MEMO

TO: Basic Science Department Chairs and Program Directors
FR: Tom Wandless, Chair, Committee on Graduate Admissions and Policy
RE: Sustainable Funding Model Plan
DT: June 9, 2014

During its June 3rd, 2014 meeting, CGAP discussed and endorsed a proposed Biosciences Sustainable Funding Plan. The initial draft of the Biosciences Sustainable Funding Plan was developed by a faculty workgroup consisting of representatives from CGAP and the Biomedical Innovation/Basic Science Campaign Committee and, led by Dan Herschlag. The workgroup presented the proposed plan to the Biomedical Innovation/Basic Science Campaign Committee, which offered feedback, before presenting to CGAP on June 3rd. The CGAP discussion of the plan was positive and centered around our collective responsibility to ensure: (1) the maintenance of our collective admissions process; (2) the effective and equitable management of our enrollment numbers within the constraints of available funds; (3) the mentoring and support for students in applying for fellowships; and (4) continued development of the best possible training for our students. CGAP acknowledges that the plan will likely require refinement through the implementation process and recommends that the sustainable funding workgroup be reconvened as a standing committee.

The proposed Biosciences Sustainable Funding Plan is provided below.

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SUSTAINABLE FUNDING MODEL PLAN

The goal of this plan is to ensure the wise and equitable use of Campaign and other funds for student support, with the central goals of empowering student ownership of projects and training and of enhancing Stanford’s research, reputation, and training. It applies for years one through four for all biosciences students (graduate years one through three for MSTP students) and ensures that there will be no funding from Principle Investigator sources. The plan assumes that there will be continued application of funds that were previously used (i.e., departmental operating budget, patent, or gift funds), and that programs will not change their funding practices opportunistically.

I. Number of students per program per year. The number of students per program will be tracked using a rolling average over the past 5 years or 10 years, whichever is higher (up to 2013). There is an expectation of normal fluctuations in numbers, and all students entering will be supported (provided that funds are sufficient, as expected). However, programs that exceed the average in 3 successive years will be asked to justify any increases, and may be required to amend their admissions practices. An annual review of program activity on a set of data points will be done each summer for all programs by the Committee on Graduate Admissions and Policy (CGAP).

Programs that wish to increase their size due to additional funding, new faculty, or new programs can petition to CGAP, which will assess the request as a part of the regular annual review of all programs. In general, there will be an expectation that the program will have raised additional funds to cover the additional student slots, so that our intention to fund all students for years 1-4 will not be jeopardized.

II. Program funding needs. Total School funding required to support each program will be tracked starting in 2013-14, and a significant increase in the need for Dean’s funding by any program will also be reviewed by CGAP. Reasons for increased need include loss of slots, reduced outside fellowships, etc. The plan is to cover programs with the assumption that at some point in the future training grants will be reduced to 2 years (i.e., current TGs with 3 years of support will decrease to 2 years of support). If a training grant is not renewed, the current mechanism for bridge support through discussions with the dean’s office will be utilized. If the training grant is not renewed in subsequent submissions, or if other funds are not obtained by the program to make up for this loss, there will likely be an expectation of a decrease in student admissions and enrollment. This process will require a recommendation from CGAP based on an evaluation of program financials.

The financial impact of loss of funding or increase in students is the most reasonable calculation for adjustment, so if a training grant covering 50% of costs for 10 students is lost, then the program loses 5 students; if it is cut by 4 then the program loses 2. This limits the effects on both the program and the biosciences by making it financially neutral. Similarly if a program gains a training grant its numbers should not increase based on the number of slots but should scale with dollars as well. An annual review of fluctuations in student numbers and financial support will be conducted in CGAP.

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1 Given the proposed expansion of the MSTP program, careful consideration of ability to fund is necessary.
From the fifth year onward, a student’s funding is the responsibility of the PI. Where funds do not exist for any reason at the PI level, the PI’s division or department is expected to cover any funding gaps. The appeal of last resort to fund a student for whom support cannot be obtained from the PI, division, or department is the dean’s office through bridge funding. PIs should keep in mind that students should not be involved or impacted by this process.

III. Program gain of funds. It is to be expected that outside fellowships and at times other sources of student support will be more available for certain programs than others. Reasons include natural statistical variation, differential priorities of funding agencies, etc. As this variation is to be expected, program size, up or down, will not track directly with outside fellowships. Nevertheless, students and programs will be strongly encouraged to obtain additional outside fellowships and funding. Writing and obtaining external funding provides valuable experience in grant writing, represents an honor for both students and programs, and is financially necessary for our overall funding model. The success rate of programs in admitting and training students who can successfully compete for external funding will be one of many factors taken into consideration by CGAP and the Dean's office when evaluating possible requests to alter average student admissions and enrollment in the future.

IV. Ongoing use of department and program funds. Currently several departments and programs have internal (e.g., operating budget, patent income) funds that have been used to support a portion of student expenses. Where possible, these local sources—all sources other than PI grants—should continue to be used to support students in years 1-4 for as long as they are available. Our budget projections indicate that the campaign funds will not be sufficient for our goals unless these funds remain dedicated to student support.

V. Fellowship applications from students. All students will be encouraged to apply for fellowships for which they are eligible, the most common being the NSF upon admission or prior to admission and an NRSA in year 3 and/or 4. Students eligible for other fellowships will be encouraged to apply for those as well or instead, with the goal of covering the first five years. For international students who are not eligible for NSF and NRSA awards, all or nearly all will enter with SGF or other external funding for 3 years. These students will also be encouraged to apply for any appropriate home country fellowships for which they are eligible, as well as independent funding sources such as HHMI.

In addition, we will administer a new Biosciences graduate fellows program (BGFP), an internal fellowship competition only for those students not eligible for NRSA or other outside fellowships (e.g., international), with paylines approximating those at NIH. The application process will parallel that for NRSAs in timing, training and content. Because NRSAs support years four through six, these students will receive support in year 5 similar to that from NRSA awards, as well as the honor of having received this prestigious award. A faculty committee will review nominees for fellowships at the School level.

Students will write fellowships in a mentored process, as part of the new Stanford Biosciences Grant Writing Academy, with direct involvement by members of each Home Program, and process support from expert staff in the Graduate Education office. The faculty mentor in whose lab the student is rotating fall quarter (or another faculty mentor who agrees to take on the following responsibilities) (and for NRSA proposals,
the student’s PI) should 1) provide feedback on multiple versions of the proposal, 2) write a strong and informed mentoring plan, and 3) write a letter of support. Recognition for successful fellowship applications could be provided publicly through newsletters, webpage, or party; students should be motivated in any case by the positive track record, empowerment, and prestige of garnering a fellowship. While we would also like to acknowledge these students financially, sufficient funds are not currently available.