

MEMORANDUM

September 26, 2012

To: Graduate Council

From: Charles Caramello, Dean

Re: Graduate Assistant Parental Accommodation

Background

In 2005, the Graduate School instituted a *Leave of Absence for Childbearing, Adoption, Illness, or Dependent Care*. Under this policy, students may apply for a leave of absence for one or two semesters (which may be extended in exceptional circumstances). In addition, the time taken on an approved leave of absence is not included in the time limitations for degree completion and advancement to candidacy. An approved leave, in other words, stops the student's "time-to-degree clock." The full policy can be found at:

www.gradschool.umd.edu/catalog/registration_policies.htm#8

In May 2010, the Graduate School proposed, and the Provost and President approved, an additional *Graduate Student Parental Accommodation Policy*, which provides a period of up to six (6) weeks during which time new parents may postpone completion of academic requirements. This policy is not a leave of absence, and allows students to maintain status as full-time, registered graduate students. The policy accommodates both childbirth and adoption. The full policy can be found at: www.gradschool.umd.edu/news_and_events/parental_accommodation.html

Both policies described above remain in effect. They pertain only to academic work such as courses, exams, and so forth, and do not pertain to graduate assistantships (whether teaching, research, or administrative).

Survey on Graduate Assistantships

In September 2010, the Student Affairs Committee of the Graduate Council was given the charge to examine the possibility of adding a parental accommodation policy for graduate assistants to the existing policies described above. The Committee, which includes faculty and student Councilors, developed a survey to ascertain both the need for and feasibility of such a policy. The Graduate School distributed the survey to the College Associate Deans for Graduate Education (CADGE) to administer, and also followed up with reminders.

The survey focused on AY 09-10. Results are as follows:

- No colleges reported denying parental accommodation to graduate students with assistantships.
- An average of 3.5 graduate assistants per college were provided some level of parent accommodation.
- During a student's absence, duties of the assistantship typically were either deferred until the period of accommodation was completed, or covered collegially by other graduate students or by faculty or staff members.
- No college reported problems with respect to graduate assistants and their mentors agreeing on an accommodation for assistantship duties or for progress toward degree.

The survey supports long standing anecdotal evidence that students on assistantships are regularly provided reasonable parental accommodations. In five years, the Graduate School has received only one unconfirmed report that a graduate assistant had not been provided a reasonable accommodation.

Funding

Estimated annual cost, based on ~42 accommodations for a duration of six weeks at average GA stipend, would total approximately \$126,000.

Asked to rank possible options, colleges indicated a preference for 1) informal accommodations, with local flexibility, over a formal policy, and 2) a centralized campus fund over continued departmental support. A centralized fund, however, would require formal, fixed guidelines; a source of funding, perhaps requiring a system of proportional taxation; and ongoing central administration and auditing.

The present system of informal, local accommodations appears to work well both for students and for departments. Establishing a fixed central policy and funding pool could inhibit a department's flexibility and ability to respond to the varying needs of individual students.

Proposed *Graduate Assistant Parental Accommodation Guidelines*

It is important that graduate assistants becoming parents be accommodated; that parental accommodation be perceived on campus as accepted practice; that the terms of an accommodation be reasonable and appropriate; that accommodations within a unit be consistent and equitable in application; and that a request for parental accommodation, if denied, receive timely review.

1. Parental accommodation is a “best practice.” Departments are encouraged to continue their customs of offering reasonable accommodation to graduate assistants by continuing, for example, to provide stipend and benefits for a pre-determined accommodation period.

2. Departments, faculty, and graduate assistants should continue to work collegially to fashion the duration, schedule, and other terms of an accommodation, recognizing that these may differ from case to case owing to individual student circumstances and departmental cultures.

3. A graduate assistant whose request for a reasonable accommodation is not approved should consult first with his or her Director of Graduate Studies or Department Chair, next with his or her college Dean, and last, if necessary, with the Dean of the Graduate School. Alternatively, the assistant may go directly to the Ombuds Officer for Graduate Students for advice and/or informal mediation. In either case, the Dean of the Graduate School will serve as the final arbiter between college/department and student.

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