



Research Council Report January 2008

Introduction

Fall 2007 was the inaugural semester for the GAPSA Research Council. This council, along with the GAPSA Professional Student Council, was invented during the merger between GAPSA and the Graduate Student Associations Council (GSAC). The Research Council mimicked, to a degree, the role of the previous GSAC General Body and GSAC Executive Board in reviewing and granting funds for academic events and conference travel grants for research students, as well as advocating on behalf of the academic concerns of graduate students. This report will summarize the accomplishments and future direction of this council.

Membership

The newly-created Research Council consists of research representatives from the following schools: The Annenberg School of Communication, The School of Arts and Sciences, The School of Engineering, The School of Nursing, The Graduate School of Education, The Wharton School of Business, The School of Social Policy and Practice, and The School of Medicine. Unfortunately, we were missing one representative from The School of Arts and Sciences during the first part of the semester and our one representative from Wharton for the second part of the semester. In addition, we did not receive a representative from The School of Design at all during the Fall 2007 semester.

Advocacy: Ph.D. stipend levels

Penn's minimum doctoral stipend is among the lowest across the Ivy League, and is the only one we know of that has not been raised at all in 2007. Our Ph.D. students' purchasing power has decreased for two years in a row and does not keep up with increasing rent. This situation was first documented by GSAC in a public report in April 2007. Building on GSAC's work, and with the help of the new SAS student government, we have continued to document the effects of low stipends on Ph.D. students. Building on estimates by University offices, we have established that the expenses incurred by a typical Ph.D. student exceed the minimum stipend by close to \$3,000 per year on average. As our survey of the student body documents, this gap hurts many students' academic performance because it forces them to work on the side; it places them at risk of being pushed out of "safe" residential neighborhoods becoming unaffordable to them; it pushes them into credit card debt; and it places their dependents at risk. We have also interviewed graduate group chairs and learned that many of them are concerned that the low stipends are hurting the competitiveness of their programs to attract prospective students.

This situation is echoed in recent capital campaign statement. It stands in contrast to the administration's 2005 pledge to "take the necessary steps" to maintain our position "among the national leaders in supporting graduate education".

Based on these facts, we have put forth the following recommendations to the administration:

- **Restore Penn’s competitiveness by increasing graduate stipends to the average level of the rest of the Ivy League.**
- **Ensure that future stipend increases are reflective of the administration's projected budget for graduate students, taking tax into consideration.**
- **Ensure that all students receive early notification of annual stipend changes.**

We have detailed these findings and recommendations in an interim report. At the time of writing, the administration has not replied to that report. In particular, we do not know by which amount, if any, our minimum stipends will increase next year. We will attempt to include this information in a later report.

Please note that GAPSAs and the Research Council act in an advisory manner only on this issue. We are not part of the decision-making process regarding stipend increases.

Budget

The Research Council approved a 2007-2008 Research Council budget as follows. The information in the table below includes the amount of the budget has already been allocated by 01/01/08 and the amount spent as of 01/01/08.

	Budgeted	Allocated	Spent
Research Council	\$45,000	\$26,184.16	\$22,395.50
<i>Academic Event Grants</i>	\$10,000	\$3,340.00	\$3,340.00
<i>Navigating Series</i>	\$15,000	\$15,000.00	\$15,000.00
<i>Research Student Conference Travel Grants</i>	\$20,000	\$7,844.16	\$4,055.50
Office of the Provost Funds	\$20,000	\$7,844.16	\$4,055.50
<i>Research Student Conference Travel Grants</i>	\$20,000	\$7,844.16	\$4,055.50
Research Council Surplus	\$24,467	\$0.00	\$0.00
<i>Research Student Conference Travel Grants</i>	\$10,000	\$0.00	\$0.00
<i>Available Surplus</i>	\$14,467	\$0.00	\$0.00

Student Travel Grants

In October 2007, the Research Council awarded 55 Fall 2007 Conference Travel Grants to 55 research students representing each of the nine research graduate schools within the University. The grant awards did not exceed \$300 per individual but when combined totaled \$15,688.32. These figures are slightly down from last year, and we expect that there may have been some confusion for applicants during the GSAC/GAPSA transition. The Research Council will continue to award travel grants in the Spring and Summer of 2008, with increased publicity.

Academic Event Grants

In the Fall 2007 semester, the Research Council awarded five student groups academic event funds totaling \$3,340.00. These groups are listed here. These amounts are comparable to previous GSAC awards, though the demand is not as strong we had hoped. We will continue to fund academic event applications, but expect to end the year under

budget.

Group	Applicant	Award
Political Science Graduate Group	Sarah Salwen	\$450
The Graduate English Association	Greta Lynn	\$220
PGWISE	Hannah Oh	\$250
Comparative Literature Graduate Group	Sarah Kerman	\$1,420
Romance Languages (Working Papers)	Francois Massonarat	\$1,000

Future work

During the next semester, the Research Council will continue to review academic event and travel grants. The Council will focus on the following advocacy issues, in order of priority:

1. Examination of the Proposed Changes to Ph.D. Tuition and Examination of the Rules Concerning Graduate Studies.

The University's central administration is in the processes of considering a change to the Ph.D. tuition structure (see attached CONFIDENTIAL document). It would be helpful to get feedback from the Research Council, while the administration is in this deliberative stage, concerning the possible effects such a change would have on research students. If the currently proposed tuition change is acted upon, it will become necessary for the University to revise the rules governing graduate studies (see <http://www.upenn.edu/grad/rules.html>). Specifically, the University will have to rework the Ph.D. clock, and this will undoubtedly affect time to degree.

2. Review of the Ph.D. Exit Survey

The University conducts an exit survey of all Ph.D. degree recipients. We are currently pressuring the University to compile and examine the data collected by this survey over the past ten years. As the University is now looking at this survey, we have an opportune time to look at it ourselves and to recommend improvements, if needed (see www.upenn.edu/grad/sdso/sdso.html).

3. Lack of funding for advanced Ph.D. students

While some Ph.D. students are offered a full funding package of five years, others receive only three and still others have noted a more vague promise of funding. Last year, students in at least four schools -- SAS, SP2, Education, and Design -- reported to GSAC about challenges securing funding for the duration of their time at Penn. For example, over the last two years, SAS has been reported to phase out the SAS Fellowships that used to get senior people through their dissertations. CGS, an important employer for doctoral students on campus, reportedly changed the pay scale for courses to "lecturer B," so that the level of pay has dropped to about \$4,000 a semester for solo-teaching a course, with health insurance not included.

4. Students with dependents

Unlike faculty and staff, Penn students with dependents are not offered the reduced "assisted rate" available at Penn's daycare center. A further fee-assistance program

is made available only to University employees. Of special concern is the situation of international students with dependents, as their spouses typically do not have employment permits in the U.S., and their children are not eligible for either state or national healthcare programs for the poor. Such students must therefore finance their families exclusively by means of their fellowships and by the salary they may get when working as Penn employees. Even students who are U.S. citizens cannot always rely on their partner's income and financial security.

5. Grievance Procedures

Ph.D. students at Penn, like other employees, sometimes face discrimination or harassment at work. Ph.D. students, however, do not have the legal protection that other employees do. There is no uniform grievance procedure in place for graduate students who have been mistreated by their professors. Often, the policy is for department chairs to handle these issues, even if the department chair is the accused party. Conflicts of interest like this should not exist. Graduate students need all the academic and labor protections that are afforded to faculty and administrators.