



GRADUATE STUDENT COUNCIL

Elizabeth A. Lanphier

e.lanphier.barone@vanderbilt.edu

Graduate Student Conference and Research Travel Funding

OVERVIEW

Problem

Graduate students across disciplines are encouraged to present their research at conferences in their discipline. Presentation of original research at professional conferences addresses a range of objectives that are crucial toward graduate student education and professionalization as well as our viability on the job market. These objectives include: getting feedback on your research from scholars working in your field outside of your home institution; being exposed to cutting-edge research in your field by attending presentations by others; networking with professionals in your field; building up a track-record of presentations in your areas of specialization and concentration that demonstrate research capacity in these areas; refining work for publication.

However, graduate student funding for conference travel and research presentations has diminished in recent years. For example, in the past the graduate school offered a total of \$2,500 in domestic travel awards. Recently this number has been cut to \$1,500. Additional money for international travel is no longer offered. Meanwhile, travel-related costs continue to rise. \$500 is insufficient to cover travel costs related to one conference and students may be required to pay out of pocket for travel. Vanderbilt's Strategic Plan for Graduate Education notes: "as graduate students attend more conferences (and as more conferences involve international travel), the cost becomes prohibitive if they cannot manage the up-front costs." Indeed graduate students are succeeding in their fields and attending more conferences, including international ones. The problem is not only limited to the timeline for reimbursement, but extends to the costs as well.

Solution

A clear solution to this funding problem is to earmark a portion of the \$300 million USD endowment available for graduate research and education to provide additional travel funds to *all* graduate students, guaranteed across five years. Travel awards should be available to students to use for either one international or distantly-located conference, or split between two conferences per year. Additionally, funding could be tiered such that students could receive smaller stipends for conference attendance while larger funding awards are granted for the presentation of original research. This would particularly support students in the first two years of study who are developing their research identities and professional networks in their fields. As the priority for endowment funding is to enhance student research and education, there is no better way than to directly support graduate student research through conference and research travel.

IMPACT

This program of making available more comprehensive travel funding for research and conference presentations will contribute to the professionalization and learning objectives of all Vanderbilt graduate students, across disciplines. It will work to address current equity issues when some students who have personal financial situations that permit them to spend funds above and beyond their stipends and travel grants and therefore are able to have greater access to these professional opportunities than those students who do not have these same financial circumstances. This corresponds to the stated goal in Vanderbilt's Strategic Plan for Graduate Education to "expand programs aimed at increasing the quality, breadth, and diversity of our graduate student population."

Additionally, increasing Vanderbilt graduate student capacity to attend and present at professional conferences will support the job prospects of Vanderbilt students to be competitive for top jobs in their fields when they go on the market. Furthermore, the presence of Vanderbilt graduate students at research and professional conferences will keep Vanderbilt, as a research focused institution, visible across humanities, social sciences and STEM disciplines, reflecting the high quality of research that is part of Vanderbilt's mission.

GOALS

1. Increase available travel funding to Graduate Student for conference related travel
2. Support Graduate Student professionalization through conference attendance
3. Support Graduate Student research by encouraging the presentation of original work at professional conferences

4. Increase Vanderbilt’s research visibility across all disciplines by increasing participation of Vanderbilt Graduate Students at research and professional conferences in their respective fields.
5. Promote equity among Graduate Students at Vanderbilt University by making increased financial resources available to all students, such that diverse financial situations are not an impediment for some students to achieve professional and research objectives.

IMPLEMENTATION

This proposal would be simple to implement as there are already mechanisms in place for graduate student conference travel. This project would only increase the dollar amounts and/or number of total awards available to each graduate student, but would not require a new system to manage these awards.

ESTIMATED COST

5 Year Impact and Cost	# Graduate Students*	\$ Award Per Year	# Years	Total USD Amounts
Proposed	2,200	1,500	5	\$16,500,000
Current	2,200	500	3	\$3,300,000
Difference over 5 Years				\$13,200,000
Percentage Of Total \$300,000,000 Endowment				4%

**Based on public records of Graduate School enrollment in 2016.*

Yearly Impact and Cost	Yearly Amounts
Proposed Annual Upper Limit for Graduate Travel Funds	\$3,300,000
Current Annual Upper Limit for Graduate Travel	\$660,000
Difference Per Year	\$2,640,000
Percentage of Estimated Yearly 20,000,000 Endowment Available	13%

Of course, not every student would take advantage of the full funding each year, which means that costs would in reality be well below this figure. **This would represent at most only 13% of the yearly funds available from the endowment** that the Chancellor is seeking to allocate for graduate student research and education and would make a significant contribution to graduate student research and education for students during their time at Vanderbilt, and toward setting up their professional academic futures well beyond Vanderbilt.