



GAPSA Research Council Statement on the Ph.D. “Tuition Simplification” Proposal

March 19, 2008

Introduction to the Proposal

The University administration is currently considering a proposal to standardize the amount of tuition charged for Ph.D. students across the 9 Ph.D. granting schools at Penn. On February 20, 2008, Associate Provost for Education, Dr. Andy Binns kindly presented this proposal to the members of the GAPSA Research Student Council at our biweekly meeting and remained for the duration of the hour-long meeting to answer questions.¹

The purpose of the proposal: Briefly, Dr. Binns explained that the proposed changes would (a) end the inconsistent treatment of students and faculty mentors (e.g. one faculty member’s grant was being changed between \$6-\$20K per student per year depending on what school the student was enrolled in), (b) definitely define the cost of a Ph.D. program for federal purposes, (c) standardize the cost of credit units allowing students to more easily pursue interdisciplinary coursework outside of their home graduate groups, and (d) make the system more transparent and easy to navigate. Binns also explained that the real impetus behind the change was the 10-year accreditation process where the external reviewers singled out the Ph.D. tuition structure as a problem unique to Penn, creating problems in efficiency, simplicity and transparency.

The proposed changes: Dr. Binns described the changes as (a) a standardization of the course unit requirements so that the same number of courses cost the same dollar amounts across the University, (b) a simplification and explicit description of the requirements for all students in years 1-5 so that all students drop to “low” tuition status by year 6 (by year 4 if they enter with a masters degree or equivalent credit), (c) an elimination of the “Ph.D. class tuition tax” so that the central administration no longer taxed the schools, (d) a “reduction” in charges for Ph.D. candidates in years 6-10 (note that this is a reduction overall, but in some cases this “low” tuition will actually be increased), and (e) a requirement that no Ph.D. program extend beyond year 10 (year 8 for students who enter with transfer credits) without academic consequences (e.g. recertification).

The actual dollar amount changes: Dr. Binns also described the actual dollar amounts: During years 1-5 (or until advancement to degree candidacy), charges will be \$12,000 per term or \$24,000 per year. During years 6-10 (or the 5 years after advancement to degree candidacy), there will be “reduced” charges of \$1,500 per term or \$3,000 per year. Another difference is the general fee of \$500 per year will be charged in every year. This is an increase for some students, because some were paying the student’s fee for first few years only though they were still taking advantage of student services.

¹ The transcript from this discussion can be found in the GAPSA Research Council minutes, February 20 2008.

Concerns of the Research Council

Graduate student representatives had mixed responses to the proposal. Reactions ranged from enthusiastic support to serious concerns regarding the effects that the new tuition structure would have on students in specific Ph.D. programs.

SAS students in years 7-10 will see increased tuition, which is likely to slow down progress and extend time to degree: Currently SAS students in years 7+ are on “low dissertation” tuition are required to pay \$1,278 per year. If the new tuition level for these students is set at \$3,500 per year, as proposed, all SAS students beyond year 6 will see an increase of \$2,222 per year rather than “reduced” charges, as the proposal suggests. Enrollment data for Spring 2008 shows that 16.4% of all SAS Ph.D. students are currently beyond their 6th year.² As can be inferred from data provided by the SAS graduate division, few students, if any, are actively avoiding graduation. Rather, long-term students cluster in those departments that require an exceptionally long time-to-degree. This correlation would be unexpected if “lingering” (i.e. staying in a program longer than is academically required) was a pervasive phenomenon in SAS.³

Will students be required to pay more for summer courses? Students who are TAs during the fall and/or spring semesters frequently end up taking courses over the summer so that they can spend more time during the academic year on improved teaching. There was concern among the Research Council that advanced students in this situation may have to pay even more than the \$3,500 per year to cover their summer course tuition.

Will financial change effect cultural change in long time to degree graduate groups? There is a perception among faculty (and students) in some programs that a good Ph.D. program requires an average time to degree (TTD) of 7 or more years. Most notable are the long time-to-degree programs in SAS (Anthropology, Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Religious Studies and Germanic Languages and Literatures)⁴, though programs in the Graduate School of Education also have long average time to degree statistics (see Figure 1).

How will the increased revenue from the Ph.D. student fees be used? There was great interest within the Research Student Council to find out how the University plans to use the sudden increase in Ph.D. student fees. It was generally acknowledged that Ph.D. students do use a number of university services traditionally provided for by the student fee; these include the Graduate Student Center, Counseling and Psychological Services, various academic help centers, and GAPSA itself. It is also understood that the fee will go, at least in part, to funding newly created resources, including the new Family Center

² SASgov report “Advanced Ph.D. Students: Why does it take more than 5 years to get a Ph.D. and what should we do about it” March 2008.

³ Specifically, 4% of Ph.D. students at SAS are beyond their 10th year, with two departments (Anthropology and Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations) accounting for 64% of that number. As stated in the “Individual Graduate Group Policies on Time Limits and Recertification for Extension” (<http://www.upenn.edu/grad/recert.htm>), both departments require unusually intensive and extended field work as standard practice as part of dissertation research.

⁴ SASgov report “Advanced Ph.D. Students: Why does it take more than 5 years to get a Ph.D. and what should we do about it” March 2008.

and newly funded school-specific student governments such as the SAS student government group (SASgov) and the Biomedical Graduate Students Association (BGS). However, the Research Council would like to ensure that the University use the newly procured Ph.D. student fees appropriately (e.g. to fund research student activities).

Perceived Benefits of the Proposal

Reduced tuition: It appears that the majority of advanced Ph.D. students will benefit from the reduced tuition in years following advancement to degree candidacy. For example, students in the School of Nursing are charged “high” dissertation rates once they enter dissertation status, so the changes will actually save most students money. The same can be said for full-time Ph.D. students in the Graduate School of Education, which each currently pay \$2,800 per term. The reduction to \$1,500 per term will result in a total reduction of \$1,300 per term or \$2,600 per year. In the School of Social Policy and Practice, the average time to degree is seven years – 3 years of coursework and 4 years of dissertation. Students currently pay \$16,112, a combination of “high” and “low dissertation” over their four dissertation years, but under then new system these four years will only cost students \$14,000 – a reduction of \$2,112.

Pressure on some schools to shorten time to degree: Those schools where the students will be saving money, (e.g. the School of Social Policy and Practice, the Graduate School of Education and the School of Nursing), will be required to bear more of the financial burden in order to compensate for the lost tuition revenue. In these cases, the schools will have a very real financial incentive to advance and graduate their Ph.D. students in a more timely fashion. Unfortunately, this is not the case with SAS, which will be receiving an increase in Ph.D. student tuition dollars. There are Ph.D. programs, specifically within SAS, that traditionally take more than 10 years to complete. We expect the administration and faculty to pay attention to these programs to ensure that they are getting students to graduate within 10 years. Nonetheless, the Research Council is supportive of a universal requirement that no Ph.D. program at Penn last longer than 10 years (8 years for students who enter with transfer credits).

Increased transparency and simplification: The Research Council is supportive of the University’s efforts to make the Ph.D. tuition system more transparent and easy to navigate, and the Council agrees that this is an important step in making the University function more efficiently, and in removing the major obstacles that currently impede interdisciplinary study at Penn.

Recommendations from the Research Council

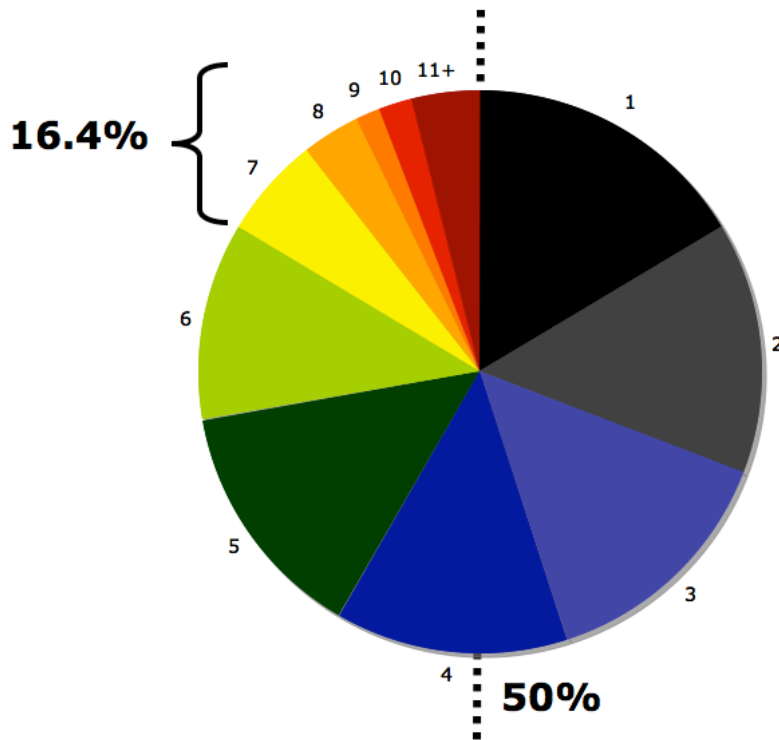
We recommend that special attention be given to the effects the proposal will have on SAS students: We have found that advanced students exist in nearly every SAS graduate group; five programs routinely take 10 years or more, at least six programs routinely take 7 to 8 years, and nearly every program takes at least 6 years⁵. In light of the fact that SAS tuition will be increasing for more than 16.4% of SAS Ph.D. students, we encourage the University to work with SAS to make the change more cost-neutral for advanced students and to create more of a financial incentive for the graduate groups to grant Ph.D.s within 5-7 years.

We recommend that the rules governing Ph.D. programs be revised to ensure that (1) faculty are required to evaluate preliminary exams and dissertation proposals promptly, within one month of the exam or proposal date, that (2) each student, upon advancement to degree candidacy is provided a Dissertation Committee consisting of at least three faculty, that (2) the Dissertation Committee be required to meet at least once annually with the student to review the student's progress, and that (3) the Dissertation Committee be required to provide the student with significant feedback concerning his/her research project promptly, within one month of the meeting date.

⁵ SASgov report "Advanced Ph.D. Students: Why does it take more than 5 years to get a Ph.D. and what should we do about it" March 2008.

Figure 1

Years at Penn for Full-time Ph.D. Students in SAS (Spring 2008)



Years at Penn for Full-time Ph.D. Students in GSE (in Spring 2008)

