April 16, 2012

Board of Regents
University System of Georgia
270 Washington Street
Atlanta, GA 30334

Dear Members of the Board,

The purpose of this letter is to express the concerns of graduate students across the University System’s research institutions with regards to the Special Institutional Fee (SIF) and present a few general but very important points about how changes to tuition and fees affect graduate students. For too many years, graduate students across this state have felt overlooked when decisions regarding tuition and fees are made. We feel that the passionate discussions about the solvency of the HOPE Scholarship program have drowned out the voices of graduate students that make up 11.5% of the student population in the University System. This is most evident with regards to the SIF. With the acceptance of the responsibility to lead our fellow students comes a duty to use our voices for the betterment of our peers. We would like to make clear the following points:

1. Graduate students are not eligible for participation in the HOPE Scholarship program, and as such, changes to graduate tuition rates have no impact on this undergraduate program.
2. For graduate students supported through Teaching or Research Assistantships, tuition is not paid by students, but covered under the agreement for employment.
3. The SIF was put in place as a means of generating tuition-like revenue without raising tuition rates necessitated by declining state appropriations and to avoid the adverse effects tuition increases would have on the HOPE Scholarship program.
4. When tuition is charged through fees, the significant financial burden of payment is shifted directly onto the students to pay out of their already modest stipends intended to be used for living expenses.
5. As exemplified by the establishment of the SIF in November of 2009, modifications to fee structures can be made at any point in the academic year.

Tomorrow’s industry leaders are currently being educated in the graduate schools across this state. The establishment and dramatic increases to the Special Institutional Fee work to undermine the competitiveness of this state’s graduate schools. In order to recruit the best graduate talent from across the country, reforms to the current SIF structure should be undertaken immediately. For schools with robust research programs, the current system is unsustainable and the status quo will have long term effects on the quality of both the students and the research those students perform. Time is of the essence.

We look to you, the members of the Board of Regents, to compel the Chancellor’s staff to develop a plan to phase out the SIF for graduate students and roll the fee into graduate tuition. This fee never needed to be instituted for graduate students. No longer should graduate students be required to sustain this burden. No longer should the competitiveness of our schools be undermined. No longer should the voices of graduate students be unheard. We understand that your decisions regarding the FY2013 budget will have likely already been made as you prepare
to meet this week. We only hope that you will be cognizant of the tremendous impact these decisions will have on graduate students.

Sincerely,

James Black  
Georgia Institute of Technology  
Graduate Student Body President  
PhD Candidate, Mechanical Engineering

Hongyu Zhang  
University of Georgia  
Graduate Student Association President  
PhD Student, International Affairs

James Dutton  
Georgia State University  
Student Body President  
Law Student,  
Masters Student, Public Administration