

To: A. Scott Weber
Graham Hammill

From: Robin Schulze

Date: April 20, 2020

Re: College of Arts and Sciences
PhD Excellence Initiative (PEI) Funding Request

BACKGROUND:

Over the course of the 2019-20 academic year, the faculty and staff of the College of Arts and Sciences have deeply considered the question posed in June 2019 by Provost Zukoski: How can we “ensure UB’s PhD programs remain among the strongest in the world at a time of changing career opportunities for those who hold PhD degrees and when higher education faces challenges to how research is undertaken, and how education at all levels is delivered?”

In the face of our COVID-19 Pandemic, that question seems more relevant than ever. UB’s PhD Excellence Initiative was established in August 2019 to examine the following issues:

- Recruiting the very best PhD students to UB.
- Providing exceptional educational and research training.
- Enhancing the diversity of UB’s PhD programs.
- Improving retention of students and time to degree.
- Assuring that UB is nationally recognized to offer top-ranked PhD programs that prepare students for specific opportunities and challenges they will encounter as future scholars and researchers.
- Ensuring strong program outcomes are aligned to PhD recruitment.

As you know, following support from all the deans, the first step was to raise the stipend floor to \$20,000 for all funded doctoral students effective fall 2019. The bridge funding from the Office of the Provost enabled CAS to comply with this necessary move to retain talented students and to provide them with a stipend more consistent with a living wage. While it was my intention to reduce the number of supported PhD students beginning in fall 2020 in order to fund the stipend increase, this was not the will of the faculty. The movement to retain the cohort size was formidable. I appreciate that CAS was able to work with the Office of the Provost to amend the bridge funding and allow a consistent number of lines to be funded for academic year 2020-21.

The foundational documents that launched the PhD Excellence Initiative called for PhD programs to align instruction and preparation with outcomes. In other words, if PhD programs accept as positive outcomes nontenure-track academic and nonacademic positions, then the PhD Excellence Initiative requires programs to realign their priorities and goals to better to prepare students to achieve those outcomes.

While there is work to be done across sectors of the College, the need for such realignment is the most acute in Humanities departments and programs. The UB PhD Satisfaction Exit Survey indicates that since 2009-2010 (the decade since the 2008 global financial crisis) only 53.9% of students completing their

PhDs in the humanities respond affirmatively to the statement, “My program has prepared me for the current job market” (34.1% “agree,” 19.8% “strongly agree”). 21.6% either “strongly disagree” or “disagree,” while the remaining 24.5% are neutral. Over the same period, some 78% of UB humanities PhDs claim they would decide to pursue doctoral studies in the same field, but only 51.5% believe they would choose to do so at UB.¹ Even though the vast majority of students believe the intellectual quality of the faculty in their respective departments is excellent and rate the teaching in their departments as either “very good” or “excellent,” nearly half of UB’s recent PhDs in the Humanities would not choose UB again. This result suggests that recent PhDs are dissatisfied with other aspects of their doctoral programs, such as teacher preparation, professionalization, and the alignment of PhD program requirements with expected outcomes. Doing a better job in these areas should improve the overall satisfaction of CAS PhDs.

Student satisfaction, however, is not CAS’s only concern. We are also charged with increasing completion percentages and lowering the time to degree. According to UB’s Office of Institutional Analysis, since 2007, only the 2013 cohort of CAS PhD students has an overall **six-year completion percentage** of as much as 35% (2013: 35.8%). All the other cohorts have a lower rate—a terrible statistic.² Since 2007, the College’s **five-year completion percentages** range from a low of 11.8% (2011) to a high of 18.5% (2013).³ Given that most CAS departments fund PhD students for a maximum of five years, these numbers are very low. PhD students in the College are outstripping their funding, a condition that leads to profound student distress. The fact that so many CAS students move from expired funding packages to adjunct labor exacerbates the narrative that PhD students are employees rather than co-investigators in training.

PROCESS:

In October 2019, CAS established two committees to make recommendations for how (1) to distribute TA resources across the College’s four sectors and twenty-nine departments (final report of the PhD Excellence Initiative Bridge Committee pending); and how (2) to improve the experience of PhD students with an eye toward increasing our completion percentages while lowering our average time to degree (see the appended report of the PhD Excellence Initiative Curriculum Committee, Appendix C).

The PEI Bridge Committee, chaired by SUNY Distinguished Professor Stephen Tiffany, has recommended implementation of an algorithm that incorporates attrition rate, time to degree, PhD student outcomes, efforts to recruit diverse students, and success with enrolling diverse students. In addition, the Bridge Committee has advocated for a standing faculty committee to monitor and adjust the algorithm over time. The committee has also recommended the allocation of ten reserved stipend lines to be used at the discretion of the committee in order to offset the immediate impact of this plan on our departments. These recommendations are a strong first step to incentivize CAS departments to honor PEI goals.

¹ These percentages are significantly higher for the Natural Sciences & Math: 83.5% would choose to pursue doctoral studies in the same field, with 65.6% electing to do so at UB. For the Social Sciences, the percentages are 77.4% choosing the same field and 58.9% electing to pursue those studies at UB.

² For the 2007 to 2013 cohorts, the range for **six-year completion percentages** for the three sectors in the College are the following: Arts & Letters 10.5% to 28.3%; Natural Sciences & Math 31.7% to 47.3%; Social Sciences 16.7% to 27.8%.

³ For the 2007 to 2014 PhD cohorts, the range for **five-year completion percentages** for the College’s three sectors are the following: Arts & Letters 0% to 16.3%; Natural Sciences & Math 11.7% to 28.3%; Social Sciences 9.7% to 15.8%.

Using the data CAS provided as the backdrop for their work, the PEI Curriculum and Teaching Committee, chaired by Professor David Castillo, compiled a series of recommendations that reflect the committee's understanding of what we could collectively do to position CAS and UB as national leaders in doctoral education. Their report is the result of dozens of hours of collaboration between humanists, artists, natural scientists and social scientists. The findings and recommendations represent the Committee's broad consensus based on their review of an extensive literature review provided by the Dean's Office and feedback collected from individual departments, including separate sets of faculty and student responses to a survey generated by the Committee, as well as extensive conversations with departmental officers and graduate student representatives. In accordance with the recommendations of the College of Arts and Sciences PEI Curriculum and Teaching Committee, we make the following funding requests to accomplish our goals of improving student satisfaction, increasing completion percentages, decreasing time to degree, while improving our students' outcomes.

Funding Requests

- 1) **Fees.** UB has made the case that its \$20,000 minimum TA stipend places it in the top five of public AAU institutions in terms of graduate student support. The fees the University charges compromise this claim. A first-year full-time funded PhD student can expect (as of fall 2020) to pay approximately \$2,600 in fees. A second-year student will pay the same. As students enroll in fewer credit hours, fees decline. In the first two years of study, the \$20,000 stipend has a real value of \$17,400. Over the course of five years, the actual value of the stipend is, on average, approximately \$18,700 per year. As of 2019, The University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill pays all fees for supported students.⁴ This is also true at the University of Kansas.⁵ The University of Michigan charges its students fees, but those fees total only \$165 per year.⁶ As part of the PhD Excellence Initiative, beginning in fall 2020 CAS plans to pay the fees of its supported PhD students. We expect the total cost of fees for funded PhD students to approximate **\$780,000 per year**.
- 2) **First-year PhD Fellowship.** In order to improve CAS doctoral students' experience at the same time that we work to improve both the PhD completion percentage and lower the average time to degree, the College proposes providing all state-funded PhD students entering in fall 2020 (and each incoming class thereafter) a first-year "fellowship year." This first-year "fellowship" will enable new doctoral students to begin their doctoral careers free from the additional stress and responsibility of teaching. Instead of teaching, first-year students will participate in instructional training and adapt themselves to the rigors of post-graduate education. Dedicated instructional preparation prior to teaching (as opposed to **during** the first year of teaching) is key to raising the quality of graduate student instruction, a corollary to improving the undergraduate experience at UB. Taking first-year PhD students out of the classroom will also

⁴ See <https://www.dailytarheel.com/article/2020/03/grad-stipend-letter-0325>

⁵ See <https://policy.ku.edu/graduate-studies/benefits-for-GRAs-GTAs-GAs#payment-fees>

⁶ See the University of Michigan's Office of the Registrar website: https://ro.umich.edu/tuition-residency/tuition-fees?academic_year=153&college_school=27&full_half_term=35&level_of_study=38

orient our PhD students as co-investigators rather than paid instructors and help them to get off to a good start as researchers. Such a fellowship would be a key attractor in an increasingly competitive market for top students.

Providing the entire incoming class of PhD students an initial fellowship year means that CAS will have to replace approximately twenty percent (20%) of all graduate student instruction delivered in the College. On average, PhD students in the College are funded for five years. Applying ratios from data collected about doctoral student instruction in spring 2019, the cohort of first-year PhDs taught approximately 47 lectures/seminars and 123 lab/recitation sections in 2018-19. Based on a review of the disciplines, replacing this lost instruction would require 14.5 full-time (see Appendix A) clinical faculty members at a cost of **\$870,000** recurring.

- 3) **Dissertation Completion Fellowship in the style of the Mellon Foundation.** In order to lower the average time to degree, CAS proposes to grant funded PhD students a “Dissertation Completion” fellowship year. This policy would become effective fall 2021. Releasing PhD students from teaching when they are close to finishing their degrees is vital if we hope to lower the average time to degree. Therefore, CAS would invite advanced students to apply for a funded year with no instruction in return for a commitment that the fellowship would constitute their **terminal year of funding** with no option to return with funding of any type unless they have PhD in hand. Replacement of instruction provided by fifth-year funded students (see Appendix A) would require 9 full-time clinical faculty members at a recurring cost of **\$540,000**.
- 4) **5th Year Presidential and Schomburg Support.** Currently, the Graduate School provides funds for four years of Presidential and Schomburg support, yet most departments in CAS fund PhD students for five years, as do our peer AAU Public institutions. Five years of support is also one of the principles of the PhD Excellence Initiative. We believe it makes no sense for the most prestigious graduate-level fellowships at UB not to match the number of years of TA support we offer PhD students, especially since these are top-up awards meant to supplement TA support. Effectively, not granting a fifth year of Presidential and Schomburg fellowship support means that our best and our diverse students are defunded by \$7,500-10,000 in their fifth year. Consequently, in the crucial final year of TA support, when in most cases these students are writing their dissertations and searching for post-doctoral employment, they have *less* funding - not more. The upshot is that many students find themselves in the position of having to take on extra service teaching either at UB or at other local institutions, which undoubtedly reduces the amount of time they spend on research and writing. Underfunding students in their final years is counterproductive both to raising the completion percentage and lowering the time to degree. Therefore, CAS has decided to guarantee all incoming fall 2020 Presidential and Schomburg fellows a fifth year of fellowship support, provisionally called the “CAS Dissertation Award,” in order to extend the same level of funding as their prior Presidential (\$10,000) or Schomburg (\$12,500) fellowship. The annual average cost of extending fellowship support for a fifth year is **\$208,000**.⁷

⁷ CAS will realize this expense in fall 2024 and will pay it for three years. The total cost to CAS for three years will be \$610,000 (2024=\$192,500, 2025=\$190,000, 2026=\$227,500). Nevertheless, CAS believes that Presidential and Schomburg fellows entering their fifth year of support in fall 2020, fall 2021, fall 2022, and fall 2023 should also realize this benefit of the PhD Excellence Initiative. The per year cost of extending all Presidential and Schomburg fellowships for 5 years beginning in fall 2020 is the following: 2020: \$217,500, 2021: \$217,500, 2022: \$187,500, 2023: \$225,000.

- 5) **Inclusive Excellence Training for First-Year PhD Students and Faculty Mentors.** To effectively increase faculty and student diversity/inclusion, retention and success, UB requires a means to provide readily available, free/low cost, modularized trainings that cumulate to promote UB's overall PhD excellence goals. We propose that the Center for Diversity Innovation (CDI) already fills that need, offering UB an opportunity to support the PhD Excellence Initiative campus-wide. The Center currently supports efforts to increase faculty and student diversity by delivering trainings, workshops, and consultative services intended to increase understanding of best practices in attraction, recruitment, selection, retention, and success. In addition, CDI supports faculty and students in understanding and adopting best practices related to inclusive pedagogy and mentoring (with an emphasis on mentoring across difference)—practices that support inclusion, retention, and success. To increase the scale of CDI's offerings in compliance with the Teaching and Curriculum Committee's recommendations, CAS would simply need permission to hire an administrative assistant to support a broader and deeper reach. **Funds for this position and the training, as well as the cost of CDI speakers and events that supplement it's training, can be covered by the existing PIF budget.** We recommend that the Graduate School promote faculty/unit and graduate student participation in the Center for Diversity Innovation free trainings, workshops and events as part of its overall PhD Excellence strategy. More detailed information about the role CDI can play is in Appendix D.
- 6) **Fundamental Skills in Proposal Development and Grant Writing.** All students enrolled in PhD programs must be able to express themselves clearly in writing, irrespective of their fields. "Writing for purpose" is an essential skill that drives long-term career success. One common and beneficial way that PhD students learn this skill is by pursuing pre-doctoral fellowships and/or grant funding in support of their research. We propose hiring a coordinator to create a program that helps PhD students identify fellowship and grant opportunities and trains them to successfully prepare and submit applications. Envisioned duties include:
- Develop communication plans for raising awareness of pre and postdoctoral fellowship opportunities across the disciplines.
 - Develop and distribute calendars of student-focused fellowship/grant solicitations.
 - Develop and deliver workshops to teach departments how to develop strategies that will lead to increased applications for graduate fellowships and/or grants.
 - Mentor individual graduate students preparing applications for graduate fellowships.
 - Function as a liaison between and/or data repository for institutional information needed to support these applications.
 - Work with departments and across sectors to build teams of faculty to pursue training grant opportunities.

The recurring salary associated with a staff hire at the SL-4 level to do this work is **\$75,000**.

In addition, the PEI Teaching and Curriculum Committee identified both teacher-readiness training for new doctoral students and mentor training for faculty who advise PhD students as critical needs. CAS is not currently prepared to propose an investment strategy related to these recommendations. Detailed plans need to be developed at the department and sector level. The standing faculty committees called for in both committee reports will address these issues and submit additional requests for the second round of PEI funding.

2019-20 has been a tumultuous year for the College of Arts and Sciences and for the University. The PhD Excellence Initiative pushed us to examine our priorities for both graduate student training and outcomes, while also forcing us to face the realities of how our programs serve both students and the University in its mission to be a top 25 public research institution. The COVID-19 Pandemic has stretched faculty in unprecedented ways. The crisis has made it clear that quality online instruction, and the ability to train both our faculty and PhD students to provide that instruction, must be a much larger part of our arsenal. We look forward to the discussions these proposals will generate.