

PhD Excellence Bridge Committee – Recommendation for funding 2020 Graduate Admissions

The PhD Excellence Bridge Committee has reviewed graduate recruitment options for fall 2020 PhD admissions. We understand this matter is of urgent concern, as departments need to move forward with their plans for graduate recruiting. **The Committee unanimously recommends that the College of Arts and Sciences and the University allocate TA funds for 2020-21 that allow departments to offer the same level of admissions as would have been expected prior to the funding changes implemented by the PhD Excellence Initiative.** The context and rationale for this recommendation are as follows:

The decision at the university level to increase PhD student stipends to a minimum of \$20,000 annually and to transfer those increased costs to the College generated a structural deficit in College finances. Absent other sources of money, the number of state-supported PhD students would have to be cut to balance the College's budget. The Provost provided some additional funding to mitigate the shortfall, but this money only covers the increases for current students for three years (100% in year 1, 100% in year 2, and 50% in year 3) and does not cover student fees (estimated to be \$1.67 million across the three years). Consequently, the long-term budget problem is delayed but not eliminated. The bridge funds from the Provost provide no funds for a new graduate cohort to be recruited for fall 2020.

The Bridge Committee was formed to determine how resources for TAs and RAs would be distributed across the College for fall 2020 and beyond. The Committee confronted two issues. The first was what to do about the upcoming recruitment season. The second was to formulate a systematic plan for the allocation of PhD funding across the College; a plan that would change the distributions of money to departments in line with the goals of the university-wide PhD Excellence Initiative. This plan would reflect detailed information from departments about graduate training and outcomes and would also consider financial information about College operations.

The first issue, formulating a recommendation for 2020 graduate recruitment, has occupied most of the Committee's attention. Given the urgency of the situation, we recognized that decisions about allocation of money could not be conditioned on any of the factors that will inform the development of a comprehensive PhD Excellence plan. The Committee reviewed multiyear financial projections for several funding scenarios. These scenarios modeled the impact of funding departments with sustained reductions in new admissions (relative to 2019 admission numbers) of 0, 5, 10, and 25% through 2022. (That time period corresponded to the duration of bridge funding from the Provost.) Of the models we examined, only a 25% reduction resulted in a balanced budget by 2022.

As the Committee examined these models and contemplated the potential impact of across-the-board cuts in graduate admissions, several significant problems became evident. The modeling was based on multiple assumptions that, given the limited time to assemble the data, could not be validated. Moreover, the 100% bridge funding from the Provost (for 2019 and 2020) fell short of the budget gap created by the University's decision to increase stipends and fully cover student fees. That is, the bridge funding was not truly 100% and provided no funds for recruitment of a new graduate cohort in fall 2020. Also, because of time constraints, the budget deliberations did not include any consideration of the overall budget situation of the College. Consequently, alternative sources of funding for our graduate programs could not be included in the modeling.

Beyond the vagaries of the modeling, the immediate and long-term implications of instituting an across-the-board cut were unclear and likely biased. For example, a 25% cut in admissions, even for a year,

would have an unbalanced impact across departments and work against the goal of promoting PhD excellence in the College. Relatedly, an across-the-board cut would be inconsistent with the Committee's commitment to develop a comprehensive plan to allocate money differentially across departments in full consideration of graduate training, graduate outcomes, and College resources. We also want substantial faculty and student input as we develop a plan. We intend to create a mindful plan – across-the-board cuts are mindless.

The Committee understands the budget implications of maintaining departmental allocations of PhD funding at current levels for an additional year. A one-size cuts all approach to the problem, which appears to be the only immediate-term option available to the committee, is a makeshift and likely harmful solution. A reasoned, justified plan for reconfiguring PhD training in the College will take time, more time than the few weeks available between the announcement of the graduate stipend increase and the beginning of the 2020 graduate recruitment season.

Recently, the University of Chicago adopted a plan to reform its PhD programs motivated by educational goals nearly identical to those advocated by UB's Graduate Excellence Initiative. The plan formulated at the University of Chicago was preceded by more than 80 committee and subcommittee meetings conducted over the course of a year. The components of the plan, including the financial elements, were implemented after the plan was fully developed, not before. The situation at UB reflects a reverse dynamic: the financial portions of the Graduate Excellence Initiative were put in place prior to the creation of a plan. Though we do not wish to relitigate what we see as the mistakes of the past, we do not want to repeat those mistakes. Consequently, the PhD Excellence Bridge Committee strongly supports stable funding of the College's PhD programs based on 2019 funding levels while the Committee tackles the complex issues of reconfiguring and strengthening our doctoral programs. This funding should include a true bridge fund. That is, in addition to the 2 ½ years of funding to cover increases for current students, the bridge funds should also cover five years of funding for a PhD graduate cohort admitted in 2020.

Members of the PhD Excellence Bridge Committee

Rachel Ablow (English)

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