Dear Students,

I hope your summer is going well. I know that with the end of spring semester, many of you are working and studying off campus in ways that will add value to your degrees. This morning, I was fortunate to hear the summary presentations from the weeklong Graduate Student Mathematical Modeling camp, where students from across the country work in study groups and then build the skills they will need to tackle problems from industry next week at the Mathematical Problems in Industry workshop. It’s an innovative framework for graduate development that UD faculty have supported for the last 16 years. The Graduate College is proud to be a part of it.

Changing the subject a bit, I will write a few words about minimum graduate student stipends. Many of our graduate students are “on contract,” meaning that they are either teaching assistants, research assistants or graduate assistants. These graduate students work for the University during the academic year and sometimes in the summer. Many teach courses. Many contribute to the research enterprise and are supported by grants or contracts. Some help with specialized university operations. In return, they are paid a stipend and given a tuition waiver. The Graduate College, in collaboration with the other colleges, sets a minimum stipend. The minimum stipend for nine-month contracts, at 20 hours per week maximum, is $21,000 for Ph.D. students and $20,000 for master’s students. There are variations for a 12-month contract, and there can be other modifications for full-time summer work, but they are all in proportion to the nine-month minimum.

Last Fall, while we were in the midst of a deep financial crisis, I consulted with the other deans and opted not to raise the minimum stipend because doing so would have led to a reduction in the number of graduate students we could support on campus. While increasing the stipend would surely have been appreciated by those graduate students who were being funded, we felt the existing stipend was adequate, and we had an obligation to continue to support both students who were already here as well as incoming students. The Graduate Student Government expressed concern because fees and other costs have been climbing. There were also some concerns about a lack of transparency in the decision-making process. To close the loop on the process and plan for the post-pandemic future that we are entering now, I charged a Stipend Task Force consisting of graduate students, graduate program directors, college budget officers and Graduate College staff to examine our stipend structure and make recommendations on how we should approach minimum stipends going forward. I received their report in late April, and I will be using it as a blueprint for how to move ahead. They made too many observations and recommendations to include in one note, but I will get started with a few important ones.

The first and most important recommendation is that every full-time UD graduate
student who has been awarded a stipend and tuition scholarship should have an income that enables that student to meet a basic standard of living. From a distance, it sounds like an obvious statement, but it’s a powerful one. It’s important to note that not every graduate student receives an award with their offer of admission. The taskforce is saying that in making an award, the University should commit to doing so in a way that a graduate student can live on that stipend. I embrace this principle. Going forward, cost of living and total cost of attendance will be the starting point for minimum tuition levels. Later, the report goes on to state that the current nine-month minimum stipend is sufficient, if only just so, to support a student for nine months while acknowledging that there are issues with the uncertainty of summer support. That’s a very challenging issue that the Graduate College will be examining going forward.

The second recommendation is that the minimum stipend policy should provide equity in terms of support for all students across all programs. I accept that recommendation as well. When the next opportunity arises to adjust the minimum stipend, the minimum will be independent of students’ academic programs, so there will be no difference in stipends between master’s and Ph.D. students.

As a final note, I hope you share my excitement about the growing vaccination rates across the nation and the world. At the same time, the pandemic is far from over, so we still need to follow the advice of experts. Until we meet in person, stay smart and stay safe.

Yours,

Lou Rossi
Dean of the Graduate College