

Report from Working Group on Graduate School Fellowship Allocation

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I. Committee's View of Current Allocation Process

The committee first reviewed the history of the current allocation process in order to determine how we arrived at the current allocation for the University's "Block Grant" fellowship resources. During this process, we focused on the following issues:

1. Amount of Allocation
2. Mechanism for Allocation
3. Flexibility in Awarding
4. Accountability for Allocation

The following are findings of the committee on each of these issues.

I.1 Amount of Allocation

Historically, the amount of fellowship funding we have to allocate is very limited compared to our peer institutions, and has not varied much over the years. The total funding that the Graduate School has to allocate directly to the colleges/schools is approximately \$5 million. This is distributed by the Graduate school through 3 different fellowships: University Fellowships (UFs), Dean's Fellowships (DFs), and Merit Fellowships. UFs are \$20k that can be distributed in varying increments of \$5k over a 4 year period. They require full base support, other fellowship monies or assistantships. DFs are awarded in \$5k increments, with the option of spreading it out over 2 semesters at the minimum of \$2.5k each. For 2 DFs, 10 credits of tuition per year remission are also provided out of the fellowship tuition accounts that the Graduate School has. For 3 DFs, 24 credits of tuition per year remission are provided. The Dean of the Graduate School also provides an option to add an additional 5th DF if a student is offered 4 DFs to "augment" the offer (this is essentially creating a new UF and thus the award must meet the UF guidelines). There are approximately 20 UFs and up to 880 DFs available every year. Thus, DFs represent close to 90% of the fellowship allocation. Merit fellowships are not part of the standard "block grant" allocation, and is a much smaller amount, typically less than 5% of the total allocation, which can be used in any amount. As such, these funds are discretionary (i.e., "soft") and is typically awarded to provide funding that is more flexible among Colleges. In general, the committee felt that the total amount of allocation was substantially lower than the current needs in their degree programs.

The current fellowship allocation is distributed by the Graduate School to Colleges based on a formula where 30% is based on number of newly enrolled graduate students, 40% is based on number of graduating graduate students, and 30% are based on student/program metrics that have results which vary by college. This formula appeared to be fairly arbitrary to the committee.

After allocation by the Graduate School to Colleges, the Colleges distribute to departments/programs by a similar or slightly modified formula, which often also seemed arbitrary to the committee. This information was obtained through surveys conducted by each committee member in their respective College.

I.2 Allocation Mechanism

As previously stated, there are 3 types of fellowships available: UFs, DFS, and Merit. These types of fellowships evolved after many challenges in trying to account for previous “block grant” allocations and to help move the funds toward recruitment of students. The current allocation is made in late Fall after all of the student data is obtained and processed from the previous Fiscal Year (FY), and the budget for the Graduate School has been finalized. All fellowship funding that a College receives must be awarded by the end of the Academic Year (AY). The DF awards are made to the students in the financial system directly by the programs, who then report those awards back to the College, who then reports them back to the Graduate School. From the survey conducted by the committee it was determined that an earlier notification would be more beneficial to Departments. There was also concern in the survey about the limitations that have been placed on the current types of fellowships that are available.

Currently, the primary emphasis of the fellowships is on “recruitment”. So, they are initially restricted to being awarded to students beginning their degree program. This is in contrast to fellowship mechanisms at other institutions which allow for distribution at the end of a degree program to cover students who may have had funding that could not cover them to the end of their degree. The Graduate School does have Dissertation fellowships available to cover students in this situation, but again the funding for that program is limited and competition for the fellowships is across the University. From the surveys, the committee felt there could be benefits in not restricting the current fellowships to just recruitment, but also allow students already in the program to receive funding.

I.3 Elements for Flexibility in the Awarding

Currently, there is limited flexibility in the way fellowship funding can be awarded. Merit has the most flexibility with a variable amount that the Graduate School can use to balance distributions to Colleges, that Colleges can use to enhance funding packages, and Departments can use to balance award to students. In contrast, DFs and UFs are relatively inflexible, requiring fixed amounts of distribution.

After the Graduate School allocates to Colleges, there is flexibility in how the Colleges can determine the allocation to their Departments. They can distribute it equitably, or concentrate it on particular programs of interest. Once the Departments receive their allocation, they can determine how they would like to make awards to students. Since it is restricted to students entering a degree program, there is limited flexibility in which current students can receive the award. However, there is flexibility in when the students could receive the fellowships, since they can be spread out over multiple years.

I.4 Accountability for Allocation

The current allocation mechanism of DF, UF, and Merit make it fairly easy for the Graduate School to account for the distribution to students, since awards are inputted directly by programs into the financial accounting system for specific students. Recently, the Graduate School has begun tracking the outcomes of awarding students fellowships tracking graduation and attrition numbers for the recipients. Since the allocation mechanisms has not been in place for very long, it has taken some time to accumulate enough data to make the accounting statistically significant.

Currently, there are no surveys for graduates to determine other outcome metrics, such as placement. There is also a lack of clarity in the specific outcomes for the allocation beyond recruitment. However, recruitment is the easiest metric to account for success in distributing the fellowships, since a “yield rate” can easily be determined, provided the Graduate School knows the number of students to whom awards were offered. The committee determined that alternative distribution mechanisms, such as awarding fellowships to students during their degree program, has issues with how to track outcomes for the recipients.

II. Committee Recommendation for Improvements in the Allocation Process

II.1 Committee’s Philosophy

After reviewing the current state of the fellowship allocation process, the committee approached its charge by agreeing upon a philosophy. The first philosophical element that was deemed to be important was to have equity in allocation amongst programs. Clearly, it would be easy to justify allocating more funding to higher profile programs in order to maintain their visibility, but this would be at the expense of the richness and diversity of all our graduate degree programs. In addition, we felt that we would like to find ways to use the allocation to potentially enhance fellowship and funding resources for all programs through a “multiplier effect”. We also felt it was important to continue to use the allocations to enhance competitiveness for recruitment of the best and most diverse graduate students. We also wanted to use the allocations to enhance the accomplishments of our graduates to improve the reputation of individual programs and the University as a whole. So, our primary focus became on how we modified allocation to the 3 current forms of fellowships: UF, DF, and Merit via our previous findings.

II.2 Amount of Allocation

The committee felt that the amount of the allocation should align with campus priorities. That being said, we felt quantifiable metrics should be developed in determining allocation amounts consistent with those priorities. Some current metrics that have been used, which the committee felt were justifiable, are as follows:

- i. Student aptitude and/or evidence of success
- ii. Enrollment numbers
- iii. Graduation rates
- iv. Number of “diverse” students (varies with program)

In addition, it was suggested that new metrics could be developed. For example, in order to enhance the amount of funding programs receive, where appropriate, the amount of external fellowship/scholarship or grant support students have obtained by themselves could be used as a metric. This could mean that a program could stipulate that a student receiving funding would also have to apply for one or more fellowships/external funding sources as a condition of their fellowship.

In order to quantify the metrics, the committee felt that there should be a timeline used. For example, in current allocations, 3 year running averages are used for many of the metrics.

II.3 Allocation Mechanism

Based on the surveys, the committee felt that there was overwhelming support to remove UFs. The constraints in awarding the UFs make it very difficult to find the best recipient. That funding would be far more effective if it was used to enhance the number of DFs or Merit. It would also simplify the allocation mechanism. The Dean's current augmentation offer could remain, and in effect could supplant the UF if desired. Thus, the intent of the UF could be preserved for recruiting the most desirable students, but flexibility would remain to still allocate the funding as a DF for normal recruitment needs.

There was also overwhelming support from the surveys to modify the minimum amount of the award for a DF. One suggestion was to cut it in half to \$2500, which is consistent with the current distribution option. However, that also requires reconsidering the allowances for the tuition remission benefits and the Dean's augmentation offer. For example, the Dean's augmentation can still be preserved by requiring 8 DFs for an additional 2 to make a total of \$25K. Also, the current DF distribution amounts to qualify for tuition remission benefits can still be preserved (\$10K minimum for 10 credits/year, and \$15k for 24 credits/year).

The committee was also concerned about how much flexibility the Colleges have over distribution of the fellowship allocations to Departments. In order to provide some more balance, the committee felt that "block" allocations of DFs by Graduate School could be made directly to programs. For example, 80% could be allocated directly to a Department and 20% could go directly to Colleges for re-distribution to their programs. Keep in mind, these are not "block grants" where there is just an amount distributed to programs that they can spend any way they choose, and can carry over year to year. It is just that there is a "set percentage" that is represented by a "block of DFs and Merit fellowships" that a unit can count on receiving directly from the Graduate School.

There was a feeling that some flexibility in allocating the funding during the AY would be useful. In many programs, there is significant variance in the number of students that are admitted in a given year. By allowing for some portion of the rollover with a cap on the amount, it can provide some more stability to programs receiving a block allocation directly. Although the current model has some flexibility in how Colleges could redistribute the funding to compensate for this variance, there were concerns about whether equity could be maintained amongst programs in a College in subsequent years (i.e., reduced funding in one year is offset by increasing funding in the next year).

As previously stated, programs could stipulate that students receiving fellowship funding apply for more external funding to enhance the funding resources for a program. Taking it one step further, if applicable, the Graduate School could require students receiving fellowships to apply for at least one external fellowship/scholarship or grant.

II.4 Elements for Flexibility in the Awarding

The committee felt that there was a real need to increase flexibility in the awarding. For example, allowing fellowships to be awarded to students at any time up until the last semester before graduation would significantly enhance the efficacy of the fellowships by extending their outcomes beyond recruitment. In addition, removing the UFs will free up more resources to be awarded through DFs and Merit. Finally, having a majority of the allocation going directly to programs reduces flexibility for Colleges to control the distribution using their own criteria, and further stabilizes the fellowship funding

for individual programs by allowing for campus-wide metrics to be used rather than also in addition to the College metrics.

II.5 Accountability for Allocation/Awarding

The committee felt it was important to be able to account for outcomes of the allocation and its distribution. Therefore, in order to simplify the allocation process and reduce reporting requirements by the Colleges and programs, it was recommended that students be awarded funds directly by the Graduate School rather than by the programs. In this case, programs would request awards to students directly to the Graduate School before making an offer. This has the potential to reduce accounting errors, and make it easier for the Graduate School to track the awards and determine the outcomes, since they would now be able to know when an offer is made. Furthermore, awards could become part of a “permanent” student record in the Graduate School, which would also enhance their ability to determine outcomes beyond recruitment. If awards to students are not made directly by the Graduate School to students, then programs should report all offers to the Graduate School whether or not they are accepted in order to determine their efficacy in recruitment.

To enhance information available to the Graduate Programs on outcomes for students receiving fellowship funding, programs could conduct surveys to account for the current status of fellowship recipients, reasons for attrition, and reasons admitted students decline offers. This would be very beneficial for the Graduate School in determining how funding allocations should be made to optimize outcomes for the University.

III. Conclusions

While the fellowship allocation process has evolved over the years into a much more effective form for accounting for both allocations and outcomes, the committee felt that there were many modifications that could be made to the current allocation process that are opportunities to enhance the fellowship resources and reputation of the Graduate Program at the University of Maryland-College Park. While much of the information on our peers is anecdotal, it is clear that having only \$5M in fellowship funding that is provided directly to programs with 11,000 graduate students (~\$500/student) limits our ability to compete with our peers. Our goal should be 10X that amount, where fellowship funding becomes a substantial portion of the resources available to programs to provide the best educational and research opportunities to our students. The recommendations made by the committee align with that goal. At the same time, we want to maintain a diverse intellectual environment for our students, and preserving equity per the committee’s recommendations is the best way to achieve that.

In summary, the committee recommends the following, which could begin implementation in part starting AY17-18 and then fully implemented in AY18-19:

1. Eliminate the UF
2. Reduce the minimum award for DFs to \$2500
3. Implement direct allocation to programs for bulk of funds with smaller percentage to college deans for college priorities
4. Implement a process in which awards are inputted and tracked by the GS
5. Base the metrics for allocations on quantifiable data that allows for maximum flexibility in timing of allocations and on data that are simpler and more equitable across programs.