From the desk of Vicky Prince

Release of the first comprehensive review of UChicago Doctoral Education in 37 years

About a year ago, I attended a meeting with Provost Daniel Diermeier to learn the charge of the “Committee on Graduate Education” or CGE. Apart from my good colleague and fellow myCHOICE PI Erin Adams, all the faculty and student members from across the University who had agreed to serve on CGE were complete strangers to me. Nearly a year later, after numerous meetings, multiple late night and early morning email exchanges, and as our comprehensive report is at last released (here), the members of this group have come to feel like old and dear friends.

At the beginning of CGE’s work I was just one of eight faculty members in a Committee chaired by Executive Provost Nirenberg, but seven months later, when it became clear that Nirenberg would be stepping down from CGE to focus on his role as Dean of the Divinity School, I was already faculty co-chair. With the support of CGE membership I retained that role, and together with student co-chair Jordan Johansen of the Classics Department fell into an unexpected leadership role. The change in leadership admittedly slowed CGE’s work down, with the group as a whole needing to settle into its new configuration. Indeed, it soon became clear that our original January deadline was not feasible, and in the end, we needed every single day of the Winter Quarter extension granted by the Provost to put our report together.

In keeping with its eleven-month gestation period, CGE’s report is a big one. But doctoral education is both important and complex, so it would be hard to do it justice—especially across the entire range of UChicago’s divisions and schools—in a shorter document. Despite its length, I very much hope that you all, whether faculty, trainee, or administrator, will take some time to read the report; or at least those chapters that have special relevance to you.

What did we learn? On a personal level I already knew that UChicago students were smart, thoughtful, and hard-working, but I soon learned that they were also invaluable equal participants in the work of CGE. In retrospect, a committee on graduate education that lacked graduate student representation would seem odd indeed. Building on CGE’s own experience, one of our first recommendations is that all units think hard about how and where graduate student representation can best be included moving forward.

I also learned that while doctoral education may differ substantially in style across the different disciplines, good mentorship is valued everywhere. Through the student and faculty surveys CGE conducted, we learned that there is something of a disconnect between faculty members’ understanding that they are providing a great deal of mentorship, and students’ understanding that mentorship is often, unfortunately, lacking. However, on a brighter note, many faculty indicated a willingness to undergo training in how to mentor, and I am already collaborating with BSD Dean for Faculty Affairs Ruth Anne Eatock to develop new programming to assist with this goal.

In CGE’s focus group conversations with PhD students from different units, professional and career development were, unsurprisingly, a
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major topic of conversation. As most students are already well aware, CGE’s analysis of national data confirmed that tenure-track positions are becoming increasingly rare across all the disciplines. However, our UChicagoBiosciences students can be confident that there is a robust job market for PhDs in biological sciences, across a wide range of careers that make good use of their education. (A summary of the diverse career outcomes of UChicagoBiosciences graduates over the past 15 years is available here.) Our students and postdocs are also fortunate that the myCHOICE program is available to assist them in learning about and preparing for careers both within and beyond academia. Another of CGE’s recommendations is that all the divisions and schools provide similar domain-specific professional development.

In my research for CGE I learned a new term: "academic steward", coined by the Carnegie Foundation’s Essays on the Doctorate.[1] Academic stewards include tenure-track faculty at institutions like our own, but also include the many other PhDs who support research and scholarly endeavors: expert directors of core facilities, educators, museum curators, program officers at federal agencies, journal editors, book publishers, developers of research instruments & technologies, and the list goes on. Perhaps most importantly, data from the Survey of Earned Doctorates show that over 90% of PhDs in SEH fields (sciences, engineering and health) are satisfied with their careers, whether or not those careers are in academic institutions[2]. If we can concur that the role of PhD education is to prepare academic stewards—as do NIH Training Grant review criteria, which request data on both “research-intensive” and “research-related” career outcomes—the odds of our PhD graduates being ‘successful’ increase dramatically.

The work of CGE was wide-ranging, and I can’t even begin to touch on all of it here; although you will only need to read Chapter One to learn about some of our broadest recommendations, such as a call for the establishment of a new Graduate Student Center. However, one final topic that I want to mention here is the CGE report’s concluding recommendation: that more attention be paid both centrally and locally to wellness activities.

Related to this, in last quarter’s newsletter (here) I wrote about the mental health crisis in graduate education. To assist our UChicagoBiosciences community in developing positive local approaches towards wellness, well-being, and the general support of students, OGPA and myCHOICE will be hosting Dr. Sharon Milgram from NIH’s intramural program on May 17th. Dr. Milgram, an inspiring speaker who also gives very practical advice, will speak on “Promoting student resilience and mental health” to faculty at 11:30pm on May 17th in BSLC 205, and on “Becoming a resilient scientist” to students and postdocs at 3pm in KCBD. I hope that many of you will be able to join us at her talks.

To conclude, despite all the hard work involved, I will genuinely miss the regular meetings of CGE, and I will try hard to find valid excuses to spend time with my new friends and colleagues from our University’s other divisions and schools. Most importantly, I hope that the efforts the student and faculty members of CGE put into the report will have a positive impact on our institution’s doctoral education practices going forward.

Vicky


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NIGMS T32 application update

NIGMS hosted a NRSA T32 webinar on March 18 describing their new application expectations. For

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Sleep well
Sleep: a restorative necessity in a busy fast moving world. Graduate school is no different and at times may cause stress that can affect one’s sleep. To learn more about healthy sleep habits as life gets busier, it may seem as though getting less sleep will allow for more time in a day to get things done. However, UChicago’s Health Services has some useful information that explains how less sleep, whether it’s intentional or not, can cause a number of detrimental side effects. These helpful resources give tips and information on how to get a better night sleep, while the Self-Care website explains how caring for oneself matters. Health services also provides support through the Refresh Sleep group, which gives students guided instruction to create healthy sleep habits. Join now and learn how sleeping can prevent these side effects and lead to success. For more healthy habits see how self-care does not have to be time consuming.

funding opportunities
The Biological Sciences Division Office of Graduate and Postdoctoral Affairs presents: the Steiner awards and the O’Brien-Hasten awards – funding for travel for research.

These two competitive awards give money to students to support their research. While there are other awards that support students to travel to annual scientific meetings these particular awards are only intended to be used in the ways listed below.

A closer look at the awards: The Steiner awards are a maximum of $1500 and go to students who are travelling to participate in a workshop, short course, or for off-site collaborations.

The O’Brien-Hasten awards go to students that are going to MBL for: an advanced research training course, short-term research, or research collaboration with MBL researchers.

Requirements: 2019 Steiner awards: Look for an email coming soon

2019 O’Brien-Hasten: Look for the email sent on Wednesday February 27, 2019 to the bsdgradstudents list

GM programs with five-year project periods ending within the next year or two with the anticipation of submitting a new application, careful review of the Webinar and Slide Deck are strongly encouraged in advance. PIs are also strongly urged to speak with their appropriate program officer prior to applying.

NIGMS is no longer accepting competing renewals; all GM applications must be written as new applications. The focus area for the application must be specifically identified. Applications are expected to focus on the training environment and outcomes. Multiple PIs are strongly encouraged and if there will be a transition to a new PI, or if a Co-PI will be added, the transition plan must be described. Trainer biosketch personal statements must address the trainer’s mentoring environment, record, career development and trainee timelines. There must be a holistic approach to trainee recruitment, diversity, rigor and transparency, and the responsible and safe conduct of research. These must be a theme throughout the entire training experience and be reflected throughout the application. Both required and allowable appendices are now part of the application.
Keystone symposia - diversity in life science programs

On March 26, Irelene R. Ricks, PhD, Director of Diversity, Life Sciences with the Keystone Symposia on Molecular and Cellular Biology, was on campus to speak with graduate students, postdoctoral researchers and early-career scientists about a series of diversity initiatives in the Life Sciences offered by Keystone Symposia.

The focus of Keystone Symposia’s diversity initiatives is on scientists, students, graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, and new investigators who are US citizens or permanent residents and members of underrepresented groups in the life sciences. The Keystone Symposia, and its staff of approximately 40 employees, are firmly committed to a robust diversity program and strategy led by Dr. Ricks and guided by a Diversity Advisory Committee consisting of leading scientists, and science policymakers, from around the US with strong interest an involvement in diversity. Keystone Symposia’s

B$D funding in general
The stipend rate for 2019-20 will be $32,372 beginning Summer Quarter 2019. This will be $8,093 per quarter.

Graduate students are supported by a variety of funding sources during training and these sources will pay on one of two schedules. Stipends distributed on the quarterly schedule are available at the beginning of the quarter. Stipends distributed on the monthly schedule are available at the end of the month. Note that the transition to the monthly schedule will mean stretching that last quarterly stipend payment an additional month (ex. the Summer Quarter stipend is paid in June but the first monthly Autumn Quarter stipend payment is paid on October 31).

In general, funding will follow this pattern:
**Year 1:** distributed on the quarterly schedule; lump sum stipend check
**Year 2:** International students: distributed on the monthly schedule, funding provided by advisor funds; stipend paid at the end of the month. Individual circumstances may vary depending on the program. Domestic students: distributed on the quarterly schedule from training grant.

Last year when GM introduced these upcoming changes to the application process, MSTP programs were excluded from the changes. That is no longer the case and all MSTP applications must now also adhere to the new application rules.

GM allows for the institutional letter of support to be up to 10 pages in length and must be a robust description of the institutional commitment and program strengths. In the BSD, this letter has traditionally come from the dean. OGPA will be working with the dean’s office to include pertinent content to ensure a strong letter will be provided.

Please feel free to contact the OGPA Training Grant office with any concerns you may have as you navigate through the application process.

BSD career advancement for postdocs (CAP) travel award
Effective July 1, 2018, the BSD Postdoc Affairs Office instituted a new postdoc professional development fee: $100 per postdoc per year, paid by the sponsoring lab at the time of appointment or reappointment, in order to supplement our budget and enhance professional and career development offerings for postdocs in the BSD. Find out exactly how these funds are spent:
conference environment fosters connectivity and the free exchange of ideas among all participants by minimizing social barriers such as stage of career, institutional affiliation, nationality, gender and race or ethnicity. Overall, diversity and connectivity among conference participants will lead to new directions for research, better research and new professional relationships that will extend well beyond the meeting setting.

Some highlights: The Underrepresented Trainee Scholarships offer up to $1,200 to help defray the cost of attending a Keystone conference.

Keystone Symposia Fellows Program, a unique diversity-centered, research-driven program centered on educating early-career scientists in understanding how the research agenda is set, how to engage in high-level discourse on research topics and how to broaden perspectives in life science research.

Early-Career Investigator Travel Award (ECITA) offers a limited number of travel awards to early-career underrepresented investigators at the Assistant Professor, or equivalent industry scientist level, to attend Keystone Symposia meetings.

Please peruse the above links and consider participating in the various Keystone Symposia’s Diversity in Life Science Programs, or share with someone you know who support or individual fellowship; lump sum stipend check. Some students will receive funding from advisor funds, in which case the stipend is paid at the end of month.

Year 3: similar to year 2
Year 4 - completion: the vast majority of students will have transitioned to funding provided by advisor funds with the stipend paid at the end of the month. The funding model for some programs requires students to remain on a quarterly schedule so individual circumstances may vary depending on the program.

With the new increase in funds, members of the PDA formed a Budget Committee and solicited requests for suggestions on how the new funds should be allocated. As there have traditionally been very few opportunities for funding supplements for conference travel available to postdocs, the overwhelming favorite request was for travel awards for attendance at conferences. To address this need, the PDA Budget Committee created The UChicago BSD CAP (Career Advancement for Postdocs) Award. Awards of up to $500 for attendance at scientific meetings and up to $1000 for professional development meetings will be given, and are meant to serve as supplements to costs related to attending these meetings. This year, we are offering three cycles of the award, with application deadlines of January 25, April 1, and June 14, 2019. We awarded six awards for attendance at scientific meetings and one award for attendance at a professional development meeting the first award cycle, which equated to a 50% application success rate. We are hoping to fund ~50% of submitted applications each cycle. We also partnered with the Chicago Center for Teaching to offer a full scholarship to attend the HHMI Summer Institute on Scientific Teaching at UC San Diego in June. Four postdocs were selected to receive the scholarship through a competitive application process.

BSD student fellowships and accomplishments

New student fellowships are updated regularly on our website. Students who have been recognized for excellence at national meetings are announced on the Accomplishments page.

New alumni

The Biological Sciences Division conferred the PhD on...
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may be interested. This is a great opportunity to expand your knowledge base and networking circle.

10 students at the end of Winter Quarter, March 15, 2019. There were 8 students who received the MS degree. We are very proud of our new graduates.

New BSD postdoc website

This winter, the BSD Postdoc Affairs Office unveiled a brand-new BSD Postdoc Association (PDA) website! This new website contains streamlined information about the PDA, news and upcoming events, and updated resources for postdocs, including career and professional development resources and policies and benefits. Be sure to have a look at the new site.

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