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Graduate student stipends for upcoming proposals

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To: oceanresearch@soest.hawaii.edu

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Ocean researchers -

At a recent faculty meeting, Seth Travis, the head of Na Kamakai, presented information on the impact of our current graduate student stipend rates (the attachment is a written version of that presentation).

The bottom line: Whereas our grad students used to be paid comparatively well in comparison with our peer institutions (reflecting the very high cost of living in Honolulu), we are now below all of our peers on a cost-of-living-adjusted basis. After discussion, the faculty at that meeting agreed that we would strive to support all graduate students at the **GA-20 level** (\$35,460 at the standard 50% FTE) while **eliminating summer overload**.

Reflecting that faculty opinion, all proposals for research funding will be expected to designate graduate student stipends at this level (and without summer overload).

If you are unable to designate this level of support, I would appreciate your sending me an explanation for the reason why before the proposal is submitted for Chair approval. This will save time and aggravation during the approval process.

I'm sure our financially stressed grad students will join me in thanking you for your cooperation in this important matter.

Aloha,
Frank

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Graduate Student Stipend Rates 7-2016.pdf

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Report on Oceanography Graduate Student Stipend Rates and Cost of Living

Seth Travis

July 2016

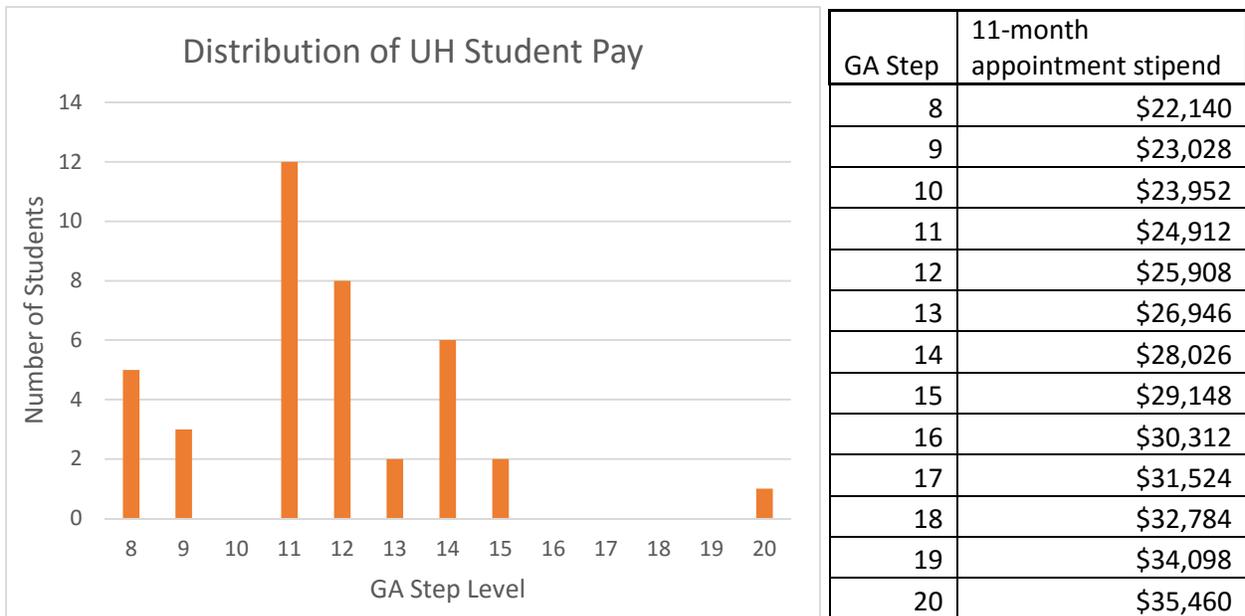
Introduction

In the past few years, graduate student stipends in the University of Hawai'i at Manoa SOEST Oceanography department have become stagnant. This is especially apparent when compared to various oceanography programs from around the country. In combination with the high cost of living in Hawai'i, many students find it extremely difficult to live here without some sort of outside assistance, and have low morale over their quality of life during their graduate education. Additionally, these low stipend rates have made the SOEST oceanography school no longer competitive, making it much more difficult to attract first-choice graduate students to attend. These two factors create a problem for the department, in which current graduate students are dissatisfied, and future graduate students are more incentivized to attend other programs. By looking at comparable stipend rates and accounting for the high cost of living, the Oceanography department should be able to set stipend rates at a competitive level to attract top talent and provide for an appropriate standard of living for students.

Current Student Stipend Rates

Graduate students are paid at a wide range of GA step levels. Figure 1, shown below, provides a breakdown of the number of students at each GA level. For the purposes of comparison, a student being funded as a teaching assistant (TA) on a 9-month appointment is treated as a student being funded as a research assistant (RA) on an 11-month appointment of a comparable rate. A 9-month appointment is funded the same as an 11-month appointment at 4 pay steps lower. For example, a GA-12 on a 9-month appointment is equivalent to a GA-8 on an 11-month appointment. The following information is for graduate students in the oceanography department for the 2015-2016 year. It does not include students funded by HIMB, outside the department, paid by stipend, or on a leave-of-absence.

For 2015-2016, the department funded 39 of the 50 graduate students in the department. 32 students were on RA's and 7 were on TA's. The average graduate student is paid at a GA step level of 11.67. The median pay step is GA-11, which corresponds to \$24,912/year. The range is from a GA-8 to a GA-20. The majority of students were clustered at a GA-11 – GA-12. For reference, the stipends for each GA level are given in table 1.



GA Step	11-month appointment stipend
8	\$22,140
9	\$23,028
10	\$23,952
11	\$24,912
12	\$25,908
13	\$26,946
14	\$28,026
15	\$29,148
16	\$30,312
17	\$31,524
18	\$32,784
19	\$34,098
20	\$35,460

Figure and Table 1: Distribution of the GA-step levels for student pay at UH. All step levels are given as equivalent 11-month appointments. The table provides the corresponding 11-month stipend for each GA step.

In the spring of 2014, a SOEST directive provided guidelines on minimum levels at which new students should be funded. These guidelines are as follow:

Entering SOEST graduate students with a Bachelor’s degree are now paid at R-11 (\$24,912) and eventually will work their way to R-14 (\$28,026) upon successful defense of a PhD thesis proposal. SOEST guidelines for minimum graduate student salaries:

- a) R-11 Incoming students with Bachelor’s degree
- b) R-12 Incoming students with Master’s degree
 - a. Students who have passed qualifying exam, and
 - b. Students who are still working on a MS thesis and have defended their thesis proposal
- c) R-13 Students who have passed their PhD comprehensive exam
- d) R-14 Students who have defended their Ph.D. thesis proposal and are working on their thesis

At the time that these recommended levels were presented, it was noted that 32 students had their pay processed through the ocean office, and that of those students, 4 students were paid above their recommended level, 12 were paid at the recommended level, and 16 were paid below the minimum recommended level. Based upon the current distribution of the number of students at each GA step level it is likely that there is still a large number of students that are being paid below the minimum recommended level.

School Stipend Rate Comparisons

Student stipend rates at 8 of the top oceanography departments across the country were collected for comparison. In addition to University of Hawai’l at Manoa (UH), the following schools were included in the comparison: University of Delaware (UDel), University of Washington (UW), the Scripps

Institute at the University of California at San Diego (UCSD), Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute (WHOi), Rosenstiel School at the University of Miami (UofM), Oregon State University (OSU), and Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory at Columbia University (LDEO). A comparison of the stipend rates for these universities is given in Figure 2, seen below. For all but UH, these are the stipend rates for first year students, as quoted by the respective institutions. The data was collected from posted rates on websites, or via email or phone communication with staff at each institution. For UH, the median stipend rate for a graduate student on an 11-month appointment is used. This is an 11-month appointment at GA-11, corresponding to a stipend of \$24,912.

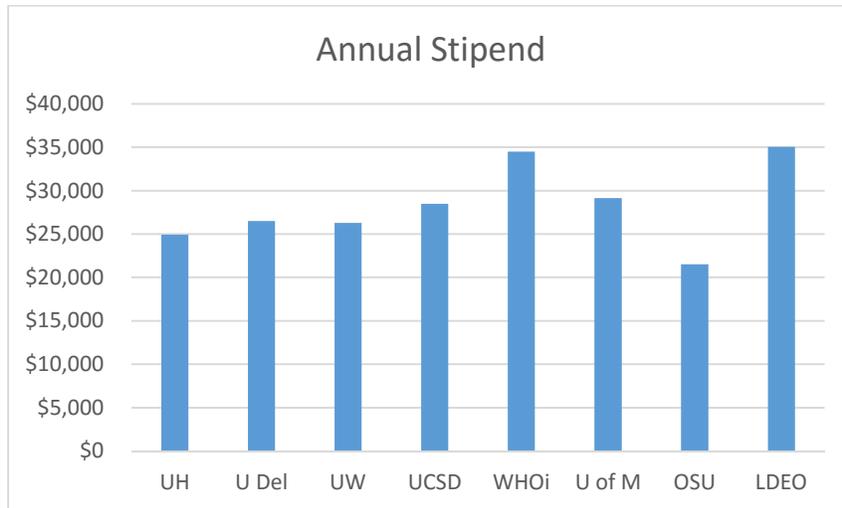


Figure 2: Annual Stipend Rates at a selection U.S. oceanography graduate schools

Upon review, UH has the second lowest stipend rate (\$24,912) of the schools reviewed. The only school with a lower rate is OSU (\$21,527), which is the rate negotiated in the collective bargaining agreement between the school and their graduate student union. The average stipend rate for the non-UH schools is \$28,782. There is a cluster of schools with stipends between \$26,000-\$29,000 (U Del, UW, U of M, UCSD). WHOi and LDEO are the highest paying schools at ~\$35,000 each. Overall, the UH stipend rate is 86.6% of the average rate for all of the other schools in comparison.

These numbers, however, fail to reflect the high cost of living in Honolulu. A comparison of the cost of living at each of these institutions is given in Figure 3. The cost of living for each school is given relative to that of UH (UH = 100%). For many of the institutions, the nearest major city is used for comparative purposes. For example, OSU is located near Corvallis, Oregon; however, the city of Portland, Oregon is used as a cost of living comparison. Similarly, LDEO is located in Palisades, NY, a suburb located about an hour north of New York City, which is used as the reference city for a cost of living comparison. Because of this, in many cases, the given cost of living for each city is likely overestimating that actual cost of living at that university. The figure highlights the high cost of living difference between Honolulu and nearly all other cities. At institutions other than LDEO, the cost of living is less than 80% of that in Honolulu, with the greatest difference found between UH and UDel, which has a cost of living 62% of that in Honolulu.

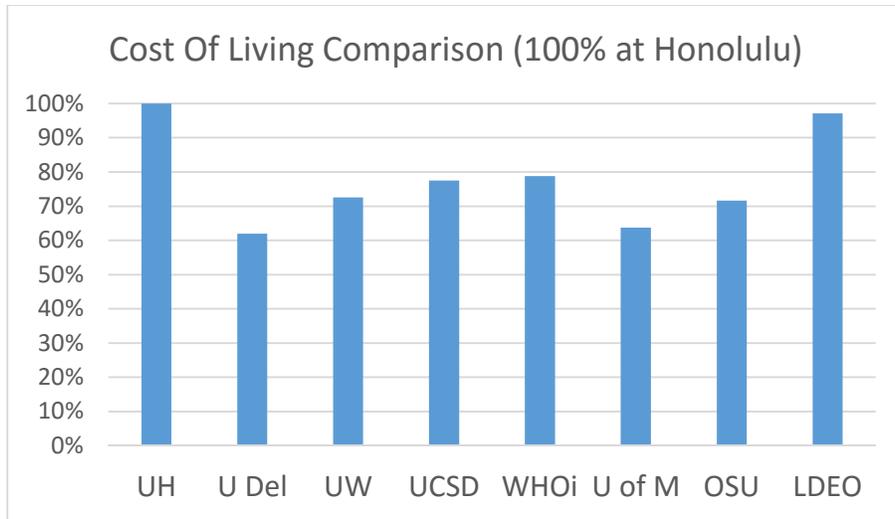


Figure 3: Cost of living comparison between UH (Honolulu) and other oceanographic institutions (nearest major city)

The stipend rates at the various institutions are adjusted by their respective cost of living, causing the disparity between the stipend rates at UH and other institutions to become even more apparent. The adjusted stipend rates are shown in Figure 4.

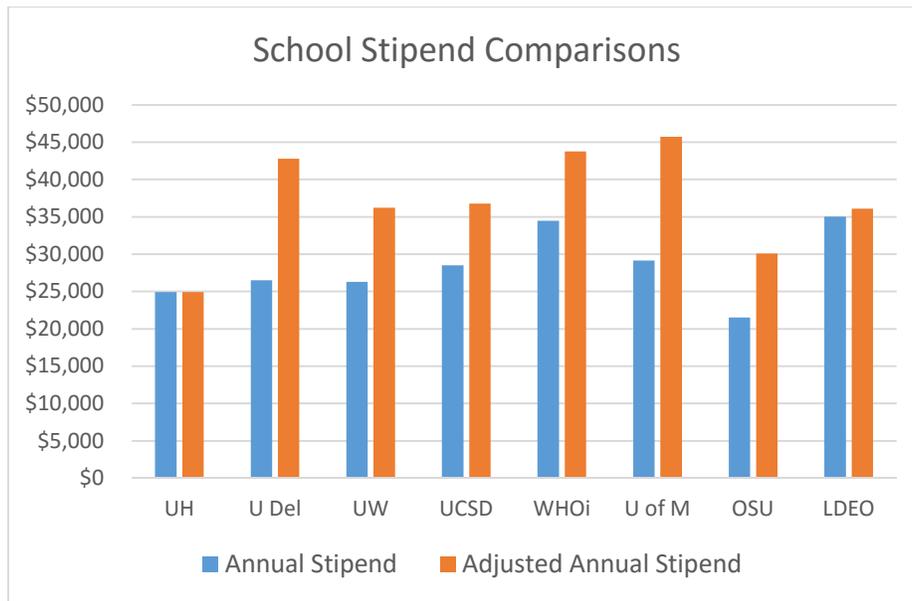


Figure 4: School Stipend Comparisons, Real (blue) and Cost-of-Living Adjusted (Orange)

When stipend rates are adjusted for the cost of living, UH has the lowest stipend rate of all the schools compared, by far. OSU, which has the lowest stipend of the comparison group in the absolute sense, now has an adjusted stipend of \$30,066. The median UH stipend is 82.9% of the stipend at OSU, which is the second lowest amongst the adjusted rates. Overall, the cost-of-living-adjusted (COLA) average non-UH stipend is \$38,773. The median UH stipend is only 64.2% of the COLA, non-UH average stipend rates of the other schools in the comparison group. A number of schools are clustered near

\$36,000/year (LDEO, UW, and UCSD), with three schools exceeding \$42,000/year (UDel at \$42,767, WHOi at \$43,782, and UofM at \$45,711).

UH Student Cost of Living

A closer look at the actual cost of living for students within the department can illustrate the financial struggle that many students face. To first examine the actual cost of living for UH students, an estimate of expected student expenditures can be analyzed. The table below is taken from a report titled “The Economic Impact of the University of Hawai’i System”, from the Economic Research Organization at the University of Hawai’i (UHERO). The report looks into the actual economic impact of the UH system on the state of Hawai’i, and where these impacts are coming from. It finds that 25.8% of the total UH impact on the state economy comes from student expenditures. A breakdown of those student expenditures is given in the table below, showing the average student expenditure by category and by county.

Table 2. Average Student Expenditures, By County

	Honolulu County	Hawai’i County	Maui County	Kaua’i County	Total
Housing	\$7,898	\$4,632	\$8,298	\$6,275	\$7,697
Durables/start-up	\$2,490	\$1,856	\$1,404	\$1,969	\$2,435
Books and supplies	\$1,388	\$2,220	\$2,679	\$1,815	\$1,452
Utilities	\$2,402	\$3,444	\$4,025	\$6,043	\$2,486
Food	\$4,044	\$4,345	\$5,025	\$4,088	\$4,070
Local transportation	\$1,833	\$2,355	\$2,200	\$2,975	\$1,898
Recreation/entertainment	\$971	\$701	\$553	\$720	\$948
Personal care	\$4,004	\$3,559	\$3,696	\$5,045	\$4,012
Travel	\$602	\$706	\$387	\$502	\$599
Total	\$25,631	\$23,817	\$28,267	\$26,432	\$25,598

Table 2: Average student expenditures, by county. Taken from the UHERO report “The Economic Impact of the University of Hawai’i System”

It should be noted that these average student expenditures account for students, undergraduate or graduate, at all UH system schools. For Honolulu county, this includes other schools, such as KCC or UH West Oahu. It can be reasonably assumed that there would be some differences in the actual student expenditures for students at UH Manoa. For example, it is likely that rent/housing costs are significantly higher for students at UH Manoa than for the average student. Regardless, this information helps to get closer to the actual expenditures of students in Hawai’i. For a more detailed explanation of the formulation of the numbers, the UHERO report should be referred to.

The first number to note is the total expenditures for the average student in Honolulu county. According to the report, the average student has annual expenditures of \$25,631. This is already higher than the median stipend for a graduate student at UH in the oceanography department. The second number to note is the average housing cost of \$7,898/year. As will be shown, this number is significantly lower than the actual housing costs for students in the program.

A survey of the UH oceanography graduate student body was conducted in Fall 2015. The purpose of the survey was to obtain basic information about the living situation of the students in the oceanography program. It included questions about rent, number of roommates, distance of housing from campus, and the student’s ability to save money in any given month. The survey received a very strong response, generating 35 responses, which amounts to a 70% response rate.

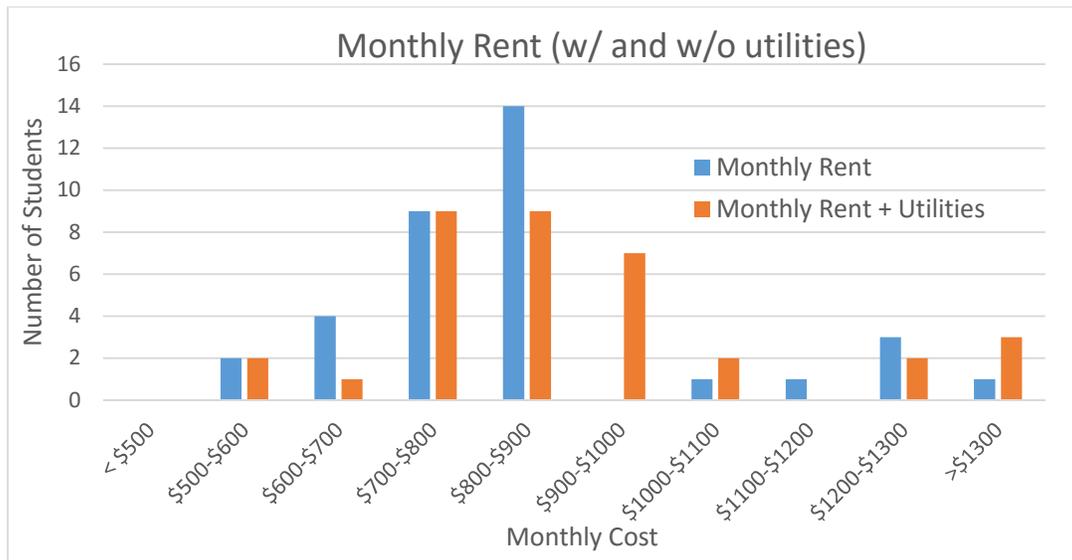


Figure 5: Survey of rent and utilities paid by UH oceanography graduate students

Figure 5 provides a breakdown of how much students pay for rent and utilities. While there is a wide range in the total amount that students pay, the majority of those surveyed pay between \$700-\$1000 per month for rent (71.4% fall within this range). The average student pays \$863/month for rent and \$918/month for rent and utilities. For a comparison, when converted to a monthly rate over the course of the year, the UHERO report gives the average rent as \$658/month. At least in this one category, it can be assumed that a UH oceanography graduate student expenditures exceed those of the average student in the UH system on O’ahu, and that the estimated expenditures of \$25,631 is an underestimate of the actual costs for graduate students in the oceanography program.

In another comparison, it is found that students are able to find more economical option for housing than those provided by the university. To live in on-campus housing, a 2-person, 1-bedroom dorm room would cost \$8687.00 for 9 months, which is equivalent to \$965.11/month. This rate includes the cost of utilities for that time period, and exceeds that of the average student, paying \$918/month. Generally, students are able to find more economical housing than that provided by the university, and for cheaper than what the university believes is a fair price to charge graduate students.

When accounting for how much of student pay goes towards rent, the percentage is exceptionally high. For a student at the median pay rate of a GA-11, the bi-monthly paycheck amounts

to \$1038.00. After taking out taxes and deductions, the take-home pay for students is approximately \$860/paycheck. This number can be highly variable, depending upon a number of factors, such as applicable taxes or the health insurance costs for each student. Regardless, \$860/paycheck is a fair estimate to use for student take-home pay. At this rate, the average student is unable to pay for rent on a single paycheck. Students need to pay greater than 50% of their actual income towards rent and utilities alone.

Rising University-Imposed Costs

While stipend rates remain low, additional costs imposed upon students by the university continue to rapidly rise. Each semester, students pay the mandatory student fees, regardless of whether students find any utility in the services that these fees provide for. These fees have drastically risen over the last 6 years. The following figure shows the mandatory student fees for the full school year, since the 2009-2010 school year.

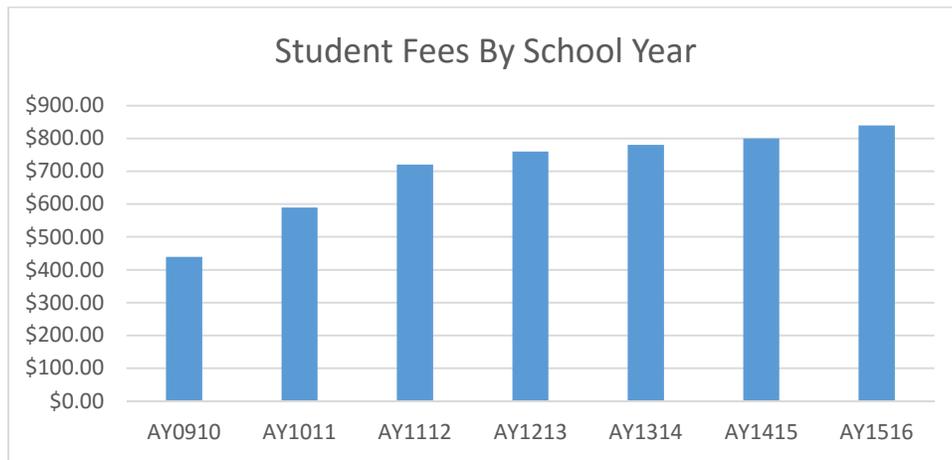


Figure 6: Mandatory UH Student fees, by school year

Since the 2009-2010 school year, student fees have nearly doubled (increased to 191.7% of the AY0910 level). The student fees for the AY1516 year totaled \$840.00. When compared to other fixed costs for graduate students, this number is exceedingly high. For the median student, the student fees for AY1516 were nearly equal to the take-home pay from a single paycheck. This number is also roughly equal to what the average student pays in rent (\$863/month).

Ability to Save

The final question in the survey given to oceanography graduate students simply asked, “How much are you able to save each month?” This question was intended to give a broad metric of the difficulty of the financial situation for students, across the wide range of special conditions which arise. The results of the survey are given in figure 7, shown below.



Figure 7: Survey of how much students are able to save on an average month.

As the figure shows, the large majority of students are able to save very little each month, with the majority reporting being unable to save any funds at all. There are a few outliers who are able to save some funds each month, many of whom also reported some sort of special situation allowing them to save, such as receiving some sort of financial assistance from family or a spouse who earns a higher income. Overall, however, this information illustrates the financial pressure that many students experience. The majority of students are living paycheck to paycheck. Any sort of emergency expense, such as unexpected medical problems, or auto and home repair, can be devastating to a student.

Conclusion

Efforts should be made to raise the stipend rates for graduate students in the UH Manoa oceanography department. The current pay level is insufficient for many students to live without undue financial pressure affecting many of their decisions. The average student, making only \$24,912/year at a GA-11, pays more than 50% of their income to rent, alone. This stipend rate is below the average student expenditures for all students on O’ahu, indicating that it is insufficient for the actual expenses that students have.

In addition, the stipend rates provided are no longer competitive with institutions in the wider oceanographic community. Among the schools surveyed, stipends at UH are the second lowest in an absolute sense, and by far the lowest among the schools when accounting for the high cost of living of Hawai’i (64.2% of the average pay). Because of this, students with options are incentivized to attend other schools. This makes UH less competitive, and unable to attract top talent graduate students to attend.

If the university wishes to remain competitive in attracting new graduate students, then it will need to be able to offer competitive stipends for those students. Advisors should account for this when writing proposals and seeking funds to support a graduate student. At the same time, efforts should be made to ease the financial stress that the existing graduate student population is experiencing. By doing both, the university will be able to maintain its status as a top institution for graduate students to attend while also improving the lives and mental health of the current students attending the school.

Report on Oceanography Graduate Student Stipend Rates and Cost of Living

Summary Fact Sheet

- The median GA rate (11-month appointment equivalence) for graduate students in the oceanography department is a GA-11, equal to \$24,912/year.
- In a survey of a number of oceanographic institutions, University of Hawai'i at Manoa (UH) provides the second lowest stipend.
- Students living in Honolulu experience the highest cost of living among the survey group. For the large majority of institutions, the cost of living at the locations is less than 80% of that of Honolulu.
- When accounting for the high cost of living, UH students receive the lowest stipends, by far. The median GA rate at UH is only 64.2% of the average cost-of-living-adjusted stipend rate among comparable institutions.
- The typical student pays \$863/month in rent. This is roughly equal to 50% of the student's after-tax, take-home income. This is also cheaper than the monthly rate offered to students for university provided, on-campus housing.
- Student fees continue to rise every year, regardless of stipend rates. Over the last 6 years, the annual student fees have nearly doubled. For AY1516, the student fees were \$840, which is comparable to a month's rent.
- The majority of students (51.4%) report being unable to save any funds at all each month.