Graduate Student Stipends: It’s All About the Benjamins

Mary Berk, Philosophy

The Chronicle of Higher Education, perhaps academe’s most respected publication, recently featured an article on graduate student stipends. If there’s one thing that can be said consistently about graduate student stipends around the country, it’s that there is no consistency from university to university. Those of us at JHU know that there’s not even consistency from department to department.

The article in the Chronicle surveyed 61 universities with a 70 percent response rate. The average stipend in the humanities is $11,000 to $12,000 per year, without any summer funding. A common stipend in the sciences is $20,000, including summer funding. Savvy grad students know that stipend amounts aren’t everything, and some even negotiate better offers. Items up for negotiation have included health insurance coverage, reduced teaching loads, tuition waivers, non-resident tuition, and an increased number of years funded.

These added benefits are crucial to grad students, whose incomes often approach the poverty level. For 2001, the federal poverty level for a single-person household is $8,590; for two people, it is $11,610. Throw in a couple of kids, and you’re well under it.

Are we keeping up?

But even though stipends aren’t everything, they are something. This is illustrated by the dramatic stipend increases of some of JHU’s closest competitors. Columbia University increased its basic stipends 15 percent to $15,000 last year. And Yale topped that with a 20 percent increase to $13,700 (the cost of living in New York is higher than in New Haven, CT). According to the article, these universities provide a basic stipend to all graduate students, which is presumably supplemented by various departments.

This makes it difficult to compare to JHU, whose funding structure varies from department to department, and within that, often from student to student. One funding baseline that we do have, however, is that all graduate students on the medical campus receive $20,000 per year across the board. Additionally, their health care coverage does not cost them a dime.

While it is difficult to rank JHU as a whole in comparison with other schools, it is easy to see disparities within JHU. They occur most noticeably between the humanities and the sciences. A number of departments have been taking strides to close the gap, but there is still a long way to go. The

(Continued on page 5)
Think of Bread and Tulips as a really quirky Cinderella story set in Italy. Rosalba is a Cinderella-figure who has been living with her prince for almost twenty years. She runs away from the faded ball to take a short vacation in Venice. Her husband, the prince/toilet salesman, sends his emissary to find Rosalba. (To add more charm to the story, the detective hired by the husband is actually a struggling plumber/mystery novel aficionado.) There is a great "glass slipper" chase scene which culminates with Rosalba, rather than finding the shoe to be a perfect fit, commenting that she had already thrown away its mate.

While this is going on, Rosalba finds her real prince charming in Fernando, a kind but depressed Icelandic waiter. This is where the "Bread and Tulips" theme comes in. He works in a restaurant and leaves her breakfast every morning; she takes a job as a florist and leaves him flowers in return. (The astute will notice that she works as a "flower arranger" and both the main characters have flower names. Coincidence? I think not.)

Perhaps because it's set in Italy, perhaps because it wasn't shot in Hollywood, Bread and Tulips manages not to slip into the absurd. It is a truly funny and unsappy alternative to Serendipity or any of the Halloween screamers that currently are out. And since it's showing at the Charles Theater, you can have convenience, culture, and comedy all rolled into one. Go see it. It really is fun.

Grad Resources is a non-profit organization that serves the practical and emotional needs of graduate students on several university campuses across the United States.

Grad Resources offers grad students free assistance and support via grad student orientation programs, seminars, support groups, online resources and several helpful articles. The organization is actively involved in co-sponsoring TA/RA appreciation events as well as Graduate and Professional Student Appreciation Week.

Find out more at www.gradresources.org

The National Science Foundation (NSF) will support about 100 U.S. graduate students (U.S. citizen or permanent resident) for research & cultural experiences in Japan, Korea, or Taiwan during an eight-week summer program in 2002. The primary goals of the programs are to introduce students to Japanese, Korean and Taiwan science and engineering in the context of a research laboratory and to initiate personal relationships that will better enable them to collaborate with foreign counterparts in the future.

International airfare, living expenses in the host country, and a summer stipend of $2,500 will be provided. The application deadline is December 1, 2001. For eligibility and other information, consult the Program Announcement (Summer Programs in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan) that can be obtained from http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/int/eap/gradstud.htm#gradsum and the NSF Tokyo office web site (http://www.twics.com/~nsftokyo). Graduate students seeking support for a specific research project with an identified collaborator in the East Asia and Pacific region should also consider NSF's other programs of support, including dissertation enhancement awards. See http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/int/eap/gradstud.htm.

General information about NSF's East Asia and Pacific Program is available at http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/int/eap/start.htm. Questions should be directed to eapinfo@nsf.gov.
NAGPS Survey: The Results Are In

Dan Bain, DOGEE

In the middle of October, the National Association of Graduate and Professional Students (NAGPS) released information collected from a 1999 survey of graduate students. This survey is an object of much interest at Johns Hopkins University. When the survey was available, GRO chair Tony Stapon tirelessly publicized it. As a result, 40% of students at Homewood took it. This high rate of participation made the results for Hopkins an excellent source of data for evaluating its graduate programs.

The results have finally been released. Please investigate the numbers for yourself. They are all available online at http://survey.nagps.org/.

Unfortunately, the NAGPS has organized them with a relatively confounding ordination. The departments are given "grades" based on the average agreement of survey participants with questions about best practices in graduate education developed by groups including the National Research Council and the Association of American Universities.

The old saw is that grades have little meaning in graduate school. You can pull a B average and still obtain a doctoral degree. This makes this ordination hard for a grad student to relate to. Further, the fact that a department gets a B in "mentorship" is a very hard concept to grasp. An "A" is based upon complete agreement of all participants with relatively broad questions. How easy is it to get twenty people to agree that, "Doctoral students in my program receive training in professional skills such as public speaking, grant writing, and working in teams." The question implies that all three criteria should be met. This is very hard to agree with strongly. It is especially hard when all graduate students are in training to be critical thinkers. Critical thinking makes it harder to agree completely with anything.

The grade system obscures the data, but it is possible to salvage some meaning. A first clarifying step is a conversion to a 4-point grade point average. For each department, all of the grades included on the "overall summary" are averaged. This table summarizes how participating departments at Homewood compare with each other, and with other departments:

(Continued on page 4)
There are no clear patterns here. Departments from Arts and Sciences and Engineering are interspersed. There doesn't seem to be any connection with US News Rankings (to look good is not necessarily to feel good). And the groupings remain tight (the curve is centered on a C+/B- and only ranges from B to C-). This makes a discussion of interdepartmental comparisons difficult. More sophisticated analyses are difficult in this timeframe, as the data are only provided in a limited set of pre-determined queries.

The clarification can be obtained by measuring how Hopkins (Homewood) compares with the aggregate results from all survey participants. In this analysis, the grades from the "Overall Summary" for all participating departments are averaged. Here's how Homewood stacks up:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>National Average</th>
<th>Hopkins (Homewood) Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information for Prospective Students</td>
<td>C+</td>
<td>2.52 (C+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation for a Broad Range of Careers</td>
<td>B-</td>
<td>2.47 (C+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching and TA Preparation</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>2.14 (C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>C+</td>
<td>2.12 (C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Guidance &amp; Placement Services</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>2.06 (C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlling Time to Degree</td>
<td>B-</td>
<td>2.46 (C+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>3.17 (B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Climate</td>
<td>B-</td>
<td>2.67 (C+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Satisfaction</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>2.88 (B-)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again, the overall grades range basically from C+ to B. Hopkins seems to be within the average of all students on all of these measures. Clearly, the ordination does a poor job of clarifying the responses. In addition, there is little surprise in how Hopkins is comparing overall ("Overall Satisfaction" is a borderline B-).

The grading system and querying limitation makes an overarching critique of Hopkins difficult, but all is not lost. Hopkins is famously decentralized. A far swifter route to progress is addressing issues on the department level.

Here's what you can do. The information collected by this survey is much more useful in the type of discussion you'd have in the oral exam you'll take to get out of here (There will be no grade, just the consensus among a group of professors). The GRO has money earmarked for departmental events for the discussion of these survey results. Schedule a time that students and faculty (at least the chair) can meet. Apply for a $150 GRO NAGPS discussion grant. If you're Earth and Planetary Science, buy champagne. If you're Philosophy, rot gut whiskey might be more apt. Sit down together somewhere near an internet connection, mix a drink, open the survey results, and talk about what the department needs to do next.

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Are you subscribed to the Grad Student Listserv?

Get information on upcoming events and important graduate student issues. Sign up by sending email to gro@jhu.edu

Black Graduate Student Association

The purpose of the Black Graduate Student Association is to provide a support network whose ultimate aim is to promote the academic success of African, African American and Afro-Caribbean Graduate students at Johns Hopkins University. The BGSA invites all interested graduate students to join our email listserv by contacting Jami Valentine (jami@pha.jhu.edu) or Ade Lukan (alukan@jhu.edu)

November Is Happy Month!

Join the GRO for extra Friday night Happy hours in E-level! Bring your friends, colleagues and Karaoke skills out on Friday, November 9th and Friday, November 30th from 4-8 PM. Good food, cheap drinks, great fun!
Baltimore Treasures:
The Baltimore-Annapolis Trail

Lisa Davidson, Cognitive Science

Living in a city often means that recreational cyclists, runners and rollerbladers must share the roads with cars. This frequently means having to navigate busy streets and stopping in order to obey traffic signals. If this makes pursuing your favorite outdoor activity a chore rather than a pleasure, then you should consider making the trip to the Baltimore-Annapolis Trail.

The Baltimore-Annapolis Trail is a 13.3-mile long, 10-foot wide paved path stretching from BWI airport to the intersection of US Route 301 and MD Route 450 near Annapolis. The northern end of the trail is extended another 6.6 miles through a connection with the BWI Hiker-Biker Trail at Dorsey Road. Created out of the land of the former B&A Short Line Railroad, the B&A Trail is today associated with the Rails to Trails Conservancy, an organization dedicated to converting defunct railroads into public trails. Although it is crossed by several major roads along the way, the B&A Trail is a secluded path mostly bordered by private homes, commercial property, and forests, making it a safe and fun place for many activities, including running, biking, rollerblading, horseback riding or just strolling with friends. On sunny and warm weekends, sections of the path can get rather crowded, although the southern end is frequently less occupied than the more developed northern end.

The path taken by the trail varies widely in landscape and character. At one point, it is separated from the parking lot of Marley Station Mall in Glen Burnie by a narrow grass median, whereas much of the southern half of the trail is lined with patches of bamboo. Both highway overpasses and bridges over streams must be crossed, while other, flatter sections traverse pastures and meadows. There is even a wheelchair exercise course next to the Earleigh Heights Ranger Station at mile seven.

More information, such as directions and parking locations, can be found at the Anne Arundel Recreation and Parks website at http://web.aacpl.lib.md.us/rp/parks/bat/...
Restaurant Review: SoBo Cafe

Matt Goldrick
Cognitive Science

After leaving Federal Hill’s SoBo Café, I could only ask myself: Why haven’t I gone there more often? It combines all that’s great about Baltimore: creative atmosphere, excellent food, low prices and a fine selection of wine and beer. After living here for seven years, I pride myself on being an expert on such establishments. Somehow, it got overlooked.

SoBo is located at 6 West Cross Street, just west of Charles (410-752-1518; www.sobocafe.com). Parking is annoying, as it’s located in Federal Hill. The atmosphere is very casual: the place is full of twentysomething professionals relaxing in jeans; you seat yourself next to the bright yellow art-covered walls; the wait staff wear t-shirts that showcase their tattoos. The menu changes regularly. The only permanent fixture of the restaurant is an extensive wine and beer list. Over 20 wines are available by the glass (none more than $5!), as well as an extensive bottled imports list (none over $4!). Local microbrews (Oliver’s, De Groen’s) are available on tap, as well as the odd couple of Budweiser and Guinness.

Starters are simple pleasures like mac n’ cheese, salads and soups (ranging from $3-$4). My dining companion went with the spinach pie, which had a good filling but was a little burnt on top (trust me, burnt phyllo dough does not taste good). I went for a cup of the vegetarian chili and felt as if I had been blessed. If you like chili at all, order this one. It was a tangy, spicy blend of tomatoes, chick peas, kidney beans, black beans, barley and some other vegetables I was too busy devouring to notice. (Our waitress told us that the chili varies depending on who makes it that day, so your actual experience may vary.) The substantial soups can also serve as a meal: a bowl of the chili or French onion soup, with some bread, is plenty of food.

Most entrees run from $8-$12, with some specials running higher. The entrees tend to be meat-based, although there are a few vegetarian offerings (such as the soups above). They range from comfort food like chicken pot pie to more non-traditional dishes like Indian lamb coconut stew (my companion’s choice). Our sample of the menu was delicious. The creamy coconut curry was tasty and unusual. My “Big Ass Pork Chop” was sandwiched be-