

March 21, 2021

As graduate students at the University of Georgia, we are deeply disappointed in Dean Walcott's recent communication to the Franklin College Faculty Senate regarding its resolution to repeal the Special Institutional Fee (SIF). Firstly, Dean Walcott shows a blatant disregard of the facts and information presented in this resolution. We are also dismayed to hear of his sudden interest in these resolutions, given his silence when the Graduate Student Association approved similar resolutions last year. Perhaps most disappointing, however, is that Dean Walcott's communication bears a striking resemblance to a letter he shared with graduate student members of the United Campus Workers of Georgia in November 2019. Indeed, the only substantive changes are related to the economic impact of COVID-19 on the university's finances, which, when compared to his original letter, appear more as convenient excuses than legitimate financial concerns.

For the senators' consideration, we have included Dean Walcott's 2019 letter as well as a response from graduate students, which went unanswered. In addition to occasionally referencing information in these communications, we believe they demonstrate university administrators' pernicious logics, misleading presentation of information, consistent attempts to diminish the concerns of graduate students, and a gross willingness to conceal inaction behind alleged budgetary constraints and worn-out platitudes.

To avoid completely rehashing our earlier statements, questions, and requests for more transparency, we will limit ourselves here to a few simple facts demonstrated in Dean Walcott's letter to the Faculty Senate.

While ignoring the argument that the SIF is a pay-to-work scheme, Dean Walcott interestingly points out that the SIF helps to pay the 50% health insurance premium subsidy for graduate workers. Yet, far from demonstrating how the SIF benefits graduate workers, this statement confirms that graduate students are subsidizing their wages AND their benefits. We were disappointed to see Dean Walcott repeat this ill-conceived argument, which implies that we should be grateful for some of our stolen wages being returned to us.

Dean Walcott's message also points to the COVID-19 pandemic and its budgetary effects as further justification for maintaining the SIF. Given that the SIF was a temporary response to the Great Recession and has since become a permanent revenue source whose loss would purportedly be "devastating to UGA," we must remain skeptical of these types of justifications. The need for skepticism becomes all the more apparent considering Dean Walcott's earlier predictions of such devastation before the pandemic and consequent budget cuts. We do not mean to diminish the decades-long gutting of higher education budgets in the United States; we only ask that our administrators join us in resisting this trend rather than serving as a means of its acceleration.

Dean Walcott's discussion of the graduate student emergency fund is similarly telling. Although this fund is admirable and sincerely appreciated, its existence is an acknowledgement

of the financial strains borne by graduate students. It represents a solution that only addresses the symptoms instead of the underlying causes. Moreover, the increased disbursement from approximately \$50,000 for 24 students to \$423,000 for 335 students between November 2019 and March 2021 indicates that the financial precarity of graduate students is only worsening. Alone, this increased disbursement of emergency funds appears to shine a glowing light on UGA. But the average award for these 335 graduate students is \$1,262.69. The yearly cost of the SIF is \$1,350.

We would like to conclude by thanking the faculty senate for considering these resolutions in support of graduate students. The last year has revealed how easily and gladly our administrators attempt to divide the campus community to obscure their own inaction and unwillingness to stand up for the people they are supposed to represent. We therefore greatly appreciate your past and present demonstrations of solidarity with graduate workers.

Representatives of the UGA Graduate Student Council and UCWGA Graduate Student Committee



UNIVERSITY OF  
GEORGIA

Graduate School  
Terrell Hall  
210 S. Jackson Street  
Athens, Georgia 30602  
TEL 706-542-1739 | FAX 706-583-0034  
grad.uga.edu

November 14, 2019

Dear Graduate Students:

We are in receipt of your communications in which you have requested the elimination of the Special Institutional Fee (SIF) by Fall 2021.

As Interim Dean of the Graduate School, let me first state that the University of Georgia (UGA) deeply values our graduate students and recognizes the contributions you make to UGA's academic excellence. The research, instructional, and service missions of UGA benefit directly from the efforts of our graduate students. We acknowledge the concerns that you raise regarding the financial constraints that students experience.

Because the University is committed to building a thriving graduate community, we are constantly seeking to enhance the quality of the experience for our students. For example, UGA has increased the graduate stipend rates in each of the past six years (2-5% per year). In FY15 and FY18, this increase was greater than the average increase pool for UGA faculty and staff. Since academic year 2013-14, the fiscal year doctoral stipend has increased by nearly 22% from \$46,523 to \$56,613 for 100% effort. These increases have totaled nearly \$6 million in additional funding being provided directly to the benefit of our graduate students. During this same time period, total mandatory fees have increased from \$1,117 per semester to \$1,145, an increase of only \$28 or less than 0.5% annually. There will be no increases in mandatory fees next year.

Overall, more than 60% of the Graduate School's budget goes directly to supporting graduate students through assistantships, fellowships, travel awards, competitive research grants, and professional development opportunities. Additionally, in FY19 we instituted a Graduate Student Emergency Fund, and thus far we have disbursed approximately \$50,000 to address the financial needs of 24 graduate students. We plan to continue providing this resource to help offset the financial challenges faced by some of our students.

The University cannot, however, honor your request to repeal the SIF. The SIF comprises an important part of the University's budget, providing roughly \$39 million in revenue annually (with about a quarter coming from graduate students) to support critical elements of our instruction and research mission. The SIF provides significant benefits to graduate and undergraduate students alike: specifically, eligible graduate students benefit from the 50% subsidy now provided for the Graduate Student Health Insurance premium, as well as library resources.

Benefits from the SIF accrue to all UGA students—both graduate and undergraduate, and it would be wrong to absolve one group of paying the fee while requiring it of the other. The magnitude of the impact of removing the entire fee—essentially, 4 percent of our general fund operating budget [comprised of state appropriations, tuition, fees and Indirect Cost Recovery (IDC)]—would be devastating to the University of Georgia. It would trigger faculty and staff layoffs, reduce the number of

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graduate assistantships we are able to offer, increase class sizes, and harm our library operations, as well as reduce the number of support services we are able to provide to all our students.

We believe that the best way to improve the financial standing of our graduate students is to continue to increase the rate of our graduate stipends and support for the Student Health Insurance Premium. As evidenced by the aforementioned data presented in this response, the University has already demonstrated its significant commitment to this effort over the past six years and will continue to do so in the coming years. Additionally, as the Interim Dean of the Graduate School, I am always willing to meet with concerned graduate students to discuss other ways that we can provide support and improve your educational experience.

On behalf of the institution, let me reiterate that we value the contributions that graduate students make to UGA's mission and are committed to creating an environment where you can thrive.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Ron R. Walott".

Ron R. Walott  
Interim Dean and Professor of Plant Pathology

Dear Dean Walcott,

We appreciate your response to our letter. We would like to further discuss the matter and the information provided in your response, which has raised several questions and concerns.

In addition to the elimination of the SIF, we are also calling for greater transparency regarding student fees. As mentioned in the [SIF Fact Sheet](#), the SIF supports a “broad array” of programs and functions, including graduate teaching assistant stipends, faculty salaries, and classroom maintenance. Nevertheless, this information provides limited details concerning how UGA actually disburses these funds.

We recently met with the Executive Vice Chancellor for Strategy and Fiscal Affairs for the Board of Regents, Ms. Tracey Cook. She informed us that the SIF is pooled with tuition and distributed accordingly to each university’s discretion, as there are no mandated disbursement requirements as with other mandatory fees. The SIF Fact Sheet appears to confirm this, noting that the SIF is combined with various funding sources to pay for some of the specific programs listed. Thus, without knowing the specific disbursement of the SIF, we are unable to adequately respond to your point about the extent to which graduate students benefit from the SIF.

We are consequently also unable to address the point about the fairness of who pays the SIF. Nevertheless, we maintain that it is ultimately unfair to charge graduate students this fee because we are not receiving an equivalent service in return. The SIF disproportionately benefits undergraduates. The programs listed on the SIF Fact Sheet such as the First Year Odyssey, Double Dawgs, and smaller class sizes (in part facilitated by graduate teaching assistants) overwhelmingly benefit undergraduates. Furthermore, this point does not address the fact that if the SIF goes to paying graduate assistants, then graduate students are paying some portion of their own wages. Moreover, if the SIF helps fund the graduate health insurance subsidy, it means that graduate students are therefore subsidizing the subsidy. The subsidy is the only listed service that solely benefits graduate students. This suggests that graduate assistants still bear these insurance costs, even if only a small portion. It also raises the question of how students who obtain health insurance elsewhere benefit from this.

To this point, we were wondering where the information was obtained supporting the claim that the SIF goes to subsidize graduate student insurance. How much of the SIF goes to subsidize graduate insurance? How is this considered a subsidy when graduate students are paying the fee that provides it? Why do all graduate students have to pay the fee when some do not obtain their health insurance through UGA?

We make these points not in bad faith, but with the hope of emphasizing that the limited information and the lack of clarity in how funds are disbursed creates confusion. Greater transparency will abate some of this confusion and facilitate a better understanding of the ways in which graduate students do or do not benefit from the SIF. In our effort to create a productive dialogue, we gladly welcome any additional information that may correct any errors or

misunderstandings on our part. We would also like to ask for further clarification regarding some of the data you shared as well ask for your aid in collecting more data that can help devise an appropriate solution.

We believe the numbers you provided regarding doctoral stipends are misleading as they are based on “100% effort” while graduate assistants are capped at “50% effort.” This also does not take into consideration smaller stipends for masters students or that many assistantships are based on less time than “50% effort.” Would you be able to share with us the data you used to calculate these averages? Were the stipends you considered comprehensive or limited to certain colleges/schools/departments? Is the \$6 million in increased stipendiary funding based on the inflated “100% effort” averages? Does this sum represent an annual cost or the cumulative cost over the six-year period? And while we acknowledge and appreciate any and all raises in stipends, we would like to point out that these raises are on par with or slightly above national inflationary trends. We would love to cooperate with your office to determine the rise in the cost of living for Athens, which has seen rent increase dramatically due to residential developments over the last several years. Until we understand these stipendiary increases in relation to the cost of living, we cannot effectively determine whether these increases “improve the financial standing” of graduate students. The availability of the Graduate Student Emergency Fund is wonderful! But the rapidity of its dispersal along with the [necessity to triple it](#) also indicates that UGA is aware of graduate students’ financial precarity.

Finally, we find it unsettling that members of the administration view the SIF as crucial to the operations of the university (although only 2%). As the SIF was originally intended to be a temporary source of revenue to make up for cuts in state funding during the Great Recession, it is highly problematic that universities have come to see themselves as dependent on the SIF. Since the Board of Regents repealed the clause that would have ended the SIF in 2012 and now determines its continuation on a yearly basis, the notion of its repeal being “devastating” implies that the Board of Regents will never have any incentive to repeal the SIF. This perceived dependence on the SIF also suggests that administrators are comfortable with students - graduate *and* undergraduate - bearing an increasing percentage of the per-student cost of higher education. According to the [Georgia Budget and Policy Institute](#), students and their families now pay about half of the per-student cost compared to about one-third prior to the recession, despite the University System’s funding formula assuming a 75%/25% split between state funding and tuition and fees.

None of this should imply that we are ungrateful for the resources and support UGA provides to its graduate students. There is no doubt that you and your colleagues in the UGA administration appreciate and value the tremendous contributions graduate students provide to the university. In addition to bolstering UGA’s representation as a top research institution, graduate students fill vital positions in the provision of quality and personalized education for undergraduates, at a much lower cost than could be provided by faculty alone. But while we enjoy our jobs and appreciate all that UGA offers, we must make clear our dissatisfaction with the financial difficulties we face.

In an effort to devise solutions to increase UGA's academic excellence and reduce the financial hardships of graduate students, we pose the following additional questions: How do UGA's high graduate fees affect student demographics? Is there data about how many students have decided not to attend UGA because of high fees? Can the percentage used for undergraduate programming and GTAs be deducted from the graduate student SIF? Is it possible for graduate student teaching assistantships to cover student fees in addition to tuition? The SIF fact sheet mentions that this fee allows the university to reduce class sizes, however, UGA is admitting more undergraduate students every year. How is the additional revenue from tuition, fees, and housing being used? Can this revenue help relieve the need for a SIF?

We ask not for special treatment but a fair, good-faith hearing of our concerns. And more importantly, we ask that you and your fellow administrators join us in demanding a change to this new normal. Join us in demanding that the state fulfill its obligations to its students and future rather than allowing the costs of higher education to be born increasingly by these students and their families. Join us in demanding greater transparency and accountability from all units of the University System of Georgia, the Board of Regents, and the state legislature. As the leaders of the state's flagship university, join us in admitting that there is not just one "best way to improve the financial standing" of graduate students. We hope that we can find these solutions together.

Sincerely,

Members of the Graduate Committee of the United Campus Workers of Georgia