

WORKING GROUP ON EXCELLENCE IN GRADUATE EDUCATION

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Background

Four proposals related to graduate education were put forward at the Retreat in June. All four proposals advanced the goal of raising the doctoral program of the University of Maryland to a level of excellence comparable to that of the very top public research institutions. The proposals began with the premise that advancing graduate education requires enhancing conditions for graduate students, and they all argued for the key objective of achieving a competitive level of funding for all doctoral students, a large number of whom currently are unfunded or underfunded. Those four proposals, together with strategic plans being developed concurrently in the Graduate School, formed the bases for the deliberations of the Working Group, which gathered and analyzed peer and internal data and which held four lengthy meetings over the fall semester.

Challenges

The Working Group quickly came to recognize challenges that must be met in any action plan:

1) Graduate education on research campuses, including UM, tends to be decentralized, with doctoral programs varying across disciplines in such matters as funding sources, funding levels, funding models; normal and/or optimal time to candidacy and time from candidacy to degree; ideal post-degree placements; and so on. As a consequence:

a) Accurate comparative data on peer programs and on UM, necessary for strategic planning but difficult to obtain, must continue to be gathered and analyzed.

b) Addressing issues at the doctoral level means balancing global campus consistency with local program variations: goals and standards must be constant, even as their specific applications may vary.

2) Adequate funding is a necessary but not sufficient condition for excellence: funds also must be deployed more effectively and efficiently, and more rigorously with respect to student progress. For this reason, the Group extended its view to include degree completion and time-to-degree. Linking funding more rigorously to student progress, however, also means that we should improve conditions in areas that enable students to progress quickly and successfully (or that impede them from doing so): training, advising, and mentoring; and GA workload.

Funding Metrics

Comparative funding data suggest that we are competitive with our peers in reported *overall* average TA and RA stipends, but also that that local variations in stipends are considerable, with UM ranging comparatively, in sample disciplines, from low to high. Comparative funding data also suggest that we are competitive in *overall* research expenditures disbursed for RA salaries as a percentage of total research expenditures; ***but analysis of internal funding sources suggests that increasing the proportion of total research expenditures to graduate student funding as a whole will be important to reaching our overall funding goals.***

Comparative fellowship data has not been captured, but anecdotal evidence suggests that we may lag behind our peers in fellowship support. New programs such as Flagship Fellowships (recruitment enhancement fellowships designed to level the resource playing field for the very top candidates) and Wiley Dissertation Fellowships (dissertation fellowships that should help decrease time-to-degree for recipient students) are positive steps. We must increase our base block grant fellowship support, however, and must revisit current criteria for allocating those fellowship monies.

The Working Group undertook an exercise to identify three figures: total financial support provided by the university to doctoral students (and students in academic masters programs closely associated with doctoral programs); total amount needed to fund all doctoral students presently enrolled using a standard figure for in-state cost of attendance provided by the office of financial aid; and the shortfall. ***The relevant data indicate a shortfall by this measure on the magnitude of \$72.5M.***

Degree Completion Metrics

Comparative data with regard to degree completion are not favorable. Council of Graduate School data on ten-year completion rates based on 1992-94 entering cohorts indicate a national average of roughly 57%; UM data for the 1994 cohort indicate an average of 47% (with local variations). The good news is that longitudinal data for UM show promising trends in ten-year retention and graduation rates and in time-to-candidacy and time-from-candidacy-to-degree durations. ***Nonetheless, our current completion rates are not acceptable; we must accelerate the positive trends.***

Strategic Fronts

The scale and complexity of the overall goal and objective require that we move on several strategic fronts concurrently. These fronts are represented graphically in the attached diagram, which applies equally to the overall campus doctoral program and to each constituent program. They are:

Graduate Student Funding
Graduate Assistant Workload

*Time to Degree
Degree Completion*

Program Size

Resource Allocation and Reallocation

While these must be addressed concurrently, certain relationships are clear: significant advances in graduate student funding presuppose advances in determining appropriate program size globally and locally, and presuppose adequate and properly allocated resources. Strategies for improving funding, moreover, must be coordinated with strategies for improving degree completion and time-to-degree rates (funding allocation plans both for programs and for individual students, for example, should include incentives for progress and consequences for lack of progress).

Each front, it is also worth noting, not only has multiple relationships to the others but also has multiple dimensions behind it: any substantial movement on any front, and particularly those of program size and resource allocation, will affect, whether positively or negatively, other aspects of our campus mission, such as faculty workload, dependence upon adjunct and non-tenure track faculty, delivery of the fundamental studies and general education curricula, and so on.

Objective: Competitive Funding for All Doctoral Students for an Optimal Period of Time

Overall Strategy

1) Identify optimal numbers of students for individual doctoral programs and for overall campus doctoral program.

2) Increase total available funding for doctoral students through acquisition of new monies and/or reallocations of existing monies at the three campus levels. Potential sources include tuition, development opportunities, professional masters programs, campus enhancement funds, and sponsored research, including research associated with targeted strategic research initiatives (the last will require creating incentives for faculty to build more funding for graduate assistants into grant proposals).

3) Deploy available funding for increased effectiveness and decreased risk, including most productive vertical deployment (among programs) and horizontal deployment (at the optimal points in an individual student's career).

Action Plan

Steps # 1-5 are actions to be initiated and largely implemented by the Graduate School; steps # 6-8 are actions to be coordinated by the Graduate School and largely undertaken within colleges and programs. Terminal actions should be completed before the end of AY 07-08:

- 1) Continue to gather and analyze comparative peer data.
- 2) Survey, map, and disseminate best practices at UM for training, advising, and mentoring students and explore incentives for local institution of these practices where needed.
- 3) Work with Office of Vice-President of University of Relations to create a development plan for graduate education.
- 4) Conduct review of Block Grant Fellowship Program in AY 07-08, with an eye toward optimal proportioning of allocations by quantitative measures such as size and qualitative measures pertaining to program excellence and student success.
- 5) Envision Graduate School resources as a dynamic tool for leveraging additional resources and influencing strategic behaviors rather than as a static pool to be distributed by formula. This would apply to fellowship monies and to a designated and finite portion of fellowship tuition remission credits.
- 6) Review all graduate programs to identify optimal size. Criteria should include capacity of program to recruit top students; to fund students; to train, advise, and mentor students; to insure graduation in a timely fashion; and to increase likelihood of placement in post-docs or faculty positions at institutions comparable to UM.
- 7) Review optimal times-to-candidacy and times-to-degree by college and program; attempt to isolate by discipline how best to deploy fellowship and assistantship funding in relation to tenure of student.
- 8) Review graduate assistantships, identifying total expenditures by units, and identifying workloads (thus supplementing The Graduate Assistant Survey 2006 Report).

Finally, the Working Group encourages the Office of the President to increase the overall portion of research expenditures devoted to graduate student funding and the Office of the Provost to designate for initiatives related to graduate education a significant portion of any available FY08 enhancement funds.