

COVID Relief Fund Program Results Report

Introduction

In Fall 2021, the McMaster Graduate Students Association (GSA) aimed to assist overtime graduate students impacted by COVID-related delays to their studies. Specifically, the GSA aimed to provide emergency financial aid to graduate students who either:

- a) Were unable to receive sufficient funding from McMaster University via their faculty or department; or
- b) Faced delays longer than those which would have been reasonably covered by the university aid they had received previously.

To achieve this goal, the GSA put aside \$90,000 in funding to be distributed on a basis of need to overtime graduate student applicants. This was further supplemented by a generous donation of \$25,000 from the Alumni Association, which made the total fund value \$115,000. Students who applied could be eligible for a one-time payment of either \$1500 or \$3000 depending on the amount of aid they had previously received (if any) and their expected date of graduation. The fund was therefore capable of providing financial aid to a minimum of 38 students.

Implementation

Early concerns regarding demand for funding led the GSA to open the initial application period for the COVID relief fund, and limited eligibility to applicants who had received zero funding from the University or external sources (such as government grants like SSHRC, NSERC, etc.). This allowed the GSA to ensure that students with the greatest potential financial need could be served first. At the end of this application period, 19 students were deemed eligible for funding (10 received \$3000 for two additional terms of tuition and 9 received \$1500 for one additional term of tuition). This round of applications used 38% of the total funding available for distribution.

Based on the initial applications, we found that there were in-need students who were ineligible for the first round of assistance based on our original stipulation that awardees must not have received COVID-related supplemental extensions to their funding. For example, many applicants had received COVID-related extensions to their funding from their faculties or departments at the beginning of the pandemic but faced delays of over two terms (8 months) and were now ineligible for additional financial support. To meet this graduate student need, the GSA Board voted in favour of broadening the eligibility criteria to include students who had received up to \$4000 of COVID-related supplemental funding over a period of 8 months but faced delays past this of over 4 months.

The second round of applications awarded another 21 graduate students funding, culminating in a total of 40 students receiving COVID relief from the GSA. Perhaps surprisingly, of the 21 additional eligible applicants, 5 were students who would have been eligible for the first round of funding (i.e., received no internal or external funding), indicating the importance of graduate student awareness of funding options available to them.

As of the end of the COVID relief fund's implementation period, 13 students received \$1500 and 27 students received \$3000, and so in total \$100,500 in funding was distributed. Of the total of 45 applicants, 5 were deemed ineligible for either round of funding (3 for having received funding

exceeding our threshold, 2 for not demonstrating sufficient COVID-related delays) making 89% of applicants eligible for COVID-related assistance.

Results and Findings

Table 1: Degree Type

Masters (Course Based)	2
Masters (Thesis)	6
PhD	37

Table 3: Funding Groups

No funding	26
Up to \$2000/term	14
Over \$2000/term (ineligible)	3

Table 2: Faculty Breakdown

Health Sciences	4
Science	4
Social Science	15
Engineering	11
Humanities	9
Business	2

Tables 1-3 provide relevant demographic breakdowns of the graduate student applicants. Looking at Table 1 we can see that PhD students made up the vast majority of applicants, which is indicative of the reality that the most substantial delays faced by graduate students were related to dissertation research. The fact that most of the Masters applicants were also pursuing thesis degrees further substantiates this reality.

Table 2 provides a breakdown of the faculties represented by applicants. Most notable in this table is the fact that Social Science applicants represented a full third of the entire pool, despite the Faculty's \$4000 stipend to those within it that applied for aid. Of concern was that only 6 of the Social Science applicants collected that stipend, suggesting accessibility and awareness issues associated with administering the funding offered by the Faculty of Social Sciences. In one noted instance, the applicant missed the deadline to apply for funding from the Faculty of Social Sciences and therefore did not receive COVID-related assistance they would have otherwise been eligible for.

The Faculties of Engineering and Humanities were also slightly overrepresented with 20% of the funding recipients¹. Interestingly, Engineering applicants had a wide distribution of existing supplemental funding: Six Engineering applicants received no supplemental funding, two had minimal funding, while three applicants received funding exceeding the eligibility threshold, with one student having received \$20,000 in support. Similarly, five Humanities applicants received no supplemental funding, three received minimal funding, and one received funding exceeding the eligibility threshold.

¹ Factoring for ineligible applications, the Engineering and Humanities faculties each had 8 funding recipients.

Table 3 breaks down the per-term amount of faculty or department funding received by applicants from the time they stopped receiving University or external funding. 65% of eligible applicants (58% of all applicants) received zero supplemental funding prior to applying to the GSA's COVID relief fund.

Note: GSA eligibility criteria specifically assisted students unable to receive COVID-related extensions to their funding. As teaching and research assistant (TA/RA) positions constitute wages for labour (and are subject to CUPE rules), these were not used in our considerations of student need. Graduate students who work as a TA or RA *in lieu*, or work other part-time jobs, are unable to use that time to focus on their studies and are therefore at increased risk of finishing their degrees at a later date².

For students who worked as TA/RAs, the GSA considered their applications holistically and found that based on the impacts of COVID on their program progression, these students were in need of additional support to help them succeed in their programs. Considering the financial difficulties many graduate students faced due to COVID-related illnesses, family concerns, and closures, the GSA advocates for overtime and delayed graduate students to receive COVID-related supplemental funding to all students regardless of work status to provide security and flexibility to students to help them flourish and succeed on campus and beyond.

Discussion and Future Considerations

Overall, despite the funding available at McMaster University to assist overtime graduate students, 40 students were eligible for the GSA COVID-relief fund, with awardees from each faculty. Notably, 26 applicants did not receive any other supplemental funding extension.

A first takeaway is that within faculties, many graduate students were unaware of eligibility criteria and how to obtain supplemental COVID-relief funding. McMaster University frequently uses a decentralized approach when administering services, often with individual faculties and departments providing parallel services to their students. During the pandemic, the School of Graduate Studies allocated funding to each faculty to distribute to students impacted by COVID-related delays. However, as each faculty and department allocated these funds in different ways, many students struggled to access these funds, especially students with language or accessibility barriers. To provide greater ease of access, we believe a centralized application system, for example using AwardSpring, would streamline and equalize the application process.

Among faculties, Social Sciences provided a specific application package for students to apply for, but not all eligible students in the faculty were able to apply to this supplemental funding due to lack of awareness of internal application deadlines and funding available. To improve this, we suggest greater flexibility and wider communications for internal emergency funding deadlines.

Another key takeaway comes from findings related to the faculties that were overrepresented in the eligible student cohort. Social sciences students applied to this student funding opportunity at a higher rate compared to any other faculty. As this is not a random sample and there is selection bias in this cohort, it is possible there is some confounding effect in which social sciences students were more likely

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to be aware of or apply to this funding opportunity. However, as previous evidence has shown social sciences and humanities programs to deal with underfunding³, this is in line with our investigation's data. To improve this, we suggest greater emergency funding and/or bursaries to be made available for at-risk students.

Parents, or students with dependents, also accounted for 17.5% (7 students) of the funding recipients, pinpointing another at-risk group, particularly women. This is corroborated by a University of Toronto article with the same observation, namely that working mothers of young children were disproportionately affected by COVID work-from-home policies⁴. Based on this finding we encourage future funds to provide aid to parents of school-aged children, especially those that are the primary caretaker, or providing support with daycare services in future.

Finally, a subset of graduate students reported extra part-time work, including TA/RA and on- and off-campus work, as part of their income in their application forms. This is of substantial concern to the GSA as part-time work during studies has been shown to delay graduation time⁵, which can ultimately feed into a delayed student's need to continue part-time work if or when they lose their guaranteed funding.

Through the shared burden of the pandemic and listening to student voices, we in the GSA were able to support 40 graduate students in their studies and we advocate for the continued and increased support of graduate students among the entire University administration and community.

As our closing remark is a representative testimonial from one of the fund recipients:

I am extremely grateful for the GSA COVID Relief Fund, which recognizes the impact and delays that COVID-19 has had on my doctoral research. I wholeheartedly thank the GSA for this Relief Fund which will help make possible the completion of my doctoral studies.

³ <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/1ed4/cd37f4c3ebc6b05ff51f977b0fde0ebba12c.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.utpjournals.press/doi/full/10.3138/cpp.2020-077>

⁵ <https://doi.org/10.1111/joes.12301>