

Iowa grad students, colleges grapple with financial concerns

With enrollment down, schools reevaluating doctorate programs



University of Iowa Graduate student Corrine Teed assists undergraduate art student Xin Xu in Teed's printmaking class in the Studio Arts Building in Iowa City on Wednesday, October 1, 2014. (Adam Wesley/The Gazette)

By **Vanessa Miller**, The Gazette

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IOWA CITY — Eight months from now, Melissa Zimdars will get to add three hard-earned letters to the end of her name — Ph.D. But those letters didn't come cheap.

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date and graduate

work — the University of Iowa doctoral student will have racked up about \$60,000 in debt.

“And I don’t have kids,” Zimdars, 29, of Iowa City, said. “I don’t know how people with children do it.

“Actually, I do. A lot of them go to the food pantry.”

Zimdars, and many like her, said it’s becoming increasingly difficult for graduate students to make ends meet. They said they are working harder for the universities, receiving low wages, paying higher out-of-pocket fees, and facing a more uncertain job market once they do graduate — often with significant debt.

“What Iowa as a state needs to do is to go back to funding universities instead of passing off operating costs onto students through things like fees, which have gone up a crazy amount,” Zimdars said. “It’s in the state’s interest and the citizens’ interest to have high-quality and globally recognized universities.

“But if you’re not willing to fund them, that puts the financial burden on the students.”

The UI’s Campaign to Organize Graduate Students, or COGS, is planning an anti-debt rally during the Oct. 22 and 23 Board of Regents meeting on the UI campus. The idea, according to COGS leaders, is to unify students, faculty and adjunct professors who are affected by mounting debt and declining state support.

University officials counter that scholarship and tuition assistance programs for graduate students are more available today than decades ago — Iowa sits near the top of the pack of comparative schools when it comes to compensation for teaching and research assistants.

But student representatives say work demands, paired with rising fees and uncertain job prospects, are keeping some prospective students from applying and enrolling. The University of Iowa has seen declining graduate student enrollment of late — a shift that hit the Graduate College’s overall and financial aid budget this year.

And graduate college officials and students are in agreement that a decline in state funding is a big part of the problem.

UI Graduate College leaders said flagging state support, a new way of funding Iowa’s public universities that could take millions from UI, dropping enrollment, and changes in the economy could make sustaining the same number of high-quality graduate programs difficult.

“I think institutions will have to start thinking about the number of doctoral research programs we have and the size of those programs and how many students they have,” said John Keller, associate provost for graduate education and dean of the UI Graduate College. “You can’t sustain the number of programs we have and keep up the quality with a reduced budget.”

‘RETHINKING THE PH.D.’

This fall, the UI Graduate College enrolled 4,610 students — 133 students fewer than last year, 421 fewer than in 2012, and 713 fewer than in 2009. The decrease resulted in a “substantial” 8 percent hit to the college’s financial aid budget this year.

With those drops, plus significant reductions in state support for higher education since the 1990s and 2000s, and a new Board of Regents funding model that threatens to further slash the UI’s cut of state appropriations, Keller said the Graduate College is weighing its options.

State appropriations made up 77.4 percent of university revenues in 1981, and it has been declining steadily ever since. It dropped to 63.7 percent of university revenues in 2001, and for the 2014 budget year state appropriations made up 35 percent of university revenues.

“This is getting us rethinking how we use our resources as best as possible to support students,” Keller said. “You are going to have to revisit programs and think about alliances.”

The university might consider coalescing smaller programs or re-envisioning them and the resources they need, according to Keller.

“I think we’re going to be faced with a lot of that coming up in the next five to eight years,” he said.

He cited a number of reasons for shifting enrollments, including financial concerns, fewer available programs, and a change in academic hiring.

“People are rethinking the Ph.D. in terms of what it could mean for their careers,” Keller said.

University tenure track positions are on the decline, and faculty jobs aren’t going to doctorate holders as often.

“People are wondering about the use of a Ph.D. for their career,” Keller said. “We are trying to emphasize that you can use a Ph.D. in the broad sense of employment options.”

The number of UI students seeking master’s degrees also is on the decline — 1,730 are enrolled this fall compared to 2,211 in 2009. Some programs are seeing more fluctuations than others, Keller said.

“People are coming out of their undergrad experience with some debt, and they don’t want to incur more,” he said. “They are trying to get a job, and they don’t want to take on any more debt.”

But fewer students pursuing a graduate education not only could affect their career aspirations and earning potential, it could affect the state socially and economically, according to Keller.

“Our doctors and dentists and lawyers and physical therapists ... go out and work in the public,” Keller said. “It is these future professionals that drive the economy and the state in every aspect, and I don’t want to lose sight of that. “

STILL ‘A GREAT INVESTMENT’

Unlike the UI Graduate College, Iowa State University’s Graduate College has seen enrollment increases of late. This fall, in fact, the campus set a record with 4,950 total graduate students — up 240 students over last fall.

The makeup of that graduate-student total, however, looks different from years past, according to William Graves, associate dean of the ISU Graduate College. It is more diverse in many ways.

“My sense is that we have more adult students and more students who have been in the work force and are coming back later in life for a graduate degree,” Graves said. “We have more students with children, which introduces new demands financially.”

About 40 percent of ISU graduate students who are U.S. citizens take out a loan in a given semester. Master’s students on average have a debt of around \$25,000 after two years, while Ph.D. students on average have a debt of about \$32,000 after five years, according to Graves.

Even though Iowa’s public universities offer various levels and types of graduate assistantships — including half-, quarter- and three-quarter-time assistantships that both pay and come with tuition assistance — Graves said students still accrue debt.

“It seems like there might be a case to be made for the idea that students have more reason to be concerned now than 20 years ago,” he said.

But, Graves said, even considering financial concerns, a master’s or doctoral degree still “is a great investment.”

“Students who complete a graduate degree over the course of their career end up having it easily paid for in a short period of time with the increased salary they can achieve on the job market,” he said.

FIGHTING OVER ‘CRUMBS’

Some graduate students are not so sure.

“In terms of outcomes and in terms of the job market after graduation, if we are not worse off today, we are in a greater period of uncertainty,” said Ben Gillig, a UI doctoral student studying education policy and president of the UI graduate and professional student body.

New doctoral degree graduates used to land tenure-track positions at universities right out of school, and Gillig said that’s “almost unheard of today.”

“Graduate students are having to grapple with a lot more uncertainty about their futures than they did decades ago,” Gillig said.

And, he said, that is tied to the “big, broad changes in higher education,” including how universities are funded in Iowa. Some critics of the Board of Regents new funding model, including several regents, have raised concerns about how the new enrollment and performance metrics will address the higher cost to provide graduate education.

Jeannette Gabriel, a UI graduate student and president of the university’s Campaign to Organize Graduate Students, said that as much as they’d like the university to increase graduate pay and assistance and decrease fees, the discussion needs to be focused on the state.

“There is this acceptance to fight over crumbs instead of taking on the larger issue, which is that the state has the money and is making the political choice to defund public education,” Gabriel said.

“It doesn’t help us to scramble over the crumbs that are left behind. That only will destroy public education in Iowa.”

By the numbers

The University of Iowa Graduate College enrolled:

- 4,610 students this year
- 4,743 in 2013
- 5,031 in 2012
- 5,323 in 2009

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