graduate School to evaluate (annually) federal and private loan levels for students in their programs, including those who drop out, to ensure the neediest students are provided sufficient support to ensure success.
- D16. The Graduate School should develop a customized funding system to provide Graduate Program Directors with the appropriate information necessary to manage their programs.