

Graduate Student Position on Graduate Student Finances GREBE

Introduction

We, the elected graduate representatives of the Department of Ecology & Evolutionary Biology at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville would like to address the current financial status of the graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) within our department and provide rationale for changes in current policies. Primarily, we seek to alleviate the increased financial strain placed on GTAs.

In this paper, we identify and provide historical context and current data for the five primary sources of GTA's increased financial strain. These sources are:

- 1) Student fee increases
- 2) Stagnant GTA stipends
- 3) Cost of living increases
- 4) Inability for most grad students to attain in-state resident status
- 5) Mandatory and continuous enrollment in EEB-600

Finally, we provide justification for action on alleviating these financial burdens and make suggestions for policy changes.

Sources of financial strain

1) Student fee increases

Graduate students have witnessed unprecedented fee increases over the past five years. Between the Spring 2011 and Fall 2011 semesters, fees rose between 17 – 26% per year (Table 1) and currently represent between 3.5 to 7.6% of current GTA stipends (depending on resident status and number of credit hours; Table 2).

2) Stagnant GTA Stipends

In the fall of 2011, the University of Tennessee raised the GTA stipends in 3.5% or \$600.00 whichever is greater. This mandatory raise increased EEB GTA monthly stipends by \$53.96, for a total raise of \$ 647.50. This represents the first increase in EEB graduate student stipends since 2007. While this stipend increase has assuaged the financial burden to an extent, it still falls short of increases in fees and costs of living since 2007 (see section 1 and 3).

3) Increases in cost of living

We used the US Department of Labor Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator (http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm) to compare GTA stipends and student fee burdens in 2007 to today. We found that a GTA in 2007 earned 5.3% more when adjusted for inflation, and paid 16.2 to 34.3% less in fees than a GTA in 2011.

4) Inability for grad students to attain in-state status

One method of alleviating fee increases is for graduate students to obtain in-state residency status. Students who are considered by the graduate school to have moved to the state solely for enrollment at UT are not granted in-state status and international students are ineligible to obtain residency at any point in their careers at UT.

In a recent survey of 2011 EEB graduate students, 85% of respondents were considered to be out-of-state residents. Many of these students are considered residents by the state, as they, for example, own property, pay associated property taxes, hold a driver's license and vehicles registration in the state, and/or are registered to vote in Tennessee.

While 95% of EEB students surveyed consider themselves to be residents of the state of Tennessee, the university does not facilitate the change in status. Allowing GTAs, who by all means are clearly residents of the state of Tennessee, to obtain residency status more easily would immediately lower fees for these students.

5) Mandatory, continuous enrollment in EEB 600

All doctoral students in EEB must pass the Advancement to Candidacy Exam by the end of their 5th semester and immediately apply to the Graduate School for doctoral candidacy after passing this exam. Once a graduate student applies for candidacy, the Graduate School requires continuous registration for Dissertation Credit Hours (EEB 600) every semester (including summer semesters). If the student fails to do so, even after meeting the 24 credit hour requirement, (s)he will be required to back-register for the summer terms or semesters during which (s)he was not enrolled, and will have to pay fees and tuition for the credits.

This requirement imposes an additional cost to more advanced EEB doctoral students, who must pay the fees for at least 3 credits in summer after admission to Ph.D. candidacy. Thus, current Ph.D. candidates must pay a minimum \$243.67 more per year as a reward for advancing to candidacy. In previous years, EEB used to give a Merit Award to those students that pass the Advancement to Candidacy Exam, which served, in part, to alleviate this extra expense.

Justification for alleviating financial strain

While appreciated, this year's pay increase still falls short of the increase in student fees and cost of living since the last stipend increase in 2007. GTAs from EEB are responsible for teaching approximately 1,700 undergrad students per year.

Policy Recommendations:

- Departmental assistance for GTA's to cover fees
- Automatically award GTA's in-state residency status
- Give PhD candidates a Merit Award to cover at least summer fees after completion of Advancement to Candidacy Exams

Table 1: Five-year history of graduate student fees that EEB Graduate students are responsible for paying. This data does not include summer course registration fees, which are mandatory for graduate students who have passed their Advancement to Candidacy exams.

Graduate Fees per semester - TA/Part-time (6 credit hours)										
School Year	FEES						TOTAL FEES		% INCREASE	
	Program & Services	Health	Technology	Transportation	Facilities (Non-Resident)	Facilities (Resident)	Non-Resident	Resident	Non-Resident	Resident
Fall 2011	162	0	72	12	192	90	438	336	17.74%	24.44%
Spring 2011	162	0	72	12	126	24	372	270	3.33%	4.65%
Fall 2010	150	0	72	12	126	24	360	258	0.00%	0.00%
2009-2010	150	0	72	12	126	24	360	258	15.38%	19.44%
2008-2009	108	0	72	12	120	24	312	216	0.00%	0.00%
2007 -2008	108	0	72	12	120	24	312	216	1.96%	2.86%
2006 - 2007	108	0	72	6	120	24	306	210		

** Part-time graduate students have the option to pay the health fee (\$81). However, this fee must be paid in full for access to the student health center.

Graduate Fees per semester - Full time (9 credit hour)										
School Year	FEES						TOTAL FEES		% INCREASE	
	Program & Services	Health	Technology	Transportation	Facilities (Non-Resident)	Facilities (Resident)	Non-Resident	Resident	Non-Resident	Resident
Fall 2011	239	81	100	26	285	135	731	581	19.64%	26.03%
2010-2011	300	0	100	26	185	35	611	461	0.00%	0.00%
2009-2010	300	0	100	26	185	35	611	461	4.27%	13.55%
2008-2009	250	0	100	26	180	30	586	406	0.00%	0.00%
2007 -2008	250	0	100	26	180	30	586	406	1.74%	2.53%
2006 - 2007	250	0	100	16	180	30	576	396		

Table 2: A cost-of-living adjustment comparison of a GTAs finances in 2007 and 2011. The 2011 Predicted column represents the 2007 stipend and fees adjusted to current day values (i.e. what a GTA would be predicted to earn/spend based on their earnings/spending in 2007).

	2007	2011 Predicted*	2011 Actual	Percent Change **
GTA Stipend				
	\$18,500	\$20,213.38	\$19,147.50	- 5.3
GTA Annual Fees (% of stipend)				
part-time, non resident	\$612 (3.3%)	\$668.68	\$876 (4.6%)	+ 31.0
part-time, resident	\$420 (2.3%)	\$458.90	\$672 (3.5%)	+ 46.4
full-time, non resident	\$1152 (6.2%)	\$1258.69	\$1462 (7.6%)	+ 16.2
full-time, resident	\$792 (4.3%)	\$865.35	\$1162 (6.1%)	+ 34.3

* Calculations based on the US Department of Labor Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator (http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm)

** Percent change from the 2011 Predicted and 2011 Actual values.