

**The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center UTHealth
Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences**

Executive Committee Report

Dr. Jeffrey Frost, Chair

Meeting on January 16, 2020

I. Approval of Minutes from October 17, 2019 Meeting

Minutes were approved as written with one minor correction to the student travel awards for first year students.

II. GSA Report

Wayne Jiang reported:

- The GSA created a survey to gather student opinions regarding the 2GB email storage limit on UTHealth email. The survey has been sent to students via email and the Essential. The survey will close in two weeks. Data from the survey will be provided at the next Executive Committee meeting.
 - Dr. Michael Lorenz is the faculty representative for IT at the McGovern Medical School. He would be willing to bring this issue up at the next IT meeting.
 - Dr. Michael Blackburn informed the Committee that he has already begun working on this with UTHealth IT, however, it hasn't been as simple as providing unlimited storage. He would like to work with the GSA on how to address this issue.

III. GSBS MD Anderson On-Boarding Issues

Marty Pagel reported:

- Patricia Cruz Bruesch and Zera Harden have been working on reducing redundancies as it relates to GSBS GRA appointments and reappointments at MD Anderson.
- The DISCOVER system (appointment and reappointment system used by Research Trainee Programs (RTP) at MD Anderson) isn't the most user friendly. RTP is looking into ways to either fix or replace this system.
- Effective February 1st reappointments within the same lab will no longer be required for GSBS GRAs. Email communication will be sent out to all MD Anderson Departments soon.
- Criminal Background Checks (CBC) are currently required when GSBS GRA's transition from without compensation to a paid GRA. RTP and Pat are working on a plan so that students are not required to have another CBC completed, which would reduce administrative burden and costs to the institution.
- There is a lot of opportunity to affect change and the GSBS would like to thank both Pat and Zera on working out solutions to these problems.

IV. Admissions & Visitation Update

Eric Swindell reported:

- Originally, there was going to be four Admissions Committee meetings with another optional fifth meeting, however, we ended up needing to have six meetings total to review all PhD applications.
- This year we had an additional 16% increase in complete applications which was a total of 837. Of the 837, 355 were domestic and 482 were international applicants. Last year there was a 27% increase.
- There were more international applications last year (34%), but this year the increase is driven more by domestic applications (30%) received.
- The deadline to submit PhD applications was December 1st, which was earlier than prior years (January 4th).
- The last Admissions Committee meeting will be next Tuesday, January 21st and the first Visitation starts tomorrow.
- The Visitation dates for this year are:
 - January 17th
 - January 31st
 - February 14th

- February 28th
- Roughly 30 applicants attend each Visitation weekend.
- 120 interview invitations have been sent, 100 have accepted. Twelve of the 100 will be Skype interviews. Eighteen are still outstanding and two declined our offer to come interview.
- Applicants are asked who they would like to meet with and we try to have them interview with as many as possible.
- If you receive an email from Karen Weinberg requesting to interview an applicant, please respond as quickly as you can.
- The evaluations from interviews are really helpful in making decisions on who to extend offers of admissions.
- Dr. van Hoof, current chair of the Admissions Committee stated that both the quantity and quality has gone up and that makes it very difficult to decide who should be invited to interview.

V. MS Student Support

Eric Swindell reported:

- Based on the recent MS program review, faculty and students have confusion over the type and level of support that can be provided to MS students.
- To begin to address these concerns, we have done some research into how our current MS students, which includes the Medical Physics SMS students and Biomedical Science MS students, are funded.
- Currently, 66% hold a Graduate Research Assistantship (GRA), 18% do not hold a GRA, but hold an employee position at either MD Anderson or UTHealth, and 16% do not hold a position.
- Of the students that do hold a GRA, the funding level varies from \$15,000 - \$32,000. However, a majority are funded at \$32,000.
- Out of the nine students that do not have funding, a couple that have their own funding (Fulbright, for example) and some wanted to work in a specific lab. Finally, there are some new MS students that haven't finalized the lab they were going to join yet, so it's highly possible the number of students that are funded will go up.
- Some MS students find an advisor willing to support them during the summer, but there are some that wait to find an advisor until the Fall.
- The GSBS would like to propose a set level of support for MS students.
- After some investigation into other biomedical science MS programs, very few provide a guaranteed stipend level to their MS students.
- Discussion:
 - It's possible that faculty may opt out of taking an MS student into their lab if there is a set stipend level.
 - Will MS students be eligible to complete rotations?
 - Some MS students complete mini rotations that are 3-5 weeks long.
 - The MS student would fund themselves during any rotations until they officially join a lab.
 - Unfortunately at this time, GSBS is unable to fund the first semester of all MS students.
 - MS students are not required to take the Core Course. The courses that MS students are required to take depends on the Program they affiliate. However, all MS students are required to have 12 credit hours of graded course work and 36 total credit hours to graduate.
 - Most Committee members were supportive of having a standard, but there were some concerns of having the stipend level the same as a PhD student. It was suggested to have a tighter range based on the cost of attendance set by the Registrar's Office.
 - Allow students to waive the GRA
- Dr. Swindell will put together a proposal with these suggestions and comments.

VI. Review of Program Annual Progress Reports

Brenda Gaughan reported:

- In the past, major Program reviews were completed every seven years. Now, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating requires them to be done every ten years.
- Program Annual Progress reports will be submitted by Programs every year, which will now consist of each Program summarizing their strengths, challenges and goals; so far, the Program Directors like the new format.
- In the packet of materials, you will find each Program's report. If you have any comments or would like to commend a Program, please let us know – no vote is necessary.
- The Therapeutics and Pharmacology Program is struggling to recruit students and so has requested to change its name back to Experimental Therapeutics.
- Experience at GSBS has shown that the name of a Program does not matter that much in terms of size and popularity.
- It was also noted that many current applicants choose Therapeutics and/or Pharmacology as an area of interest.
- It was requested that we look at the data on the type of research interests the applicants list when they apply and which Program they end up joining.

VII. Deans' Report

Deans Barton and Blackburn reported:

- [18 Characteristics of Texas Public Doctoral Programs](#)
 - This report has a lot of data: average time to degree, ethnicity, gender (as declared), student publication information, etc.
 - This report should be reviewed in more detail at the Program Director's meeting.
 - It was suggested to add obtaining an ORCID and eRA Commons ID to the student milestone's list.
- Parental Accommodation Leave
 - Patricia Cruz Bruesch has put a lot of effort into this drafted policy that take into account best practices around the country.
 - Currently, NIH provides up to 8 weeks on fellowships and training grants. NSF doesn't have a policy, but if we do then they will accept it.
 - A few years back, Drs. Barton and Blackburn brought this up at a committee with other Deans from the UT System and unfortunately this group did not want to give any attention to the issue and would rather handle it on a case by case basis.
 - Currently, UTHealth based students are not covered under any policy, nor accrue vacation or sick leave, but MD Anderson does have a policy in place and they do receive vacation and sick time so equity is an issue between our students.
 - Discussion:
 - It was recommended to change the max from eight weeks to twelve weeks and take this as an opportunity to lead in this area of student health and well-being.
 - Allow for the student to take leave prior to as well as after the birth or adoption to allow for more flexibility.
 - The spirit of being on leave is that the student should not be contacted, but there are circumstances this may not be possible.
 - The majority of the Committee agreed that having a policy in place that covers all our students is reasonable.
 - Once revisions have been made and both MD Anderson and UTHealth's Legal departments have approved the policy, it will be discussed at a future Faculty Meeting.
- IDP Update
 - Dr. Shadding's team plans to implement some changes to the IDP process, as listed below:
 - Create a supplement to myIDP that facilitates stage-specific scientific and career-related training goal-setting that is specific to GSBS PhD students and incorporates required academic milestones. The supplement would also provide a platform for students and mentors to have a focused discussion on training goals for the upcoming year.
 - Encourage GSBS students to engage more deeply in their annual IDP by implementing IDP

touchpoints. For example, requiring advising by the Career Development Office and/or attendance to an IDP workshop.

- Create an IDP process for GSBS that allows student participation to be tracked and measured.

VIII. New Business

- GSA President, Wayne Jiang, will make a trip to Science Park to meet with the GSBS students regarding any questions or concerns they have regarding the closure of the Science Park campus.

IX. Old Business

No old business was discussed.

Meeting on March 26, 2020

- I. Approval of Minutes from January 16, 2020 Meeting
Minutes were approved as written.

II. GSA Report

Wayne Jiang reported:

- The GSA created a survey to gather student opinions regarding the 2GB email storage limit on UTHHealth email.
- Dr. Blackburn advocated in the meantime and was able to increase the storage space to 4GB instead of 2GB.
- The survey was eight questions long and related to the storage space issue of GSBS students' UTH email accounts.
- 147 students responded to the survey.
- Question 2: Has your UTHHealth email account ever exceeded the 2GB storage limit?
 - First year: 7 yes; 4 no; 3 not sure
 - UTHHealth: 40 yes; 7 no; 0 not sure
 - MD Anderson: 55 yes; 20 no; 11 not sure
- Question 3: How often do you exceed the storage limit on your UTHHealth email?
 - 1-2 times a year = 38
 - Once a month = 39
 - Once a week = 14
 - Over once a week = 13
 - Not sure = 43
- Questions 4: How much time do you spend to clear your UTHHealth email space when your account research 2GB limit?
 - Less than 5 minutes = less than 5%
 - 5-10 minutes = 22%
 - 10-30 minutes = 27%
 - Over 30 minutes = 24%
 - Not sure = 22%
- Question 7: Does the 2GB storage limit affect your research productivity? If so, how?
 - Overall theme was that students are frustrated with the limited space and the need to save important communication records.
- The GSA plans to provide students with tips for better storage space management.
 - Initially, GSBS IT was going to talk at the GSA Spring Town Hall, but unfortunately, we had to cancel due to the COVID-19. At this point, we won't be rescheduling.
 - At UTHHealth the following options are available for additional storage:
 - UTH-Share, which is Google-based and provides unlimited storage.
 - Microsoft Office 365 OneDrive provides 100GB with UTHHealth credentials

- UHealth recipient can directly edit the OneDrive shared file in an email attachment without even downloading the file
- At MD Anderson the following options are available:
 - All resources available above to UHealth students
 - Microsoft Office 365 OneDrive provides 1024 GB/1TB with MD Anderson credentials
 - Box.com with MD Anderson credentials provides unlimited space with 15GB file size limit
- With all the tools listed above, students should allow students to not exceed limits as often.
- Thank you to both IT and Dr. Blackburn for helping address this concern.
- Dr. Blackburn mentioned that he is working with UHealth IT on additional resources and storage limits should increase again. A rough estimate of the increase would be 100GB, but this won't happen until the next budget cycle in the Summer.
- The McGovern teaching award is currently being voted on and we should have a winner soon and submitted to the President's Office by their deadline.
- Due to COVID-19, all scheduled GSA events have been cancelled.

III. Admissions & Visitation Update

Eric Swindell reported:

- PhD Interview information:
 - 166 total offers
 - 156 applicants accepted
 - 107 female and 59 male
 - 101 domestic and 65 international
 - 34 URM's
 - 20% of the total
 - 34% of domestic
 - 135 in-person interviews and 21 Skype
- PhD Admissions offer information:
 - 133 offers of admissions
 - 87 female and 46 male
 - 80 domestic and 53 international
 - 29 URM's
 - 22% of total
 - 36% of domestic
 - 34 have accepted
 - 21 declined
 - 78 offers outstanding
 - April 15th is deadline for students to accept and most of these offers were given prior to the stay-at-home order.
- Genetic Counseling Visitation/Admissions information
 - Received 263 applications and will interview 45.
 - Only one Visitation was completed prior to the stay-at-home order going into effect.
 - Modifications and a lot of creativity were made to complete the remaining Visitations online.
 - Rankings are due on April 14th

IV. COVID-19 Discussion

Deans Barton and Blackburn reported:

- MD Anderson made the call to shut down research labs last Sunday. All equipment had to be turned off and labs were safety sealed.
- GSBS classrooms and administrative offices were also closed so any Spring 2020 courses were either switched to an online format or cancelled.

- UTHealth has implemented a shift model with essential personnel so that labs could continue research. In order for Graduate students to in the lab an exception request must be filed to ensure that all parties feel comfortable and safe going to lab. These are being handled on a case by case basis.
- After Hurricane Harvey, the GSBS Deans Office administration reached out to all our students to ensure everyone was safe and if they needed anything. We learned a lot from this process and have decided to reach out to all our student again. We are in the process of dividing up the list. We will ask a set of questions and allow them to ask any questions they may have.
- If anyone has a question or concern during this time and do not know whom to ask please use the email Talk2GSBS@uth.tmc.edu.
- The timeline on getting back to work is unknown at this time, but there are a set of parameters that must be met before returning to work. Reopening will likely be different for MD Anderson and UTHealth.
- If someone in your lab gets sick the best course of action to take is to inform Employee Health to address next steps.
- The GSBS has created an [alerts page](#) on our website to address questions and concerns.
- The Essential has been modified and is primarily is geared towards COVID-19 updates and resources available.
- It was suggested that at the Medical School to keep research and clinical operations separate to limit exposure or to restrict entry points into clinical areas.
- How long is the research shutdown sustainable for GSBS?
 - The GSBS created a list of activities that students can work on while not in the lab. Some examples are:
 - Participate in virtual lab meetings and journal clubs
 - Write a proposal
 - Apply for the Spring general application for scholarships/fellowships
 - Students should keep a daily log of what they are accomplishing
 - Faculty should also track expenditures and how the shutdown impacted their ability to complete research.
 - Ms. Bruesch will ensure there is extra emergency funding in the FY21 budget.
- Academic Affairs
 - Current first-year students will be allowed to extend their third tutorial and allow for a fourth rotation as needed.
 - We understand that this process already creates a lot of anxiety and stress and with the pandemic that has exponentially increased.
 - We have extended time for completing milestones, but will continue to discuss this as the shutdown goes on.
 - UT Counseling is still seeing students during this time.
 - Dr. Shadding's group will have several sessions that will focus on fear and anxiety along with discussions about switching from the lab to working remotely and back again. These sessions will begin in April.
- Student feedback

Wayne Jiang reported:

 - The GSA conducted a brief anonymous survey to collect concerns regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - All responses have been sent to the Deans without editing and have been address already through the alerts page or will be addressed at another meeting.
 - The GSA worked with GSBS to put Student Health Services information on the alerts page.
 - Thank you all for your support you provide to all students!
 - The GSA wants to help in any way possible, please reach out to us if you need our help.

V. Deans' Report

Deans Barton and Blackburn reported:

- Commencement 2020 has been canceled, however, we will do a combined 2020/2021 Commencement next year.

VI. New Business

No new business was discussed.

VII. Old Business

No old business was discussed.

Meeting on June 18, 2020

- I. Approval of Minutes from March 26, 2020 Meeting
Minutes were approved as written.

II. GSA Report

Wayne Jiang reported:

- There were no new items to report.

III. Admissions & Orientation Update

Eric Swindell reported:

- The incoming class consists of 54 PhD, 7 MD/PhD, 22 Biomedical Sciences MS, 1 Medical Physics SMS, and 10 Genetic Counseling SMS students for a total entering class of 94 students.
- There are 11 PhD and 4 Biomedical Science MS international students living abroad that may face difficulty receiving a visa stamp. These students may defer entry into their degree program for up to 1 year.
- There are an additional 5 students that are currently in the United States on the J-1 Research visas and will need to change their status. We are working with OIA on options for these entering students in the interim period.
- Orientation will be conducted online this year. Some of the modules will be able to be completed prior to Orientation week while others will be a live presentation. The Presidents Research Scholarship Award winners will still present during Orientation. Program related sessions will be 100% online as well and we are working with them on directly.

IV. Deans' Report

Dean Blackburn reported:

- Thanks to everyone, the GSA, our students, faculty, and staff for being so flexible and stepping up during this time. It's been a challenging three months and it's been wonderful working with you on all this.
- Graduate Student Research Day typically falls in June, but because of the pandemic we have pivoted the format and moved to an abbreviated online version that only included the elevator speech competition. The students that participated did great and almost 300 people participated in the event. It was an extraordinary event.
- Both Deans continue to reach out to friends and are continuing to build relationships and work towards our philanthropy goals. We recently did secure a one million dollar donation from a supporter of GSBS.
- The UHealth budget took a hit as a whole and because of that the institution has asked faculty and staff to address the vacation liability by voluntarily taking a vacation day once a week, however, central administration has been furloughed for one day each week.
- Associate Dean, Pat Bruesch is finalizing the FY21 budget and will submit that soon. The amount of money Programs receive per capita of students in the Program will be reduced for next year. The Program Directors will receive their budgets soon so they can begin to plan for next year.
- The GSBS leadership currently meet three times per week to discuss any issues so that a plan can be made to communicate this information to specific groups and/or as a school as a whole.
- Our international students are facing some challenging times right now, but we are working closely with the Office of International Affairs and they are helping us understand the Proclamation and how it affects are

current and incoming students. We are trying our best to help our international students with the information we have and we will continue to advocate for our students.

- Everyone is impacted by COVID and we all need to be as flexible as possible.

V. COVID-19 Subcommittee Recommendations and Responses

COVID-19 Subcommittee members reported:

- At the Deans request, Drs. Joya Chandra and Jeffrey Frost co-chaired the COVID-19 Subcommittee.
- The Subcommittee mainly consisted of faculty on the Executive Committee, students from both institutions and the GSBS Associate Deans.
- It quickly became apparent it was too much work for the committee to handle all at once so we decided to break up into four groups: 1. COVID classroom, 2. Rotation students, 3. Current Students, and 4. Scenarios.
- Each group met on their own and we came together a number of times as a committee as a whole to discuss recommendations each group came up with.
- The final recommendations from each group are attached:
 - COVID Classroom
 - Rotation students
 - Current Students
 - Scenarios
- Discussion from each group:
 - COVID Classroom
 - Many committee members agreed that pre-recorded classes isn't the best way to teach. However, there are some benefits of utilizing short pre-recorded videos (5-15 minutes) to bolster your lecture or have the students refer to it for future reference.
 - Having a hybrid approach could be beneficial and as a long-term option. Are there any rooms around campus that allow for appropriate social distancing?
 - We are currently not offering hybrid classrooms or in-person and the recommendation, at this time, is to teach courses completely online.
 - If there is a need to for in-person lecturing or for hands-on experience we will need to work with that course coordinator directly.
 - Currently we are not allowed into the GSBS classrooms or Administrative offices so our rooms are not a possibility.
 - As things progress, the ultimate goal is to return to full in-person lecturing and learning for our students.
 - Rotations
 - Based on the recommendations from this group, Academic Affairs has already scheduled and held a WebEx meeting for first year students on June 15th to discuss recommendations from this group, we also notified them that academic milestones will be pushed back. Around 50 students attended this meeting.
 - The start of rotations will be pushed to October 1 instead of September 15 to allow students more time to find labs to rotate in, and/or allow time if self-quarantine is required, and/or if they are delayed in arriving in Houston. In addition, the additional time could be used for Programs to virtually introduce faculty that are seeking students.
 - Students have the option to waive their third rotation. It was suggested to determine who in the incoming class would be eligible to waive the third rotation and inform them when they arrive to help them plan ahead.
 - The group also thought of contingency plans if we get shut down in the fall and rotations weren't possible. If needed, three short rotations of 4-5 weeks could be possible in the Spring.
 - Genetic Counseling and Medical Physics are unique due to having clinical rotations. GSBS is working with both Programs to ensure they have the access they need.
 - Current Students
 - We are role models and leaders so we need to follow PPE protocols alongside our students and set an example.

- The informal COVID meeting is just to check in to ensure everyone is on the same page regarding expectations and to ensure the student has everything they need to accomplish these goals. This meeting shouldn't be a burden to the student nor does it require a formal presentation.
- Some students could have substantial delays, especially due to loss of animals.
- Cost of transportation, cost of parking and dependent care were of major concern. If we can defray cost of parking.
 - Shuttles are on a truncated schedule.
 - The reduced parking rates are determined on a month to month basis. Dr. Blackburn is keeping an open line of communication with all three institutions (UTHealth, MD Anderson and the TMC) regarding parking.
- Scenarios
 - The charge of this group was to brainstorm different scenarios: will the curve go down quickly and can return to work quickly or will there be a second shut down, etc. which made providing recommendations a little more difficult.
 - Communication has been a source of frustration, however, communication has been greatly improved and an email went out today that helped to clear much of the confusion.
 - Regular updates will be helpful in order for everyone to stay in compliance especially in regards to PPE and social distancing requirements.
 - If there can be a mechanism for bridge funding for tuition and fees, stipends etc. due to COVID related delays in graduating that would be helpful to GSBS faculty and students.
 - If there is a second shutdown, this group will likely need to meet again to come up with new recommendations on how to make contributions to your field.

VI. New Business

- **Publication Requirement**

Dr. Bill Mattox reported:

- At the last Academic Standards Committee meeting a unanimous decision was made to change the publication requirement for students to graduate.
- The rule now will require students to have a submitted paper by the time they graduate. This is the minimum requirement, however, the student's advisory committee makes the final decision on the expectations of publication as long as it meets this minimum requirement.
- This rule will be in place for one year and will end summer 2021. After which, the rule will revert back to students being required to have a published paper before graduating.

VII. Old Business

No old business was discussed.