



Closing the Disparity between Stipend Increases & Rent Increases

A Policy Brief and Recommendation by the Quality Of Life
Committee of the Graduate Student Advisory Council

Philip P. Rodenbough | Quality Of Life Chair | ppr2113@columbia.edu

Contents

- Executive Summary..... 2
- University Community 3
 - Missions of Columbia University, GSAS, Facilities, and GSAC’s Quality of Life Committee..... 3
 - Purpose of increases in stipends and rents 3
- Scope of this Policy Brief..... 4
- Data..... 5
 - Table: Stipends and average rent 5
- Clarifications 5
- Figures..... 6

Executive Summary

Over the past 10 years, rent charged to graduate students living in University Apartment Housing (UAH) has been increasing at higher rates than stipends offered to graduate students through the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (GSAS). An independent GSAC analysis of GSAS and UAH data concluded that graduate students saw multiple consecutive years when rent increases outpaced stipend increases. In fiscal year 2007, humanities and social sciences students devoted on average 48.29% of their total stipend to rent. In fiscal year 2016, that number has risen to 52.80%. For bench science students, rent shares increased over the same period from 41.65% to 44.68%. These out-of-sync changes are hurting students financially, for a reason no greater than a lack of coordination between offices at the University.

The Quality of Life Committee recommends to GSAS (which sets stipend rates) and Facilities/UAH (which sets rent) to communicate with each other and jointly coordinate their rate increases for students. These two offices should agree not to impose on students rent increases at higher rates than stipend increases. It is further recommended that, in future years, rent and stipend increase rates be shared with the Quality of Life Committee, so that graduate students can make informed and responsible choices about their monetary standing from year to year.

University Community

Missions of Columbia University, GSAS, Facilities, and GSAC's Quality of Life Committee

In its mission statement, Columbia University pointedly asserts its goal to provide “distinctive and distinguished learning environment for undergraduates and graduate students in many scholarly and professional fields.” University housing is certainly a part of the broader environment in which such learning takes place, as is the financial situation of its graduate students. Carlos Alonso, the Dean of GSAS, describes in his welcoming letter that his office works with GSAC to promote the interests of graduate students in diverse areas, including housing. Facilities highlights in its official vision that it is dedicated to providing high value and quality service, and a steady change in proportion of student stipends going towards rent certainly impacts facility value. The Quality of Life Committee of GSAC, for its part, takes as its mission to advocate for university policies that improve the general experience of the student body. Addressing the financial pressures on graduate students created by internal policies is a key issue for ensuring the high quality of student life at Columbia.

Purpose of increases in stipends and rents

The Quality of Life Committee recognizes that a thoughtful analysis of complicating factors undergirds the decisions made about rent and stipend increases each year. However, the Committee has identified a potential oversight in communication among the responsible parties in the university, which is having negative effects on the financial well-being of the graduate student body. The Quality of Life Committee certainly appreciates and applauds that GSAS offers cost-of-living increases each year. The committee further recognizes that yearly rent increases are inevitable. Yet these decisions should not be made independently of one another—indeed, they should be arrived at in the context of one another and in the context of the health of the university community. Given that graduate students are making long-term commitments to the institution (and vice versa), it seems most sensible to keep funding as competitive and efficient as possible by eliminating this discrepancy.

Scope of this Policy Brief

This policy brief is targeted primarily at the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (GSAS) and University Apartment Housing (UAH). This recommendation will affect PhD students in GSAS programs on the Morningside Heights campus who live in UAH apartments. This recommendation is targeted with the understanding that GSAS, under Dean Carlos Alonso, sets standard student stipend levels, and that UAH, under James D. Wang, Vice President for Finance and Administration in CU Facilities and Operations, determines annual rent increases for graduate students.

There are many PhD students at Columbia whose stipends are not directly determined by GSAS, including students in SIPA, GSAPP, Biomedical Sciences, Business, Journalism, Nursing, Engineering, Public Health, and Social Work. Furthermore, CUMC runs its own housing program independently from UAH. Although the spirit of this policy brief/recommendation extends to all of these schools and offices, the specific rate analysis does not. Later modifications of this policy brief/recommendation may be produced for other schools.

Data

Table: Stipends and average rent

<i>Fiscal Year</i>	Non-bench stipend (\$)	% increase from previous year	Bench stipend (\$)	% increase from previous year	Average rent charged /month	% increase from previous year	Yearly rent/stipend ratio % (non-bench)	Yearly rent/stipend ratio % (bench)
2006-07	23,000		26,667		926	5.00	48.29	41.65
2007-08	24,000	4.35	28,000	5.00	972	5.00	48.59	41.65
2008-09	25,000	4.17	29,333	4.76	1,020	4.30	48.98	41.75
2009-10	25,500	2.00	30,000	2.27	1,064	2.50	50.09	42.57
2010-11	26,000	1.96	30,667	2.22	1,091	2.75	50.35	42.69
2011-12	26,350	1.35	31,133	1.52	1,121	3.00	51.05	43.21
2012-13	26,750	1.52	31,667	1.71	1,155	4.50	51.79	43.75
2013-14	27,336	2.19	32,448	2.47	1,207	4.00	52.97	44.62
2014-15	28,586	4.57	33,781	4.11	1,255	4.00	52.68	44.57
2015-16	29,658	3.75	35,048	3.75	1,305	3.50	52.80	44.68

Clarifications

- GSAS students in the “bench” sciences (astronomy, biological sciences, chemistry, earth & environmental sciences, physics, and psychology) receive a higher annual stipend than students in “non-bench” departments, typically due to faculty research grants.
- Non-bench students receive a 9-month stipend and a different summer stipend, which are combined here in all cases to show the annual total
- Prior to fiscal year 2012, non-bench students received only 1-2 summers or support as part of the five-year funding package. Beginning in fiscal year 2012, the 5-year funding packing included an annual summer stipend (included in the totals provided here in all cases).
- In fiscal year 2012, GSAS assumed the cost of the University Facilities Fees, which had been paid by students until then. The stipends reported here represent take-home amounts for students, independent of other fees that may be charged afterwards.
- The vast majority of students are funded at the levels detailed here, although some have external funding packages which result in a greater take-home amount.
- Some departments offer additional paid teaching opportunities which may result in a greater take-home amount for some students.

Figures

