ONE EXPENSIVE MISPRINT

‘Clerical error’ in offer letter costs UL Lafayette graduate program thousands

Brianne Hendricks
Digital Media Manager

The University of Louisiana at Lafayette’s graduate school budget just got $43,990 smaller.

In a time when the state’s elected officials regularly eye higher education as a piggy bank to rifle through, a mistake in paperwork has cost the graduate school more money from their budget.

The error goes back to November 2018. Seven graduating seniors sat by their computers waiting for acceptance and offer letters, looking for good news and job offers as well.

UL Lafayette currently offers a $10,070 a year salary for any student enrolled and admitted into their graduate teaching assistantship programs within the English department. Likewise, Ph.D. students receive $15,900 per academic year.

Instead of receiving the standardized amount, three Ph.D. students and four Master’s students in the English department received a somewhat unusual offer letter.

“This assistantship offer carries a stipend of $15,900/10,070 to be paid in equal monthly payments beginning in January 2019 and continuing until May 2019.”

The difference would cost the graduate department $43,990.

The Dean of the Graduate School, Mary Farmer-Kaiser, Ph.D., said what happened was a “clerical error” by Dr. Elisabeth Bobo of the English Department.

“The graduate coordinator put in the full stipend amount for an academic year instead of a one-semester award,” Farmer-Kaiser said. “Because these offers, of course, were made to begin in January. So, it said January through May as the term, and then had a full academic years stipend on it.”

As of now, fewer students will be admitted to the graduate school with stipends and tuition waivers because of the error, meaning students graduating in Spring 2019 will be short the usual amount of graduate student assistantships.

“Certainly, I would rather be funding more graduate students,” Farmer-Kaiser said. “What it means is that those overages

A stack of redacted documents released by UL Lafayette administration on March 19, 2019. They detail English department graduate student offer letters issued in late 2018.
are preventing us from being able to fund a few more graduate students this semester.”

On Jan. 18, the graduate school and the English department, having found and realized the error made in the contracts, would soon issue letters to the students not only apologizing for the mistake but also making it clear it would not happen again.

Kaiser said she felt concerned about students who chose to attend UL Lafayette because of the original offer letter made which offered much more money than should have been provided, particularly students who moved away from home for the letter’s lucrative offer.

“Students, and there are some students who moved, made the decision to come here and moved a great distance to come here,” Kaiser said. “They made that decision based off that offer letter so we needed to honor that offer letter.”

The correction letter also offered assistance for any student wishing to transfer schools because of expectations promised that could not continue to be delivered on.

According to a previous article from The Vermilion, though undergraduate enrollment for the Spring 2019 semester is down to 15,570 from 15,862, graduate school enrollment was up at UL Lafayette.

“We have a significant increase in our graduate school... about 20% more students on the graduate school side,” DeWayne Bowie, Ph.D., vice president for enrollment management at UL Lafayette said in the article.

Keeping that trend alive is something of importance to graduate students who look to expand their college’s influence throughout the campus. Graduate student of Folklore and Tech Support Assistant Jill Crosby is one such student.

Crosby said the lack of money will impact the graduate department as a whole and has concerns about what this means going forward.

“It’s like, you’re crippling the one area of the department that’s not only what you really need, but what’s also been very reliable,” Crosby said. “Now you’re basically tying a lot of people’s hands.”

Crosby said he worries with less graduate students, and the same amount of needs that need to be filled, departments will get used to having both postgraduate students and lower level professors contribute more than they should to make up for the lack of help from funding.

She also said positions that are available now could be phased out in the future for similar budgetary reasons.

“People won’t see the need for (these positions) anymore, after a while,” Crosby said. “They won’t realize how bad it gets once it gets that bad. They get used to the few graduate students they have doing the work now. They’re not going to expect that to change once the funding changes.”

She said once the changes go in, the department could be ripe to see abuse of positions. Since the department has fewer graduate students to do the same amount of work, the faculty could ask a student who isn’t qualified in specific situations to take over in places they shouldn’t be.

Graduate students are generally required to work only 20 hours a week. The original offer letter describes these hours as the equivalent of teaching two lower level division lecture classes.

“Even if they had the funding to pay them extra, they really can’t because they can’t go over the hours they’re already working,” Crosby said. “It just throws a much bigger wrench into the cogs.”

Upon entering graduate school, students are automatically enrolled in the Graduate Student Organization. According to their website, the main goals of the organization are to provide advocacy of issues graduate students face to the administration, help graduate students find funding for research and travel expenses, and establish lines of communication to all graduate students within the school.

Former Secretary of the Graduate Student Organization Linda Fairchild also said she’s curious how the upcoming changes will affect the graduate school. Though Fairchild said she wondered how the seven students didn’t see the error in their contracts, she also said the error isn’t their fault, but the responsibility of the coordinator.

“It takes forethought to either change this part or that part,” Fairchild said. “And again, who doesn’t proofread contracts? It’s the most important part, the money.”

Fairchild said she felt Bobo should at least receive a censure, adding the lost money coming out of the graduate school budget was unfair. If anything, she said it should come out of the English department’s budget, because that is where the error occurred.

Being a former board member of GSO, Fairchild said the loss will indeed hurt every graduate student and she felt a little apprehensive as to what could come next for other departments and their graduate students as well.

“This shows every other department that ‘maybe I can get away with this’” Fairchild said. “Especially if (Bobo) is not getting even an informal reprimand that maybe what they did was OK.”

The graduate school puts on many different events throughout the year, including a full week for graduate student appreciation. Fairchild said she hopes Bobo’s mistake doesn’t cost the graduate school so much money that those events may be put off next year.

“Is it all Bobo’s fault that we don’t get all our stuff next year?” Fairchild asked. “I just don’t think the graduate school should have been the funds for (the coverage).”

Because of the clerical error from last December, safeguards for both students and the graduate school have found ground here at UL Lafayette. Kaiser said though it was unfortunate what happened, if there’s any good to come out of the situation it’s that at UL Lafayette, mistakes in offer letters are much harder to make now.

“We’ve instituted a couple of changes. We’ve made changes within the standardized letter so that it’s a little harder to make that mistake.” Kaiser said. “The new offer letter indicates the monthly status rather than the academic year of the semester amount.”

Kaiser also said offer letters will now also require a prior review before being sent to any student for graduate school, adding offer letters also come with a customizable feature in the new letter where whoever is offering the assistantship can talk about what the student’s duties are or what the grant project they work on entails.

As for Bobo, she still holds her position as graduate school coordinator for the English department, and she was unavailable for comment on the situation.

"What it means is that those overages are preventing us from being able to fund a few more graduate students this semester."