

Report and Recommendations of the
AD-HOC COMMITTEE ON AREA INCENTIVES

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December 2001

The charge to this ad-hoc committee, motivated by the offer of the NSF “IGERT” fellowships to incoming 2001 graduate students, was to review the departmental policies regarding graduate student fellowships, graduate student support, especially in view of possible “area incentive” awards (à la IGERT). The latter was the most important novel aspect of the package under consideration.

The committee was divided and ambivalent about the wisdom of instituting “area incentives” for graduate students. Some committee members felt that these incentives were inherently flawed insofar as they would accentuate the attractiveness of the “richer” disciplines in physics at the expense of the “poorer” ones, and that it is in general inappropriate to introduce non-physics considerations (such as financial windfall) into the choice of specialization in physics among our students. Other committee members, while recognizing the potential benefit of offering distinguished incoming candidates additional recognition and monetary incentive as a means of attracting good students to UVA, argued strongly that such incentives should be in principle open to all groups within the department, and not only to those that are recipients of specialized external funding such as IGERT.

The latter view prevailed in the end, and we have come up with a corresponding set of recommendations, which were passed unanimously. The issues and our recommendations are listed below:

1. Graduate student support

To date the departmental faculty vote only on the graduate students’ summer salary. The voted amounts become the de facto standard and practically all of our students receive their summer support accordingly. The committee was unanimous in the view that the same procedure should be followed for the academic year student support. Furthermore, it was the opinion of the ad-hoc committee that sufficient mechanisms are available in those cases when special considerations warrant exceptions, such as adjustment for higher cost of living off-grounds, etc.

Recommendation:

The department faculty shall vote annually to set the standard levels of graduate student fellowships and assistantships for both the academic year and summer months.

2. Area incentives

Since area incentives may hold the potential of attracting a few additional highly qualified graduate student candidates to UVa, the ad-hoc committee supports a trial implementation of this concept. All interested researchers in the department are strongly urged to seek external funding for such incentives along the lines of the IGERT program. However, such sources of external funds are few and may be hard to obtain. Members of the ad-hoc committee have strongly felt that it is critical to maintain an even playing field within the department in this respect. To this end, we have developed a method which would allow the use of more readily available research funds for this purpose, through additional research assistantships within the framework of PHYS-593: “Independent Study”. Current labor regulations allow us in principle to offer this additional support to all US applicants (citizens and residents), as well as to the foreign fellowship recipients. It would not be open to foreign applicants who are being offered teaching assistantships. We have deemed this to be compatible with our goal of attracting the best candidates, particularly those from the US.

Recommendation:

The department will offer “area incentives” in the form of additional research assistantships to selected qualified applicants for admission to our graduate program. This additional support will be offered for the student’s first academic year (nine months), with the possibility of renewal for the second academic year. The incentives will be awarded only to those candidates whose admission has been recommended by the Graduate Admissions Committee and who express an explicit interest in a particular field of physics in their application file. The recipient will be required to enroll in PHYS-593: “Independent Study” with the advisor offering the incentive, for the duration of the support. In addition, it is presumed that the student will sign up for PHYS 997/999 with the advisor during the summer(s).

The additional amount of support will range between 5% and 15% above the standard fellowship/assistantship, and will be set annually by the department faculty.

The area incentives will be for:

- atomic physics,
- condensed matter physics,
- high energy physics,
- nuclear physics,
- theoretical physics,

and/or combinations thereof, as well as for other fields deemed appropriate.

This program will be offered on a trial basis for three years, during which time its effectiveness will be closely monitored. At the end of three years the department faculty will decide on the continuation or termination of the program.

Of particular importance is the procedure for selecting the candidates to whom the offers will be made. All the candidates' files will be made available to the faculty interested in offering an incentive in a timely manner. Individual faculty members, or groups of faculty, will submit the names of potential incentive candidates for the area of their study to the departmental Graduate Admissions Committee. The latter will meet and draw up an overall list. Any conflicts in cases where faculty from different fields are interested in the same student, will be resolved by the Committee working with said faculty, to mutual satisfaction. The departmental Graduate Admissions Committee will set the timetable for all of the above actions, allowing adequate time for the process.

The incentive offer will be made in an official letter co-signed by the department Chair and the Chair of the Admissions Committee, preferably in the same letter offering the candidate admission to the PhD program in Physics.

The above unanimous recommendations are being made in the hope that the proposed program may result in some admissions of highly qualified candidates into our graduate program, who would otherwise go elsewhere.