Dear UT Austin Graduate Student Workers,

I am writing in response to your Petition to Adjust the Tuition Reduction Benefit to Meet Tuition Rates for all Departments. Let me begin by thanking you for the time and effort involved and for clearly sharing your concerns with me. I share your concerns. Funding and affordability issues for graduate students have very real consequences, and your letter and petition echo sentiments I’ve heard from many on campus.

You have asked for a provisional plan to address the Tuition Reduction Benefit (TRB) gap this year. Instead, I would like to share our comprehensive strategy to more broadly address funding issues for graduate students, as well as recent steps we have taken.

Since I arrived at UT, I have asked similar questions about the many issues related to our graduate students, with the gap in the TRB being among them. As I learned more about the many variables adversely affecting graduate students, it became clear to me that the university needed a comprehensive approach to address these complex issues in meaningful and substantive ways.

I have been working with the deans and the Graduate School and we are making progress. While funding for academic programs, including graduate education, is provided to the college and schools, there is variation in how their funding models operate. In order to address these issues, discussions must happen at the university, college, and departmental levels. The Graduate Education Task Force is currently working with all parties to identify sustainable solutions to graduate funding.

Prior to establishing the Graduate Education Task Force, steps have been taken to increase funding for graduate students. The Graduate School increased its centrally funded fellowships from approximately $14 million in 2013/14 to more than $23 million in 2017/18.

More recently, a number of colleges and schools have recently increased tuition support and wages for graduate students. A few of examples include:

- The Moody College of Communication recently increased doctoral stipends across the entire college, which for some students represented an increase of almost 50%.

- The College of Natural Sciences has completely eliminated the TRB gap for all doctoral students, and it will increase the minimum 12-month stipend in the 2019/20 academic year.
- The McCombs School of Business increased funding support for doctoral students by 16.5% in 2018/19.

- The Jackson School of Geosciences now fully funds tuition, provides highly competitive wages, and has increased stipends.

- The College of Pharmacy has made considerable progress in recent years to increase stipends that are now competitive with national peers.

I realize these early investments have not benefitted all graduate students, but it is an indication of the urgency and attention we are giving these matters.

My numerous conversations with graduate students, faculty and university leaders informed my decision to create the Graduate Education Task Force. Led by the dean of the Graduate School, Mark Smith, and the associate dean for graduate student transformation, Daina Berry, we invited a broad representation of campus stakeholders to serve as members. They have been working to engage the campus community and effectively understand the many layers affecting these issues.

To date, the task force outreach to the campus has included six town hall meetings with a seventh scheduled for May 22. They have met with associate deans, department chairs, graduate coordinators, and many graduate students. Through their website, they have received approximately 200 comments from students, faculty, staff and alumni.

The task force is working to collect accurate data, and has partnered with the Office of Institutional Reporting, Research, and Information Systems (IRRIS) to collect unit-level data and develop a software tool that will enable departments to explore new models for supporting graduate education.

Later this month, the task force will share their preliminary recommendations with the campus. Final recommendations are expected to be delivered in December 2019. The findings and insights provided in the final recommendations will ensure we are effectively addressing these issues in a holistic and sustainable manner.

In the interim period, the Graduate School will work with colleges and schools to address tuition coverage in many departments beginning this fall.

I understand why you feel the university needs to move more quickly. Our goal is to comprehensively address these issues. As you pointed out in your letter, graduate students do so much of the vitally important work that makes UT Austin a world-class institution. I am committed to addressing them, and I look forward to receiving the final recommendations from the task force later this year so we can better support our graduate students most effectively.
As a next step, I encourage you to engage with the task force leaders. I know many of you have done so, and some of you are serving as members. I understand you have requested to meet with me, but a more productive conversation would be with Dean Smith and Associate Dean Berry, who have been charged with engaging the campus and developing recommendations for me and other university leaders.

Again, thank you for sharing your concerns with me.

Sincerely,

Maurie McInnis

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