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Models of the New American Research University

Academic Organization Group

GRADUATE & INTERDISCIPLINARY EDUCATION

**Executive Summary:**

Graduate education must be an institutional priority in the New American Research University as it is essential to preparing the most highly trained members of our society – our future leaders, innovators, teachers, professors, and thinkers. However, at the University of Delaware, graduate education is under stress. During discussions for the strategic plan, the University community cited concerns that were organizational, curricular, and financial. In this document, we propose two changes to the university’s academic organization to address those concerns.

A number of faculty noted that it is difficult to develop new, interdisciplinary graduate programs. There is a strong desire for more flexibility, which would allow involvement of faculty across multiple departments and colleges, with the overarching goal of drawing upon a diversity of faculty expertise to develop new expertise in students.

The University of Delaware needs to develop a culture that is receptive to interdisciplinary activities and programs.

From a financial perspective, the university is feeling budgetary pressures both internally, following the implementation of RBB, and externally, with an increasingly competitive federal funding environment. These pressures have resulted in a shift whereby faculty and graduate students are asked to bear a larger share of the cost of graduate education, with students receiving inconsistent stipend and tuition support, and faculty paying more of the cost of their students’ education. For some faculty, funding postdoctoral fellows has become a less costly choice than funding graduate students. Thus financial pressures have placed negative stress on the University’s core role in graduate education.

Finally, there is a need for more robust support services for graduate students. During interviews, the community noted a lack availability of professional development and career services opportunities, graduate student housing (beyond the 50 or so beds available), and funding for graduate student-led organizations and programming.

To help address these challenges, we are recommending two important changes in academic organization:

1) Create a College of Graduate and Professional Education, with staff and budget commensurate with the size of the UD faculty and graduate student body, and consistent with universities of similar size and research intensity.

2) Encourage interdisciplinary programs by structuring joint faculty appointments in the University’s institutes and graduate college, to support both interdisciplinary research and graduate degrees, and offering several options for how they can be organized.

**1) Create a College of Graduate and Professional Education, with staff and budget commensurate with the size of the UD faculty and graduate student body.**

*Background*

Approximately 3600 graduate students are enrolled at the University of Delaware.  Within the central administration, the Office of Graduate and Professional Education (OGPE), an office headed by a Vice Provost (appointed from among the faculty) and supported by an Associate Vice Provost, four professional staff, and four administrative staff, service graduate education at UD.  The office processes all graduate admissions, and oversees the completion of masters and doctoral degrees and the submission of dissertations.

OGPE funds several graduate student organizations, such as the Graduate Student Government and the Black Graduate Student Association, but that support is limited by availability of funding.  In general, the Division of Student Life does **not** support any services, organizations, or activities for graduate students.

*Lessons Learned*

In the Path to Prominence, UD sought to be a leader in graduate education. There is concern, however, that over the past seven years support for graduate education has stagnated. Part of this concern stems from growing financial challenges around graduate education.

Historically, graduate students who received a stipend also received a commensurate tuition waiver; that is, the rate of the stipend as a percentage of the university minimum stipend was the same percentage of tuition remitted.

Since the implementation of RBB, graduate tuition support has been de-coupled from graduate stipends.  This means that there are students in multiple colleges who are awarded tuition remission and stipends in disparate proportions, which has created financial strain on affected students.  For example, a student receiving full stipend but only half tuition will either need to commit a majority of the stipend to paying the remainder of tuition (as off-campus jobs are generally prohibited for funded students) or else take a loan to cover the difference.  In this case, which is not uncommon, the illusion of being funded translates into unexpected financial hardship. Compounding the situation further is the fact that UD’s minimum graduate stipend is not presently competitive with its peer institutions. If the current situation continues, UD faculty may find it increasingly difficult to attract and retain the best graduate students.

Faculty are also feeling budgetary pressure, as several colleges now require that faculty advisors pay a percentage (presently 15%, though scheduled to grow) of their students’ tuition.  Moreover, hiring postdoctoral researchers instead of graduate students is often more economical, especially in the absence of incentives for taking on additional students. With no appreciable increase in research grant funding, faculty will be able to support fewer students in their labs, limiting access to a UD graduate degree.

The other way funding impacts graduate education is that the services that UD provides for graduate students are limited by the capacity of OGPE to provide such services. There is only minimal support for recruiting or diversity initiatives, and the relatively small number of professional staff in the office are not able to meet the demand for career services and professional development, among other programming. While some units within the University, such as Career Services, do extend their services to graduate students, they do not have the funding or the manpower to provide their services on the scale or in enough depth to fully and proactively serve the entire graduate student body. Finally, the University is providing limited graduate student housing (about 50 beds) and does not meet the need for accommodation.

Finally, there is also interest among faculty in developing a broader selection of interdisciplinary graduate degrees. In some instances, faculty have been reluctant to move ahead over concerns about dean and chair support, about the complexities of cross-college financials and over ambiguities around new interdisciplinary programs, which do not have a single home department or college.

The quality of graduate education at UD cannot improve unless the university is willing to commit (culturally, as well as monetarily) to improving the graduate student experience.

*National and Global Trends*

Many AAU institutions organize their graduate studies under a separate college, which may or may not itself be degree-granting, and most of these colleges are staffed at a significantly higher staff-to-student ratio than is OGPE.  Moreover, the fact that a university has formally devoted a college, its highest-level organizational unit, solely to graduate education announces that graduate education is an institutional priority.

*Strategic Schemes*

Reorganization of OGPE into a College of Graduate and Professional Studies would generate the following benefits:

* Strategic leadership and analysis around development of new graduate programs, including job market analyses, and data from comparator institutions.
* Periodic review and evaluation of existing graduate degree programs, in a more focused way than standard Academic Program Reviews are able to implement.
* Coordinated cross-college recruitment and retention efforts, including those specifically focused on building a diverse graduate student population.
* Strategic and operational leadership in seeking new sources of external funding for graduate students, working in close coordination with the colleges and institutes, the Research Office, and the Development Office. With appropriate staffing, a college could ensure that UD is targeting all significant sources of external funding for graduate study (e.g., the NSF National Research Traineeship, the US Dept. of Education GAAN, the NSF Graduate Research Fellowship Program, and many other federal, foundation and individual donor opportunities).
* Analysis and implementation of graduate student funding standards, including both tuition and stipends, across the various colleges. Here, the college will need to carefully consider the academic and “cultural” differences between “traditional” versus “professional” graduate programs, and work to provide standardization within each of those portfolios, rather than between both of them. A dedicated associate or assistant dean for each portfolio, for example, would be able to provide appropriate coordination.
* Streamlined models and templates for new graduate degree program proposals. With appropriate staffing, a College of Graduate and Professional Studies could assist faculty groups in designing programs, and in developing proposals for approval.
* An optional organizational home for interdisciplinary degrees.  This option would provide an administrative structure to facilitate opportunity and encouragement for collaborative projects. Such interdisciplinary degrees, in turn, will encourage additional graduate student enrollment. (This idea is expounded upon further in the next section.)
* Services to students that are not provided to graduate students by other academic units, whether by developing them in-house or by providing resources to strengthen and enhance existing ones (such as Career Services).  A similar initiative already exists on South Campus: the Graduate Student Advisory Committee [<http://sites.udel.edu/gsac/>], a graduate student organization initiated by the Dean’s Office of the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources to support graduate students in that college (and also in the Biomechanics and Movement Science and Kinesiology and Physiology programs) who are physically located on South Campus.

**2) Encourage interdisciplinary programs to support interdisciplinary research and the development of future graduate degrees.**

*Background and Introduction*

UD has six interdisciplinary graduate programs. Two examples are the Biomechanics and Movement Science (BIOMS) and Water Science and Policy (WS&P) degree programs. Each program arose from the interests of a group of faculty representing multiple colleges, and each program was catalyzed and assisted by a center or institute in its development. The more-established BIOMS program and the new WS&P program are successful, both in terms of attracting excellent students and in placing those students in jobs after graduation.

*National and Global Trends*

A study conducted by the National Council for Science and the Environment found that among environmentally-focused institutes and centers in the US, about a third serve as the administrative home for interdisciplinary environmental and sustainability education programs, particularly at the graduate level.[[1]](#footnote-1)

*Lessons Learned*

During multiple interviews with the University community, a frequent comment focused on the need for interdisciplinary research and education opportunities at UD, and the perception that the University has become compartmentalized into silos that hamper collaboration. The implementation of RBB was frequently cited as a complicating factor; there is the perception that the current structure has dis-incentivized creative experimentation and collaborative, extra-departmental work.

Nevertheless, the University of Delaware has exceptional potential to support creative and successful interdisciplinary programs. While today UD has relatively few interdisciplinary graduate programs, there is interest among faculty in developing more. In particular, UD’s centers and institutes can serve a central role in this capacity.

A recent example is the Water Science & Policy (WS&P) program. The Delaware Environmental Institute (DENIN), which was established in 2009, was instrumental in developing the program, which was launched in 2011. Today, the program involves some 30 faculty members across four colleges and is attracting excellent students. Like the BIOMS program, WS&P is jointly administered by a cross-college faculty group, with a faculty director.

Currently, faculty may affiliate with DENIN informally; however we are proposing that institutes would have the option to create formal joint appointments. Faculty who affiliate could then also work together on new interdisciplinary graduate programs, among other joint projects.

There may also be faculty not associated with an institute who are nonetheless interested in collaborating to develop interdisciplinary graduate programs. (The new PhD in Economics Education is one program that fits this model.) Those faculty would be able to form a unit within the graduate college, where they would be able to receive some administrative support for developing such a program and where it would have an academic home.

*Strategic Schemes*

Allowing joint faculty appointments at UD’s institutes and in the graduate college would support and encourage the development of new interdisciplinary graduate degrees, and would offer the following benefits:

* Strategic coordination across colleges in thematic areas.
* Leadership in seeking funding for graduate students.
* Coordination with the College of Graduate and Professional Studies and other colleges in diversity recruitment and retention programming.
* Increased opportunity for graduate students, including reaching into previously untapped markets, and professional development for affiliated graduate students.
* Physical location where students and faculty from different disciplines can work, meet and otherwise interact.

**Short-Term Tasks**

The creation of a graduate college will require considerable planning. Factors to be considered include the review of current funding algorithms under RBB to optimize services and programs administered centrally, as well as such professional programs that might be managed at the academic level and to identify the degree to which university graduate education functions would be centralized in the graduate college. Such functions not already under OGPE purview include:

* Enforcing a consistent standard of funding rates across all colleges, to ensure that the stipend and tuition remission rates are equitable for all funded graduate students among and within “traditional” and “professional” programs.

Providing student services and programming commensurate with what the Office of Student Life and Career Services provides for undergraduate students, or redistributing funds to the existing units for them to enhance current programming.

* Housing interdisciplinary graduate programs, and providing an organizational structure in which to incubate new ones.
* Reviewing the process by which permission is granted to institutes or centers to award graduate degrees and determining relevant policies.
1. Vincent S., Bunn S., and L. Sloane (2012). *Interdisciplinary Environmental and Sustainability Education: Results from the 2012 Census of U.S. Four-Year Colleges and Universities.* National Council for Science and the Environment: Washington, D.C. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)