

**Report of the Graduate School Evaluation Committee
October 2009**

Mark Boyer, Professor and Head, Political Science Department
Mun Choi, Dean and Professor, School of Engineering
Richard Colon, Graduate Student and Student Trustee
Mary Anne Doyle, Professor and Head, Curriculum & Instruction Department
Gary English, BOT Distinguished Professor, Dramatic Arts Department
Debra Kendall, BOT Distinguished Professor & Associate Dean, CLAS
Skip Lowe, Professor and Head, Psychology Department
Robert McCarthy, Dean and Professor, School of Pharmacy
Mary Musgrave, Professor and Head, Plant Science & Landscape Architecture
Department
Suman Singha, Vice President, Research and Graduate Education

Introduction

The Graduate School Evaluation Committee was charged by Provost Nicholls in spring 2009 to:

1. Review the current structure of the Graduate School and, if needed, recommend changes in that structure, i.e. retain the current structure, decentralize the graduate school, or change the current structure;
2. Evaluate the current functions of the Graduate School in terms of efficiency and effectiveness; and
3. Identify functions and activities not currently undertaken by the Graduate School, but necessary for enhancement of graduate education at the university.

The committee believes it is essential to the institution's future growth and development that the graduate structure and activities provide university-wide leadership of graduate education and scholarship that assists in recognizing, advocating, and celebrating its central role at the university. These goals can only be accomplished by enhancing the leadership for graduate education by providing it with the portfolio and authority to make strategic decisions, consistent with the university's Academic Plan, which ensures that graduate education holds a preeminent position it should at a research-extensive university. Moreover, graduate leadership must ensure that the scholarly mission of the university is appropriately linked to graduate education.

In completing its work, the committee met with the following individuals:

From the Graduate School

James Henkel, Associate Vice Provost and Associate Dean
Lee Aggison, Associate Dean
Thomas Peters, Program Director
Anne Lanzit, Program Lead, Graduate Admissions
Melanie Dolat, Program Lead, International Programs

Terra Blakeslee, Program Lead, Graduate Records

Dolan Evanovich, Vice President for Enrollment Planning, Management, and Institutional Research

Jeff von Munkwitz-Smith, University Registrar

Structure

As a research-extensive university, scholarship and graduate education must be inextricably linked and define a major component of the core mission of the University of Connecticut. Graduate education and training must be given comparable stature as the research enterprise at the university. The structure that supports these activities must not only ensure an efficient and effective operation to assist graduate students and graduate faculty, but must also demonstrate to internal and external constituencies the university's strong and consistent commitment to producing high quality scholarship and exceptional graduate students. Consequently, the committee strongly believes that the centralized structure for graduate education—with a central graduate school— should not only remain in place and but also should be considerably strengthened.

This recommendation is based on identification of the following strengths and weaknesses revealed by the committee's review process:

Strengths of a centralized versus a decentralized graduate school structure:

- Graduate school admissions and degree auditing proceeds most efficiently in a centralized system, especially for the large numbers of international graduate school applicants that UConn receives. The auditing of degrees received in international settings requires extensive expertise.
- The needed staff expertise and time to complete admissions and auditing are efficiently addressed by the availability of staff members who are cross-trained and easily available to assist one another. This availability of cross trained staff members is also financially beneficial.
- The centralized structure supports and insures consistent quality of graduate education at the university across all programs, especially in the case of interdisciplinary programs. Oversight of the composition of graduate research committees, the creation of new graduate certificate and doctoral programs, and the appointment of graduate faculty, in our view, are critical responsibilities of a central unit that is charged with ensuring excellence and maintaining high standards.
- A firm commitment by the administration to maintain and strengthen the Graduate School would convey that the university strongly values graduate education, and would subsequently raise the stature of the university nationally.

Weakness of de-centralizing the graduate school structure:

- Decentralization of graduate administration would jeopardize, or surely weaken, the admissions and degree auditing processes now in place for national and international applicants; many additional staff or existing staff would require training to handle international degree auditing responsibilities.
- To require other units on campus (e.g., colleges, schools, departments) to absorb admissions and degree auditing processes would require either the imposition of increased responsibilities on existing staff or the need to hire and train additional staff. A decentralized model would require substantially more resources than does the current model to meet the demands of graduate education.
- A decentralized model, which relies on individual departments across the campus to monitor programs and program quality, is a concern for ensuring consistent high quality graduate education across all university programs.
- Decentralization would result in dissolution of the Graduate School, and such action would likely be viewed as very negative by the university's graduate faculty and graduate students, and have a deleterious impact on the reputation of the university's graduate programs nationally.

Although we recommend maintaining a centralized graduate school, some modifications in the current structure need to be made to properly support both graduate education and research, with each function properly and professionally staffed. We believe that the current leadership position of Vice President for Research and Dean of the Graduate School (VPRGE) results in neither responsibility receiving the attention both areas, so vital to the university, deserve. Consequently, we strongly recommend dividing the current leadership position into two separate positions.

The first recommended position, Vice President for Research, would be consistent with the president's reorganization that placed all university research activities, including those at the UCHC, under a single individual. This position would continue to report directly to the president. We note that previous VPRGE search committees have identified the serious challenges of finding a single individual capable of excelling in such a dual position, and have expressed concerns about the ability of a single individual to successfully navigate the challenges presented by each area.

The second recommended position would hold a dual title, yet have a single responsibility: graduate education, from which the incumbent could advocate for the needs of graduate students and graduate education. We recommend the creation of a position entitled Dean of the Graduate School and Vice Provost for Graduate Education which would report directly to the Provost. The reasons for the dual title are several. First, a clear message is sent to external constituencies and to the university community about the preeminence of graduate education at UConn. Second, as both dean and vice provost, the individual would have a seat on both the Dean's Council and the Provost's staff meetings. Third, as Vice Provost for Graduate Education, the position parallels the current position of Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, indicating an equal importance of both graduate and undergraduate education at the university.

Important Activities

Staff Strength

It was apparent to the committee that the current staff of the Graduate School is committed to the service and welfare of graduate students and faculty. The current staff has considerable expertise in the technical aspects of the admission of graduate students and in providing on-going support once students have matriculated (e.g., personal contact, academic counseling), as well as an array of other valuable services. The admissions, international, and records teams are cross-trained and frequently assist one another. These teams are clearly a strength of the unit.

Graduate Student Support

Although the committee found that the Graduate School staff are available to provide various academic and personal counseling services for students, in many instances graduate students are not aware that these services are available, and hence they rely solely on their academic advisor, their department head, or the department's coordinator of graduate studies. However, the assistance received by graduate students can vary greatly depending on the experience and commitment of their advisor, department head, or coordinator of graduate studies. Consequently, new efforts are needed to ensure that all graduate students are aware of these advocacy and information resources of the Graduate School, and are aware that they have access to reliable, consistent, and experienced advising through the Graduate School.

Recruitment of Underrepresented Students

The current graduate school staff is charged with representing university graduate programs to external organizations (e.g., federal and state government organizations, professional organizations). In recent years, there has been a commitment by the Graduate School to recruit students from underrepresented groups, yet there needs to be an even greater emphasis by the Graduate School and by the university administration, to increase these efforts that include recruitment and an increased financial commitment.

Consistency of Standards

The committee believes it is essential that there be consistent baseline measures and messages for all university graduate programs (i.e. university-wide quality control). Although we have found numerous instances where this occurs well, such as review of theses and dissertations for compliance with formatting specifications, ensuring compliance with graduate study policies & procedures, and administration of graduate scholarships & fellowships, other functions are being performed but are in need of improvement or enhancement. While academic progress reviews are being conducted, they need to be done so more efficiently.

Interdisciplinary Programs

Although the Graduate School is charged with providing oversight of interdisciplinary/interdepartmental graduate programs, the committee believes it is

critical that greater emphasis be given to this responsibility. There are concerns that programs are being developed absent of appropriate faculty input, review, and approval.

Graduate Student Training

The Graduate School provides some training for graduate students in research ethics, and has developed and offered a course focused on this area; this activity should continue and be widely publicized. Realizing the importance of this activity, some federal funding agencies require that graduate students supported by training grants (individual and group-based) participate in a formal course in responsible research conduct.

Grievance Resolution

The committee commends the Graduate School staff for their support in cases of misconduct or grievance involving graduate students and/or faculty. Their experience and sound advice are invaluable in effectively resolving such situations. Given this expertise, the committee recommends that the Graduate School be given formal oversight for such cases.

Areas of Enhancement/Improvement

1. The Graduate School should plan and provide opportunities to promote intellectual collaboration between and among graduate students and faculty across the university, including the development of cross-disciplinary colloquia.
2. Graduate School staff should actively promote the availability of a broad-range of support services to graduate students, including personalized counseling.
3. The Graduate School should assume the role of primary advocate for the postdoctoral fellow community. In some disciplines, post-docs are an important constituency of scholars and teachers-in-training who should be promoted by the Graduate School in policy development and professional development opportunities.
4. To elevate the status of holding a graduate faculty appointment, the criteria for these appointments to the graduate faculty must be rigorously and periodically reviewed—with an appreciation that junior faculty, while often lacking the experience of their more senior colleagues, nevertheless are frequently eager to participate in and have much to offer to graduate education.
5. The Graduate School should enhance support for graduate faculty. Such support could include the development of “boilerplates” to assist all faculty, especially junior faculty, in preparing grant applications, research ethics, and in the submission of university-wide grants (e.g., NIH training grants). Similarly, the Graduate School should provide workshops for graduate students and postdoctoral fellows on proposals, dissertations, and grant preparation and submission.

6. The committee urges the university to centralize the data gathering function for graduate education within the university Office of Institutional Research (OIR). While the review and approval of plans of study occurs, the plans used and reviewed in the Graduate School sometimes do not mesh well programmatically or administratively with the departmentally approved plans. The Graduate School collects and archives graduate education data, yet there appears to be no coordination with the Office of Institutional Research (OIR). In addition, movement to a fully electronic graduate application submission and review has been slow.
7. Significant deficiencies exist in the application of state-of-the-art technology to graduate functions. There exists a need to enhance interactions with the university Registrar's Office to increase the efficiency of graduate course entries in PeopleSoft. Priority should be given to the institution of an electronic admissions system, including the development of a user-friendly, fully on-line application, including the capability for on-line submission of personal statements, letters of reference, and *curriculum vitae*. Further, a fully electronic system for the submission of plans of study should be instituted. In addition, a listserv should be created for Graduate School/Center staff indicating which staff handles what functions. An on-line, easy-to-access list of policies and procedures that are "hot topics" would also be useful for graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and faculty.
8. The Graduate School should work more closely with departments in the recruitment of graduate students, especially students from underrepresented groups, and should create a list serve that would include all departmental administrative assistants who have responsibility for graduate admissions and/or graduate records.
9. The Graduate School should actively announce the availability of postdoctoral fellow and graduate student grants, training grants, and additional funding to enhance the diversity of the graduate student body, and should provide financial support to graduate students or departments who win highly prestigious individual or program awards.
10. The Graduate School should develop and implement programs, in conjunction with the Institute for Teaching & Learning, which will enhance the teaching skills of graduate students and post-doctoral fellows.
11. At present, the university has a paucity of private support for graduate student education. To ensure the long-term viability of the university's graduate programs, the committee believes it is essential that academic units and the University of Connecticut Foundation give priority to attracting extramural funds to support and recognize graduate students.

12. The committee believes that the current hard copy catalog should be discontinued and replaced by an on-line only version.
13. The Graduate School should assume a central role in working with departments to coordinate visiting scholars.

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