



A Resolution Addressing the Need for Increases in Graduate Stipends and the Establishment of Cost of Living Adjustments

Sponsors: Kassie Hollabaugh

Co-Sponsors: George T. Fields, Leighton Chappell

WHEREAS, the Graduate Student Senate (GSS) is the official legislative body and voice of all graduate and professional students at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville; and

WHEREAS, graduate assistants perform work that is central to supporting the University's mission in terms of research, teaching¹, and administration, as well as other key areas; and

WHEREAS, there are 2,796 graduate assistants at the university who receive some form of financial compensation in the form of an assistantship²; and

WHEREAS, according to OneStop, the 2023-2024 total cost of attendance (COA) for an in-state graduate student is \$34,902. The cost of Tuition and Fees is \$13,380; the cost of Books, Course Materials, Supplies, and Equipment is \$1,880; the cost of Housing and Food is \$12,780; and the cost of Transportation is \$3,469. The proportion of the COA that graduate students are expected to cover is \$21,522, based on subtracting Tuition and Fees from the total COA³; and

WHEREAS, the university has taken action to cover tuition, mandatory fees, and differential tuition for graduate students on assistantships, for which the Graduate Student Senate passed a resolution in May 2022, thanking the administration for taking much-needed action⁴; and

¹ 389,888 credit hours were taken by undergraduate students enrolled in Fall 2022. Graduate assistants are critical to the delivery of those credit hours, through indirect (as Teaching Assistants) and direct (as Instructors of Record) means.

² [25 Year Trend of Median Graduate Assistant Stipends 1998-2022](#)

³ [Estimated Graduate Student Cost of Attendance](#)

⁴ [A Resolution Recognizing and Thanking the University for Waiving Graduate Assistant Fees and Differential Tuition at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville](#)

WHEREAS, based on university data gathered in conjunction with the Division of Finance and Administration and the Graduate School, the estimated average stipend for graduate assistants is \$20,190⁵, which falls below the COA minus Tuition and Fees (\$21,522); and **WHEREAS**, based on university data gathered in conjunction with the Division of Finance and Administration and the Graduate School, of the 66 academic units for which there is data, 52, or 79% of academic units' estimated average stipends fall below the COA minus Tuition and Fees⁶; and

WHEREAS, based on university data gathered in conjunction with the Division of Finance and Administration and the Graduate School, of the 2,454 graduate students on assistantships for which there is data, an estimated 1,373 (56%) have average stipends that fall below \$21,522 (COA minus Tuition and Fees) meaning that these graduate students face a deficit between the costs estimated by the university for housing, food, transportation, and other relevant expenses, and the assistantship stipend paid by their academic unit⁷; and

WHEREAS, since 2021, inflation measures and the cost of living indexes have reflected a severe spike in the costs of living, with the Consumer Price Index (CPI) increasing 5.0% since March 2022⁸; and,

WHEREAS, according to the Knoxville Area Association of Realtors (KAAR), as of Fall 2022 effective rental rates in Knoxville have increased 47% since 2019 and the rental occupancy rate is 98.02%⁹. According to Avail Research Quarterly Landlord and Renter Survey, as of Fall 2022 roughly 70% of landlords planned to increase their rental rates¹⁰. According to Zillow Market Trends, as of May 2023 the median rent in Knoxville is \$1,163 and median rental costs have increased by \$407 since May 2022¹¹; and

WHEREAS, according to the USDA, monthly costs for food for a single adult averages \$310 for a 'thrifty' food plan, \$332 for a 'low-cost' food plan, and \$411 for a 'moderate' food plan, with those costs increasing as the number of individuals within the household increases¹²; and

⁵ The 'university data' referenced in this resolution was gathered through months of advocacy by GSS leadership, and a collaboration between the GSS, the Division of Finance and Administration, and the Graduate School.

⁶ For reference, there are 32 academic units (48%) whose maximum stipend doesn't exceed \$21,522 (COA minus Tuition and Fees).

⁷ Please note that the data collected is averaged to a 9-month, 50% appointment.

⁸ [Consumer Price Index \(CPI\) March 2023](#)

⁹ [KAAR - 2023 Local Housing Market Forecast](#)

¹⁰ [Avail Research Quarterly Landlord and Renter Survey - Q3 2022](#)

¹¹ [Knoxville, TN Rental Market Trends \(as of May 2023\)](#)

¹² [Official USDA Thrifty Food Plan: U.S. Average, March 2023; Official USDA Food Plans: Cost of Food at Home at Three Levels. U.S. Average, March 2023](#)

WHEREAS, when adding the monthly median rent from Zillow (\$1,163) and the 'low-cost' monthly food plan provided by the USDA (\$332), on average the food and housing expenses for a graduate assistant in Knoxville are \$1,495 per month or \$17,940 per year. When adding the university's estimated annual 'transportation' expenses (\$3,469) and estimated annual 'miscellaneous personal expenses' (\$3,043) to the annual 'low-cost' food and average housing total of \$17,940, we find that a graduate assistant's estimated average annual cost of living in Knoxville is \$24,452; and

WHEREAS, based on university data gathered in conjunction with the Division of Finance and Administration and the Graduate School, of the 66 academic units for which there is data, 64 or 97% of academic units' estimated average stipends fall below the estimated average annual cost of living in Knoxville as calculated above, meaning only two academic units' estimated average stipends meet or exceed our calculated cost of living¹³; and

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the UTK Graduate Student Senate strongly urges the Administration at the University of Tennessee to increase minimum stipends across the university, especially addressing those academic units where stipend levels do not meet or exceed the cost of living; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the UTK Graduate Student Senate requests that the Administration at the University of Tennessee examine the range of stipends within academic units and across the university to ensure stipends are fair and competitive with the market and our peer institutions; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the UTK Graduate Student Senate encourages the Administration at the University of Tennessee to continually assess graduate assistant stipends to ensure that they are keeping pace with the cost of living in Knoxville, making adjustments to stipend minimums as necessary based on economic conditions; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the UTK Graduate Student Senate insists that the Administration at the University of Tennessee prioritize adequate and appropriate graduate assistant compensation, as graduate students contribute to fulfilling the university's goals, master plan, and strategic vision; and

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED, that this resolution is distributed to the Office of the Chancellor, the Office of the Provost, the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Finance and Administration, the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Life, the Office of the Dean of the Graduate School, the President of the Student Government Association, and the President of the Faculty Senate.

¹³ The only two academic units whose estimated average stipends meet or exceed the calculated cost of living are the Bredesen Center for Interdisciplinary Research and Graduate Education and the Department of Nuclear Engineering in the Tickle College of Engineering.

Adopted by the Graduate Student Senate of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville on the ninth of May in the year two thousand and twenty-three.



Zane Smith

Senate Chair

The Graduate Student Senate of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, President, does hereby approve / [] veto this resolution.



George T. Fields

President

5/9/2023
Date