

Policy on Supplementing Stipends for MCRO Students Who Earn Fellowships

Background (Excerpt from Education & Training Committee 5/12/20 meeting agenda)

BBSP and the School of Medicine Office of Graduate Education set the minimum stipend for all graduate students who enter UNC through BBSP. In spite of the fact that the success of BBSP depends on similar stipends across departments (so students don't simply migrate to the highest bidder), there is no policy that says all stipends must be equal. Higher stipends for some students are clearly allowed. In particular, some departments allow students who earn fellowships to receive a higher stipend.

The Department of Microbiology & Immunology has not to Bob's knowledge ever had an explicit discussion or policy about graduate student stipends [other than to say that (i) because graduate school is a full-time job, earning income from outside jobs is prohibited, and (ii) students who transition from the Ph.D. to the M.S. program still receive the same pay]. As a default position, our practice has been to pay all graduate students the same. There are at least two separate decisions to make:

First, should we allow students who earn fellowships to receive a higher stipend for the duration of their fellowship? A partial list of pros and cons follow:

Pros

- It is only fair that students should be compensated for their extra efforts, which benefit lab and departmental finances to a far greater extent than any supplement that might be paid to the student.
- Supplements would encourage more students to apply for fellowships, which is a desired outcome.
- In the real world following graduate school (including postdoctoral positions), pay levels are unequal and are often explicitly linked to the productivity or experience of the individual employee.
- Other BBSP programs and universities allow the practice of stipend supplements for biomedical Ph.D. students.

Cons

- Is a financial incentive really needed to encourage students to apply for fellowships? Do we think a financial incentive would change student behavior? If so, is this a behavior that we wish to encourage relative to other potential uses of student time?
- Inequities in graduate student stipends could negatively affect our collegial departmental atmosphere.
- The prestige of earning a fellowship and accompanying career benefits should be sufficient motivation for students to seek them.
- Will different students have unequal chances to earn fellowships and hence a bonus, for example because of their research topic, the prestige or assistance of the mentor in preparing the application (NIH fellowships depend heavily on having

a funded and experienced mentor), citizenship status (international students are not eligible for many fellowships), etc.?

Second, if we recommend that supplements be allowed, then we also need to decide how supplements could best be implemented. Some issues to consider:

- Should the amount of supplement be set by the department or at the discretion of the mentor?
- If the amount of the supplement is uniform across the department, what should it be? 15% of the stipend seems to be commonly used.
- Who pays for the supplement? If it is the responsibility of the mentor, then their ability to pay could be affected by their overall lab budget or funding changes from year to year. This means the mentor could be perceived as a "bad guy" if they decide to not pay or pay less than the full amount. UNC Pharmaceutical Sciences pays 15% from a central source to avoid these issues.
- Would the supplement policy apply to all fellowships, both external and internal, and regardless of fellowship amount?

Discussion (Excerpt from Education & Training Committee 5/12/20 meeting minutes)

We had a wide-ranging discussion on whether we should we allow students who earn fellowships to receive a higher stipend for the duration of their fellowship. We first clarified current practice in our department: Students who earn fellowships that pay less than our normal stipend of \$32K/year (e.g. NIH F30/F31, most private foundations) have their stipends supplemented to reach the same amount as everyone else. Students who earn fellowships that pay more than our normal stipend (e.g. NSF pays \$34K/year) are allowed to keep the full amount. Several additional points were noted: (i) Eligibility restrictions vary between fellowships and can include immigration status, demographic group, or scientific field. Therefore different students have different access to fellowship opportunities. (ii) Our discussion was limited to students. Pay for postdoctoral scientists, including those who earn fellowships, is set individually by PIs. (iii) We excluded recipients of T32 funding from the discussion, because faculty (not students) obtain training grants. (iv) In programs that allow supplements, a typical amount is 15% of the fellowship.

The existence of higher pay for the few students with NSF fellowships led to some apparent initial support for compensating fellowship winners for their efforts in obtaining fellowships, which benefit lab finances to a greater extent than possible supplements would cost.

However, a variety of counter arguments were raised: A fellowship application is not prepared by a student in isolation, but rather involves significant contributions from the mentor and is a valuable training experience. The entire lab often contributes to the foundation of knowledge that supports a successful application, and the entire lab benefits when an application is successful. In a highly competitive funding environment, being awarded a fellowship has a significant component of luck in addition to skill, and it is not always clear that students who submit unsuccessful fellowship applications are less deserving. Payment of supplements to fellowship winners has the potential to diminish collegiality within a lab and shift emphasis toward the individual rather than the

group. Fellowship winners already derive a significant career benefit in terms of prestige and listing the fellowship on their CVs.

Decision (Excerpt from Education & Training Committee 5/12/20 meeting minutes)

The committee unanimously decided against allowing students who earn fellowship to be paid a supplement.