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Action Steps to Improve the Experience of Graduate Students in the Humanities, Social Sciences and Divinity School

Thomas F. Rosenbaum, Provost
Cathy J. Cohen, Deputy Provost for Graduate Education
Kimberly Goff-Crews, Vice-President and Dean of Students

The report from the Working Group on Graduate Student Life in the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Divinity School represents a substantial piece of work that will guide our plans to enhance graduate and professional education at the University of Chicago for some time to come. The faculty, staff, and student members of the Working Group, especially the chair, Professor Alison Winter, are to be commended for the significant work, energy, and care they contributed to producing such a comprehensive and constructive document. In the pages of this report, one finds a thoughtful discussion of a series of recommendations that the University might adopt as we continue to invest in the graduate-student population, including those students who matriculated prior to the implementation of the Graduate Aid Initiative. Central to the report is a section authored by the graduate-student members of the committee, which directly expresses their understanding of the issues confronting current graduate students and how the University might alleviate some of the challenges they face. In the same section, the graduate-student members of the committee also present their priorities for changes and additions to graduate education along with the accompanying rationale for their recommendations.

In May of 2007, Provost Rosenbaum convened the Working Group. The charge given to the group was to explore issues of graduate life relevant to both current and

future graduate students. Thus, while much of the discussion concerning the recommendations in this report focuses on improving the condition of current graduate students, especially those not included under the Graduate Aid Initiative, we are also mindful of how each recommendation will enhance graduate study in the future. The Working Group met weekly during the summer and through much of the fall. In December, the Working Group submitted its final report.

In early January, the Provost, Deputy Provost for Graduate Education, and the Vice-President and Dean of Students met with the Working Group to gather additional input and reflections on the report, especially from its student members. During January and much of February, the Provost, Deputy Provost for Graduate Education, and Vice-President and Dean of Students met with different groups on campus to receive feedback on the recommendations contained in the report. The Provost and Deputy Provost consulted with the Deans of the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Divinity School. We also met with Departmental Chairs in the Humanities and Social Science Division. The Deputy Provost and the Vice-President held two town-hall meetings with graduate students and one small-group meeting with student leaders. Finally, the Provost, Deputy Provost, and Vice-President met with a group of student leaders prior to this announcement to discuss the action steps we planned to adopt.

All of the recommendations presented in the report were given thorough consideration by the Provost and the President. In addition, the May 2, 2007, letter from graduate students to President Zimmer was seriously explored and greatly informed our thinking about which recommendations to adopt. We should note that while ideally we would like to include all graduate students as part of the Graduate Aid Initiative, it is not

financially feasible if we are to invest in and continue the record of excellence that defines the many parts of our University, especially our faculty, staff, and large graduate-student population. It has been our outstanding graduate programs, departments, and faculty that in the past convinced outstanding students from across the world to join the University of Chicago community, often for less financial support than they could have secured from another highly respected university. These students are attracted here by the powerful educational experience that is offered by our University. It also has been our commitment to having a larger cohort of graduate students on campus than most of our peers that has allowed us to extend offers to students who are nontraditional in their approach and preparation for graduate school. These students have repeatedly demonstrated that one's capabilities cannot always be judged by a written application. Thus, while we will continue our commitment to provide a diverse and broad group of students excellent and innovative graduate education, we do so with the understanding that such efforts must complement our commitment to promoting the continuing distinction of other parts of our University.

The University of Chicago has long been known as an outstanding institution for graduate education. Fundamental to our success in the field of graduate education has been an outstanding faculty, an exceptionally gifted group of graduate students, and an overall commitment to follow innovative intellectual pursuits independent of discipline or scholarly tradition. We are committed to building on that tradition through new enterprises such as the Graduate Aid Initiative. In addition to the Graduate Aid Initiative, there are numerous other actions that the President and the Provost have taken that underscore their understanding of the significance of graduate education to the life of the

University. For example, for the first time the Provost recently established a new Deputy Provost position, which will focus exclusively on graduate education. Professor Cathy J. Cohen, the new Deputy Provost for Graduate Education, will lead a critical assessment of the graduate experience across the University, considering new programs and paradigms necessary to define graduate education for the future. Similarly, new Vice-President and Dean of Students Kimberly Goff-Crews will direct an effort to identify the major issues that define graduate-student life and develop guiding principles that the University will use to inform our ongoing work to improve the overall experience of graduate and professional students. The University has also devoted nearly \$2 million to make sure that every graduate student who matriculated since 2003 will receive University-paid health insurance for the balance of the first five years in their program. We have also developed a Graduate Student Parents policy which allows new parents in graduate programs and professional schools to adjust their programmatic deadlines and coursework so that they can successfully meet their new responsibilities as parents while also continuing to make progress in their program of study. We believe that these efforts, numerous others, and the actions we outline in this document will improve the experience of our graduate students substantially. Our goal in all these endeavors is to enhance the educational experience of our students and to provide our students with the resources they need to excel in and to complete their graduate programs and fields of study.

Action Steps

The Working Group presented four distinct options, which included either a single suggested program to be adopted or multiple ideas for adjustments to our graduate

program. Instead of responding to each option presented, we have unbundled the recommendations and will discuss the action steps we will take to further improve graduate education and graduate-student life.

Action 1: Reduction in new admissions in exchange for funds for current students

All departments and programs in the Social Sciences and Humanities Divisions have been given the option of reducing the number of full-package, five-year offers they can make to new students for the 2008–09 academic year in exchange for additional money to bring current doctoral students not covered under the Graduate Aid Initiative to a minimum level of stipend support. Specifically, every new matriculating student under the Graduate Aid Initiative represents a financial commitment of \$111,000 over five years from the Division and the Central Administration. The actual money available from an exchange of one Graduate Aid Initiative five-year fellowship will be \$100,000—discounted for immediate use.

5 years of stipend @ \$19,000/year = \$95,000

5 years of health benefits @ \$2,000 = \$10,000

2 summers of support @ \$3,000 = \$6,000

Given the decentralized nature of our University, we believe that departments are the appropriate bodies to evaluate the cost and benefits of such a plan for their current and future graduate-student population and for their fields more generally. This possibility of exchanging offers or “slots” for graduate-student support or “funding” was

made available only this admissions season. The actual number of offers needed in exchange for one Graduate Aid Initiative five-year fellowship has been determined by the average yield of each department in previous years. Every department that has decided to participate in the “slots for funding” plan has committed to bringing all of its current students at least up to a minimum stipend level that was determined in conjunction with the Division. In the Humanities Division, the minimum total support (from either stipend or stipend plus salary from guaranteed teaching service obligations) is \$15,000 per year for years SR3, SR4, and AR1 beginning in the 2008-09 academic year. In the Social Sciences Division, the stipend minimum is \$10,500 for years SR3 and SR4 starting in the same academic year. The number of years covered by the increase has been determined by each Division, based largely on past funding packages.

We are very pleased that nearly all the departments in the Humanities Division and many in the Social Sciences Division have decided to partner with the Central Administration and adopt the “slots for funding” plan as a means to increase the stipends of underfunded students. In the Humanities Division, the following departments will bring their students up to a minimum level of support of \$15,000: Art History, Cinema and Media Studies, Classics, Comparative Literature, East Asian Languages and Civilizations, English, History of Culture, Jewish Studies, Linguistics, Music, New Testament, Romance Languages and Literatures, and Slavic Languages and Literatures.¹ The Humanities Division and its departments in conjunction with the Central Administration will commit \$705,000 to improve the stipends we offer our current students over the next three years.

¹ Music will use departmental funds to increase the stipends of all their students in SR3, SR4, and AR1 to \$15,000. The Committee on the History of Culture and the Committee on Jewish Studies have stopped admitting new students. Their students will be brought up to \$15,000 from divisional funds.

In the Social Sciences, the Department of Political Science, the Committee on Social Thought, the Department of History, and the Department of Sociology will bring the stipends of their SR3 and SR4 students up to a minimum of \$10,500. The Social Sciences Division and its departments, in partnership with the Central Administration, will commit \$421,000 to improve the stipends we provide some of our current students over the next two years.²

In total, the University will devote \$1,126,000 to increase the stipends we offer many of our students in the Humanities and Social Sciences Divisions. Departments, Divisions, and the Central Administration are taking this action because we believe that increasing the stipends of underfunded students will provide these individuals with needed support as they work to fulfill program requirements. It is our hope that this supplementary assistance, along with the other actions described below, will also help to lessen the time to degree for some of our current students. Finally, this adjustment to stipend amounts will narrow the differences in financial packages evident among our students, strengthening a collaborative culture of exploration, investigation, and exchange.

Action 2: Increase in the number of Provost Summer Fellowships (two-year program)

The Provost and the Vice-President and Dean of Students will increase the number of summer fellowships available during the next two years. These new fellowships, inaugurated by the Provost in the summer of 2007, were designed to supply

² The Department of Sociology is using departmental funds to increase the stipends of all their students in SR3 and SR4 to \$10,500.

current students with additional financial support so they might concentrate on programmatic requirements during the summer, such as preparing for exams, finishing a master's thesis, or conducting research for publication. In the summer of 2008, the number of summer fellowships will increase fourfold, from the twenty-five previously scheduled to be awarded to one hundred. In the summer of 2009, we will award fifty Provost Summer Fellowships, up from the fifteen that were expected to be awarded. The number of fellowships awarded each year will decrease as the number of students in scholastic residence not covered by the Graduate Aid Initiative also decreases. During the next two years, the Office of the Provost will devote \$300,000 in new resources to this effort. The Office of the Vice-President and Dean of Students will commit an additional \$30,000, bringing its total contribution to \$150,000 to fund these summer fellowships, for a total of \$450,000 in funding commitments.

The Provost Summer Fellowships will be awarded through a competitive process. Students who are eligible to receive these awards include those who are in their second, third, or fourth year of full-time doctoral study at the time of application and not covered under the Graduate Aid Initiative. The current level of graduate aid a student receives, the student's financial need, and previous summer fellowships awarded will be taken into consideration when reviewing applications.

Action 3: Increase in the number of dissertation-year fellowships

In the upcoming year, the University will add fifteen new dissertation-year fellowships. This initiative will begin to address the needs of advanced graduate students in the Social Sciences and Humanities who no longer have financial support through the

University and need funding that will allow them to concentrate on completing the research and writing of their dissertation. Dissertation-year fellowships have proven to be very successful in the past, allowing students close to completing their dissertation the concentrated time to finish their writing and defense. A high percentage of students who receive such fellowships go on to finish their degree within two years of the fellowship. We believe an increase in the number of dissertation-year fellowships will substantially increase the probability that advanced students in their sixth, seventh, and eighth year of graduate school will be able to secure internal funding so that they might complete and defend their dissertation. This action step will benefit not only current advanced graduate students but future ones as well. Although we have greatly improved the funding packages we can offer students in the Social Sciences and Humanities, we understand that time to degree often extends past the five years of guaranteed funding that is part of the Graduate Aid Initiative. In response to this need, we will devote money immediately to increasing the number of dissertation-year fellowships.

Currently, there are more than eighty dissertation fellowships housed in the Humanities Division, the Social Sciences Division, or one of the departments in those Divisions. We will add fifteen new dissertation-year fellowships immediately and guarantee the funding of those fellowships for the next five years. Each new fellowship package will cover a stipend of \$23,000 plus health insurance, for a total expenditure of at least \$25,000 per fellowship. Our goal is to increase the number of new dissertation-year fellowships to twenty during the next five years and to raise funds sufficient to endow these twenty new fellowships and eventually more.

Earlier in the academic year, in response to the needs of graduate students and the desire to lessen time to degree, the University submitted a proposal to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation requesting financial support for dissertation-year fellowships. We are pleased to announce that the University was awarded a grant of \$6 million from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for the Mellon Endowment Fund for Graduate Education in the Humanities at the University of Chicago. Next year seven new dissertation-year fellowships will come from the yearly payout on this endowment. Eventually, by year five, the number of dissertation-year fellowships generated by the payout on the Mellon Endowment grant will grow to eleven.³ To further increase the number of dissertation-year fellowships we can offer our students, the Office of the Provost will also fund an additional eight new dissertation-year fellowships during the next five years. These eight new fellowships will be guaranteed for at least the next five years, costing the Office of the Provost \$200,000 a year and \$1,000,000 over five years. The total monetary commitment for all the new dissertation-year fellowships during the next five years is \$2,150,000.

Action 4: Committee to review teaching by graduate students

The report from the Working Group notes that there is a need for a serious review of multiple issues surrounding graduate teaching, not the least of which is our current levels of remuneration. The Deputy Provost for Graduate Education will convene a committee of faculty, students, and staff to immediately explore first and foremost our current system for determining levels of remuneration for graduate teaching. Initial data

³ Since these are endowed funds we can use only the payout on the endowment and not the total grant for dissertation awards.

reported by the Working Group supports claims that we lag behind our peers in financial compensation for graduate teaching. This committee will be charged with gathering systematic data on this issue and making recommendations for needed changes to both the levels of compensation and the system for evaluating teaching remuneration. Every effort will be made to implement the accepted recommendations by the beginning of the 2008-09 academic year.

In addition to investigating issues of remuneration, the committee will also explore a number of other topics, including the pedagogical training that students need and receive prior to and during their teaching assignments, the roles and responsibilities of graduate-student teachers, and better systems of monitoring and improving the experience of graduate-student teachers. The University is committed to supporting and improving teaching opportunities available to graduate students because we recognize that teaching is a primary instrument through which we can facilitate the development of essential skills needed for success in a career, especially the academy, as well as productive engagement in the larger society. Through pedagogical training and teaching experience, students learn how to articulate their thoughts, present evidence in a clear manner, listen to and comprehend alternative points of view, carefully deliberate opposing ideas, and provide effective written and verbal feedback. We believe that what graduate students learn through observing and engaging in teaching augments the more detailed knowledge acquisition happening through departments and programs in their areas of study. We therefore have a responsibility to explore how we can improve the pedagogical training and actual classroom experiences of our graduate-student teachers. We expect this part of the committee's work to be completed by winter 2009.

Action 5: Committee on Advanced Residency and Time to Degree

The Deputy Provost will convene a committee of faculty, students, and staff to review the advanced-residency (AR) system currently employed for graduate students, focusing in particular on the out-of-pocket tuition paid by students during advanced residency and its yearly increase. More broadly, this committee will explore the link between the AR system and the time to degree among our students. Are there changes to the AR system that might lessen time to degree? For example, should we decrease or eliminate the out-of-pocket tuition costs students pay during AR1 through AR4, with the expectation that after eight years most students should be able to finish their degree? What incentive structure might we put in place for both students and departments to aid students in completing their degrees in a reasonable length of time? Just as important, what additional resources and support mechanisms do students need to significantly lessen their time to degree? All of these issues will be explored by the Committee on Advanced Residency and Time to Degree. We expect this committee to submit its report by the end of Autumn Quarter 2008. Our goal is to implement any needed changes by the 2009-10 academic year.

Action 6: Expansion of the Graduate Aid Initiative to include the Divinity School and increase in stipends for current Divinity School students

We are pleased to announce that matriculating doctoral students at the Divinity School will be included in the Graduate Aid Initiative starting in the 2008–09 academic year. These students will receive a stipend of \$19,000, tuition and health insurance for five years, plus two years of summer funding of \$3,000 each summer. The cost to the University of including the Divinity School as part of the Graduate Aid Initiative will be

approximately \$2.4 million over five years with an incremental yearly cost of \$1.5 million. Last February, when President Zimmer announced the Graduate Aid Initiative, he made it clear that he hoped eventually to include the Divinity School as part of this funding program. The Divinity School at the University of Chicago is one of the best in the world, producing world-renowned scholars. In the past, we have struggled to adequately fund the exceptional doctoral students who are part of the Divinity School. Starting in 2008–09, not only will we substantially improve the funding package for matriculating students, we also will be able to increase the stipends of many of our current students at the Divinity School.

Using the same process detailed earlier in our discussion of slots for funding in the Humanities and Social Sciences, faculty at the Divinity School are partnering with the Central Administration to cash in offers for potential new graduate students to increase the stipends of current graduate students. Current doctoral students in the Divinity School will have their stipends increased to the level of \$15,000 for up to either three or four years, depending on their scholastic residence status when they entered the doctoral program. This effort represents a commitment of nearly \$1.4 million over the next four years from the Divinity School and the Central Administration. It is our hope that the inclusion of matriculating 2008 students as part of the Graduate Aid Initiative and the increased stipend for many current doctoral students at the Divinity School will supply these individuals with the resources they need to excel in their program while shortening their time to degree.

Additional Concerns Raised in the Report

The report of the Working Group for Graduate Student Life in the Humanities, Social Sciences, and the Divinity School included several recommendations on which the Office of the Vice-President and Dean of Students in the University (O-VPDOS) will take the lead to research solutions and determine follow-up steps.

International Students

The report recommended that the O-VPDOS begin to identify solutions for helping international students in financing their education at the University. Financial issues are often not easy for international graduate students in the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Divinity School because of difficulty in obtaining private loans and legal constraints on their ability to work in this country. Obtaining private loans is particularly hard because international students are often considered a greater risk by lenders. In the absence of a credit history, lenders require international students to have a U.S. citizen as a co-signer. Most international students cannot meet this requirement.

The Graduate School of Business, which has a sizeable international-student population, has developed an alternative loan program. The O-VPDOS is considering this model as an option, but subprime-mortgage problems affecting the economy have limited the pool of available funding for such programs. With the financial markets not likely to change in the foreseeable future to enable us to negotiate favorable loan terms for international students, the O-VPDOS is identifying alternative ways to provide loans to international students. With respect to employment opportunities, international students may legally work twenty hours per week or less at a job for the University; the paycheck

has to be from the University itself. At this time, it is unclear what the institution can do to supplement funds earned in this way, other than to provide more scholarship funds for advanced international students to compensate for their inability to legally work longer hours.

In conversations with students and faculty, it also has become increasingly clear that international-student concerns go beyond financing their education. By Spring Quarter 2008, the O-VPDOS plans to charge a committee of faculty, students, and staff to develop a set of short- and long-term recommendations for enhancement of current services to improve the lives of current and future international students.

Monitoring and Mentoring of Graduate Students

The report recommended the development of guidelines for how graduate students are monitored as they progress through their various stages of graduate work. The report suggested the possibility of surveys as well as further development of student information systems toward a comprehensive and accessible student database. In consultation with the Deputy Provost for Graduate Education, the O-VPDOS will explore opportunities for regular and systematic graduate-student surveys, with an eye toward the graduate-student academic as well as nonacademic experiences. The O-VPDOS will review existing national benchmarking surveys as well as surveys that peer institutions conduct and determine which surveys best capture the data needs for the University of Chicago and provide good comparative information from peer schools. In addition, the recently hired University Registrar will collaborate with relevant academic units to determine what data need to be tracked and reported in which format for the academic

units to analyze student progress, what changes need to be made to the student information systems to build this capability, what resources are needed, and what is a reasonable time frame to develop this capability for measuring student progress in a systematic and consistent manner.

Finally, the Deputy Provost of Graduate Education will work with the Deans of Students in the Humanities, Social Sciences, and the Divinity School to review and improve how every department monitors student progress as well as student mentoring. The Deputy Provost will also hold quarterly meetings with Directors of Graduate Studies to discuss difficulties they face and how the University might advance the monitoring and mentoring of our graduate students.

Health Care Costs and Services

The Graduate Aid Initiative included coverage for the health insurance premiums of students through AR1 enrolled in the University-sponsored health insurance plan, SASI. This is a commitment of nearly \$2 million from the University for our current graduate students. This coverage provides welcome financial relief, but nevertheless, students continue to report difficulties in paying the medical bills incurred when using the plan. The Student Health Insurance Review Committee (SHIRC), as part of its annual review of the plan and rate-setting for the next academic year, will assess these reported problems, including whether the problems result from the current plan benefit structure, whether students receive medical care not covered by the plan, or whether other issues underlie the students' experience with high medical bills.

Independent of these reported problems, the O-VPDOS has heard from graduate students and others that health care services are of concern. The O-VPDOS will begin a review process of the health care programs offered to students by both the Student Care Center and the Student Counseling and Resource Service. This will be a long-term process in which the University will develop a framework for providing the best possible health care services and programs with the optimal use of the available resources.

Graduate Student Representation on University Committees

The Working Group recommended that the University broadly consider including students on University committees. Currently, two students, one undergraduate and one graduate or professional-school student, serve as liaisons to the Board of Trustees Committee on Student and Campus Life. Students sit on many departmental search committees, working groups, and other committees across the institution. The Office of the Vice-President and Dean of Students and the Office of the Provost will work with faculty and student leadership to determine other committees and working groups that would benefit from more formalized student participation.