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by Ramy Amaout

With most funding requests processed, Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program officials are calling this summer the most difficult funding period in the program's 25-year history.

While students' UROP Office funding requests topped $1.3 million, only $400,000 in internal UROP funds were available for distribution this summer, according to a UROP Office statement released last week. The financial strait has resulted in students receiving only a minimal share of their UROP funding from the UROP Office.

Of the 717 proposals reviewed so far, about 90 received no UROP Office funding, the release said, although UROP Administrator Debbie Be H. Shoop said, "Many who didn't receive direct UROP funds have been funded by supervisors." By comparison, during the summer of 1993, 1,092 students received $528,000 in internal UROP Office funding, the statement said.

Office staff expect the funding crisis to carry over into the fall term. "To minimize the number of students turned away from a summer UROP opportunity, the UROP Office has already allocated a significant portion of its fall budget to meet summer demand," the statement said.

SIM aids not UROP funds

The UROP Office funding crisis comes despite Provost Mark S. Wrighton's April allocation of $1 million to help UROP, the statement said. In his original announcement of the allocation, Wrighton directed the funds "to be used to cover the fringes [employee] benefits and indirect [overhead] costs that will be charged to grants, contracts, and fund accounts," but not those costs that will be charged to internal UROP funds.

Since the allocation is directed at only those overhead and employee benefit costs incurred on sponsored research funding — money paid directly by a student's UROP supervisor — and not at benefit costs on internal UROP funding, the UROP Office does not benefit directly from the $1 million, Shoop said. The allocation "will not be used to help offset the additional employee benefit costs charged on [internal] UROP funds," the statement said.

Shoop said there is a general unawareness among students of the exact use to which the $1 million is being put, she said. Many students have been calling the UROP Office to find out why their proposals were not funded despite the apparent availability of $1 million, when in fact the $1 million does not apply to UROP funds, she said.

As of July 1, the added employee benefit costs will make students 8 percent more expensive than in previous years for internal UROP funds, according to a memorandum to Wrighton from the UROP Working Group Wrighton formed to answer the crisis for the fall. This number is down from the previously reported rate of 43 percent, largely because of the recent efforts of the working group and Comptroller Philip J. Keohan. (See related story, page 1.)

According to the memorandum and UROP Director Nora McGavern, overhead costs, which do not apply to UROP Office funds, will combine with employee benefit costs to make students 64.2 times more expensive for sponsored research funds.

"Faculty-funded proposals will continue to be accepted until May 31, and consideration for overhead and employee benefit coverage will be awarded on a rolling basis until the $1 million allocation has been exhausted," the statement said.

Notes for summer, fall

The UROP Office will accept full UROP proposals for one week in early September, Shoop said. Funding awards will be announced to students shortly thereafter, over the course of a single week.

For the present, Shoop advises students who are still searching for summer UROPs not to give up hope. "We have seen, and believe that several are still in the process of searching for summer UROPs, presumably leaving their funding behind. "The best place to look for cancellations is the UROP Office," she said.

"UROP is inadvertently caught"

The crisis stems from revised federal guidelines, effective June 1, that treat UROP like a research program rather than an educational program, McGavern said. As a result, UROP funds will now accrue overhead and employee benefit costs.

However, the problem is not so easily solved, McGavern said. "Just because something is inadvertently caught, it's not like saying 'excuse me, please, could you please move your project?'" McGavern said.

"UROP 'inadvertently caught'"

"UROP is inadvertently caught in these revisions," McGavern said. "UROP was by no means targeted or singled out. If you look at the language of the document, you would have to be quite prescient to catch UROP...it's too convoluted a language," she said. "In the document, UROP looks like a research project, rather than an education project, she said.

However, the problem is not so easily solved, McGavern said. "Just because something is inadvertently caught, it's not like saying [to the government], 'excuse me, please, could you please move your project?" It's not that easy," she said.

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