

Department Town Hall Minutes:

Response to Graduate Student Issues with COVID-19

Introduction

- Prof. Mawhinney greeted everyone and started the meeting. Unclear at what level of detail I should take notes, but here we go.
- Noted extraordinary changes at the university including taking all teaching online, moving out undergraduates, and moving all research activities online.
 - Stressed the main point is compliance with governmental orders and ongoing planning/discussion to deal with the situation
 - Research operation and grants are still running, supported by federal agency funding which has continued under redirected workloads.
 - Faculty are taking this time to write grants due to other research activities being unavailable. Mentioned available funding to redirect research efforts to COVID-19 related areas
 - Discussions are ongoing at the university level of ramping back up to some kind of university activity.
 - Labs are trying to open up, but teaching activity is less clear.
 - Task forces supervised by the Provost meet daily to set guidelines on several topics.
 - Density on-campus will have to remain very low, requiring that anyone who does not require on-campus work will have to for as long as possible, even when those who need to physically be in a lab are allowed in.
- Summer school program will run for the duration of the summer but no decisions have been made for how the Fall will run.
 - Prof. Mawhinney speculates that the Fall will be only online classes.

Summary of Graduate Student Town Hall

- Elena noted that other departments have begun striking and that the graduate students convened yesterday to understand such issues.
 - Says we have not made plans to go on strike but had a check-in to understand graduate student issues in physics.
- Main issues are funding for first-year students and for theory students.
 - Graduate student perspective is that experimental graduate students committed to a group have secure funding.
 - 5-10 first-year students noted that summer funding is very unclear for them at the moment.

- Expectation is for available teaching positions to be fewer this summer and generate uncertainty about funding for theory graduate students.
- International students are having visa issues.
 - Want department assistance for both graduate students stuck at home or stuck here with issues of visa renewal.
- Email sent to department administration last night which spurred on this meeting
 - Barbara noted that survey results to student body included issues with funding, housing, visas, and healthcare.

Chair's Response to Graduate Student Issues

- First topic addressed is summer funding for first-year students interested in theory
 - Noted there is a structural issue with funding these students year-to-year in the department generally, worsened by COVID.
 - No specific commitment from the university yet on summer TA slots for students, with program run by Prof. Dodd.
 - Faculty met earlier today to examine summer support for first-year and advanced theory students.
 - It appears funding is in place to support everyone, although this is not a solid guarantee yet. Gave caveats to this point.
 - Noted departmental commitment to support students in some way or another
 - Email sent to the faculty asking who has experimental positions available, but there are not many spots currently
- Ioanna asked a question about summer credit registration and the response was unclear.
 - Randy noted that you should just provisionally sign up to be a research assistant and changes can be made later on.
- Barbara noted that some professors have dropped experimental students they were planning on taking since the labs will be closed.
 - Barbara expressed that the department should be aggressively encouraging labs to take students.
 - Prof. Mawhinney responded that these problems should not occur. Faculty may have mis-interpreted a widespread budget cut, which would not affect funding for graduate students.
 - Barbara responded by asking how students should remain attached to groups who cannot currently take them.
 - Prof. Mawhinney said first-year students should still take intellectual interest even if they cannot be paid, while upper-year students should have secure funding.

- Prof. Mawhinney believes that definitive funding sources for all first-year students will be determined within a week.
- Jooyun asked about potential spots with experimental groups.
 - Prof. Mawhinney noted that this search is, at this point, not going to be productive, and it does not make sense for students to just be sending cold emails out.
- Randy wanted to mention that upon registration, GSAS will assess fees on accounts, but they will be paid after and he is happy to answer any questions we have on financial accounts.
- Niccolo asked if there was some official university position on how to handle payment for graduate students or if any university-level intervention would be possible.
 - Prof. Mawhinney noted the level of effort put in at the university level and level of attention paid to graduate students, to whose plight he is clearly the knight in shining armor we all need.
 - There was a recent fund of 300 million dollars put together for non-science GSAS students... doesn't really help us.
 - They are adding a \$3000 supplement to students on a 12-month stipend, which I suppose would include us.
 - Prof. Basov noted that experimental seminars are a good place to go in order to participate, become engaged, and find an advisor. Unclear if this applies to people with only transient interest in non-theory fields.
- Prof. Mawhinney moved onto the next concern raised by the PGC, funding for theory students beyond their first year.
 - Prof. Mawhinney stated that these students are included under the students for whom he believes funding for the summer is squared away.
- Ioanna asked for the number of students it is plausible to support without teaching positions, noting this information was unlikely to be communicated.
 - Ever the politician, the number quoted by Prof. Mawhinney was, "we believe we can support everyone".
- Sun asked what the backup plan is if anyone cannot be supported.
 - Prof. Mawhinney said that the backup plans are, basically, to fight until everyone gets support. He said they would search for a checkbook someone could cut a check from or some possible other TA position, query to GSAS, etc.
- Barbara asked if there is a way we can push the university to support us, either by collective action or some other mechanism.
 - Prof. Mawhinney said that this is a physics department-specific problem, with some fluctuations depending upon the summer program.

- Barbara asked if the faculty could support students in a collective action against GSAS, to which Prof. Mawhinney expressed that he could not envision such support on any kind of official level.
- Prof. Christ wanted to note that this is a fairly complicated system, and the university could decide to support us but also cut the class size next year, as an example of how they would balance the budget.
- Kathryn asked about long-term funding issues regarding lab funding in the Fall. Made distinctions between three categories: attached to a research group with remote work, without remote work, or unattached.
 - Asked about the department's position on longer-timeline funding than anticipated.
 - Prof. Mawhinney once again noted the commitment of the university to students and to work on this problem.
 - Stated that there may be fewer graduate students admitted 2-3 years down the line to account for extending the time of PhDs
- Barbara then raised the next PGC concern about international students stranded in other countries unable to perform in-person research.
 - Sun noted that labs could even open up, but students could still be unable to enter the United States due to travel restrictions.
 - Prof. Mawhinney noted that even asking students to come back could be a significant infection risk and the university needs a broad policy for these concerns from the university.
- Claire then raised a question about students working in experimental groups being able to do planning/strategizing for future experiments and placing large number of orders. With the department office closed, they are unable to receive packages, which is further stalling research efforts.
 - Prof. Mawhinney has made some progress on this problem recently through interaction with arts and sciences. The plan is to divert our packages to central receiving, but it is unclear how long they will hold packages. It will be up to us to go get them, but since we are not allowed on campus, packages would just accumulate.
 - Claire wanted to understand what issues remained to be solved, and Prof. Mawhinney said that the real question is indefinite storage of package since we are unable to acquire them. SEAS has a building manager who is storing packages, but we do not have an analogous person in this job.

Concluding Remarks

- Prof. Mawhinney thanked everyone for coming and apologized for not communicating enough quickly enough, noting concerns about a lack of

responsiveness from faculty. Stated desire for a follow-up meeting on the timescale of a week.

- Ioanna had a question about how budget cuts have affected the department in general. Hiring freezes, salary reductions, etc.
 - Prof. Mawhinney responded the issues here are like an onion. They have layers.
 - The provost announced a hiring freeze a while back, so that is not up to us. Exceptions exist for faculty hiring, occasionally for post-docs, but not much else.
 - Revenues have plunged enormously. Columbia hospital revenue is down by \$100 million. Omg he spelt it out and called it C-O-V-I-D 19. And then later on, he called it COVID! Unconscionable.
 - In regards to cuts to the department's budget specifically, GSAS has been putting together a budget but no cut has been put in place due to the employment of rainy day funds being used.
 - The university is doing everything possible to maintain funding streams now that we no longer have people who "had some miracle performed on their body" by the medical school donating money.
- Prof. Mawhinney closed by noting that another such meeting should be happening soon in order to ameliorate uncertainty.
- Elena asked about Prof. Christ's cat walking across the screen and asked for an introduction to the cat.
 - The cat is named Sammy and is 13 years old but has since gone back to sleep.
- Randy noted the registrar is currently working to ameliorate issues with the cap on students with a research appointment.