

Tuesday, September 26, 2006 1:00 a.m.

Scraping by

Grad students afford little

By **ALEJANDRA CANCINO**

Alligator Writer

It's 1:50 on a Friday afternoon, when UF doctoral student Tim Nevin gets ready to teach his third lecture of the day. His students see him every Friday and greet him by name, but few of them know that as a graduate assistant, Nevin makes just \$9,000 a year.

[+ Enlarge photo](#)

Andrea Morales / Alligator Staff

UF doctoral student Tim Nevin talks to his wife Debra Zakpa Paye at their apartment a few blocks west of campus. As a returning graduate assistant, Nevin's salary is \$9,000 a year.

"If every two weeks I get \$500 and rent is \$525 per month, more than half of my stipend is going to pay rent," he said.

Officials in UF's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences agree that graduate assistants' salaries are low, but they say they cannot increase them because of low funding from CLAS.

The college's tight budget has led its graduate salaries to fall below those at other universities. Research done by Graduate Assistants United, UF's graduate student union, showed that the average pay at Rutgers University in New Jersey is about \$18,000 a year. At UF, assistants generally earn less than \$12,000.

To attract new graduate students this year, some CLAS departments - including history, sociology and astronomy - offered higher wages to new graduate assistants. The decision was approved by CLAS, but it angered returning students working with lower wages.

At the history department, for example, returning assistants like Nevin get paid \$9,000, while new assistants are paid \$12,000. In addition to their salaries, graduate assistants receive tuition waivers, but they still have to pay for fees - about \$400 per semester.

"It's not enough," Nevin said, adding that he takes about \$4,000 in loans every semester in order to support his wife and pay for rent, electricity, cell phones and other living expenses. After bills, about \$200 remains in his wallet.

Nevin's wife, Debra Zakpa Paye, a student at SFCC, uses the salary from her two jobs to support her mother, siblings and child. They live in three different West African countries.

To save money, Nevin has no cable, uses UF's dial-up service to connect to the Internet, rides his bicycle rain or shine, eats at home and skips parties to avoid spending money on alcohol.

During the Summer, when Nevin does not work for the university, he lives off savings and is occasionally paid to help students move and mix music at house parties.

"It's unfortunate that we are not paying our TAs more," said Matt Gallman, graduate coordinator for the history department.

Gallman said that although his department wanted to increase the wages of all its graduate assistants, CLAS officials would not allow it. In fact, he said his department was not given new money at all for assistants, so to offer the additional \$3,000, the history department hired fewer assistants.

Although CLAS Dean Neil Sullivan said he was not involved in the decision-making process, officials from the statistics and anthropology departments said Sullivan's office offered an explanation as to why returning students could not be paid more.

Carol Rozear, an official from the statistics department, said CLAS told her office that assistants could not receive a salary increase higher than what GAU had negotiated with the university.

In August, the union negotiated a 3 percent salary increase for graduate assistants, which will go into effect Oct. 1.

But Bret Seferian, co-president of GAU, said the 3 percent increase does not represent a cap on graduate salaries. Departments are free to raise wages as much as they want.

Ken Sassaman, chairman of the department of anthropology, said he was also told a year ago that he could not increase salaries for returning students.

But when he called GAU, officials told Sassaman he was free to hike department wages beyond the minimum increase. He then raised graduate assistant salaries from \$17.50 per hour to \$19.

Regardless of whether departments granted higher wages this year, most students still say their salaries are too low.

Peter Waylen, chairman of the geography department, said the salaries of his 12 graduate assistants - about \$8,500 - are the lowest in the college and among the country's top geography programs.

Even the chemistry department, which offers its students about \$18,500 a year, sometimes loses top students to other universities. The reason, said department chairman Daniel R. Talham, is that UF's rate is lower than the nationwide average.

UF Provost Janie Fouke said she's not surprised when UF loses graduate students to other universities. However, she said that to increase CLAS funding, the university would have to cut money from other colleges or find a new way to earn money.

Nevin, the history doctoral student, said UF needs to find a way to increase the CLAS budget.

"My situation as a graduate student is very typical (at UF)," he said. "My stipend is too low to support me and my wife."

