

Graduate College Review Report October 26, 2016

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A university's success and prestige rises and falls with the quality of its faculty and research, and by extension therefore, by the quality of its graduate education. Faculty research is fueled by graduate students, and faculty reputations are built in part by the success of their students. As a consequence, a university's ability to recruit and retain high-quality faculty depends on its ability to recruit and support high-quality graduate students. Today, the landscape of graduate education has become more complex as the scope of employment opportunities for individuals with graduate degrees has broadened well beyond traditional academic positions, and continues to do so. These changes must be factored into how students are trained and prepared for life after graduate school. Given all of this, it is clear that graduate education is an intrinsic component of both the research and the teaching missions of the University of Iowa (UI) and that the Graduate College (GC) has the potential of being one of the most important partners for ensuring the University of Iowa's continued reputation as a leading institution of American higher education by assuring quality and addressing challenges in graduate education

The GC was last reviewed in 2004. Since then, there have been many changes within the GC, as well as in the University more generally, and in the national understanding of the role of Graduate Education. This committee was charged with reviewing the current effectiveness of the GC in promoting the research mission of the University, its effectiveness in promoting student success across the University, and how well the administrative structure of the college meets its needs, including the needs of the departments and programs that report to the GC. The committee met with representatives from a wide range of units relevant to graduate education, staff within the GC, and graduate student representatives. It reviewed the procedures, programs, administrative structure and other details of the college, and it received comments from individual members of the Graduate Faculty. Below is a summary of the committee's observations and a set of recommendations for increasing the effectiveness of the GC at the UI.

Observations

There is widespread support for the GC across the University. The college is viewed as a national leader in understanding and adapting to changes in national trends within graduate

education. In our discussions, the GC was also recognized for having creatively identified solutions to meet both the needs of individual students that are not easily met within their programs, as well as the needs of programs that do not fit well within other units of the University. The recent developments in both the Office of Graduate Development and Postdoctoral Affairs and the Academic Affairs office of the newly restructured GC are perceived as excellent in many ways and are successfully moving the University in productive directions.

While recognized for its creativity and innovative programs, almost all of the groups that the committee met with felt that graduate education, in general, is severely under-resourced at UI, a shortfall that is detrimental to the University. In addition, ineffective procedural integration and/or communication across different units relevant to graduate education throughout the University seems to prevent units, including the GC, from being maximally effective in their support of graduate education.

Graduate Success

The focus on graduate success is something that distinguishes the GC within the University and nationally among its peers. The GC has been at the front edge of a nationwide recognition that graduate schools are both practically and ethically obligated to consider where their students will be placed following completion of their degrees. While there is a long-term and probably permanent decline in the number of academic positions available for new PhDs, there are also increasingly larger numbers of careers open within the broader modern economy for individuals with graduate degrees. The GC is in a position to facilitate awareness of and preparation for the full range of career options that are open to today's graduate students.

The GC's recent reorganization included the creation of an Office of Graduate Development and Postdoctoral Affairs, leading a robust program of new initiatives supporting graduate success. It, and its precursors, have developed and implemented multiple innovative programs aimed at increasing skills in communication, providing guidance for developing careers both within and outside of the academy, facilitating the acquisition of external Fellowships, as well as raising the profile of graduate education at the UI within national and international communities. These efforts are recognized across the University as innovative and highly advantageous to UI. Their success is reflected in part through the fact that student participation in these programs may reach a point where the GC cannot handle them all with available resources.

Changes to the Fellowship and other Funding Programs through the GC

Over the past decade, the GC has significantly changed how resources are distributed between programs and students. These changes have been in part a response to diminishing resources available to the GC, as well as an effort to creatively maximize the impact of those resources to improve graduate education and student success. These changes began with the elimination of block allocations made to graduate programs, redirecting those resources to a Strategic Initiative Fund (SIF) program, whereby individual graduate programs could apply

for funds to support innovative initiatives within their program (e.g., an RA-ship targeted at supporting students through a year of field work). Further reductions in GC resources forced the elimination of the SIF program and a focus on directing resources to fellowship programs supporting student success. This trend has fed a sense among graduate programs of diminishing support for graduate education. The SIF program represented a strategic approach to maximizing GC influence over program quality and innovation, but its subsequent loss has contributed to diminished influence.

In response to decreasing and uncertain budgets, the GC undertook a major renovation of its Fellowship Program two years ago. Prior to the changes, it offered two major recruiting fellowships (the [Presidential Graduate Research Fellowship](#) and the [Dean's Graduate Research Fellowship](#), which was targeted particularly at recruiting members of underrepresented groups to UI graduate programs), a year-long dissertation-year fellowship (Ballard and Seashore Dissertation Fellowship) and smaller summer fellowships that students who had completed their comprehensive exams were eligible to apply for. The changes eliminated both of the Presidential and Dean's recruiting fellowships and created a lesser one ([The Graduate College Iowa Recruitment Fellowship](#)) that consists of multi-year top-off funds and summer support, with programs being responsible for the base academic-year support through an assistantship of some form. In addition, the [Ballard and Seashore Dissertation Fellowship](#) was reduced from an academic year fellowship to a single-semester fellowship, but the number of them awarded was increased and the breadth of disciplines to which it is open widened. A new semester-long fellowship was also added for mid-stage students who recently completed comprehensive exams (the [Graduate College Post-Comprehensive Research Award](#)). Finally, a significantly larger number of [summer fellowships](#) are now granted. As a consequence of these changes, a greater number of graduate students now receive some kind of support from the GC than before, and data indicate that students who receive GC support are completing their programs more quickly than had been the norm. However, the amount of support provided to any given student has decreased considerably through these changes.

The changes to the fellowship program represent thoughtful and creative solutions to the serious challenge of having both insufficient and uncertain funding. However, it is clear that they are having negative impacts on graduate programs and on the role of the GC within the University. While specifics vary, four broad issues emerged consistently in our discussions about these changes with Deans, Directors of graduate programs, members of the Graduate Council, and in written comments submitted from individual Graduate Faculty.

- 1) The lack of any substantial recruitment fellowships has undermined the ability of programs to compete with peer institutions for the strongest students.
- 2) Many believe that the loss of a targeted recruitment tool for members of underrepresented groups, in particular, has seriously hampered efforts to increase diversity at the graduate level. The UI is a national outlier in its lack of a targeted fellowship program for underrepresented minorities. The loss of the Dean's Fellowship, without replacement by an analogous mechanism within disciplinary colleges or through some other mechanism, was cited by multiple groups as

among the reasons for the loss of a recent large Sloan Foundation grant aimed at increasing minority representation within graduate education at the UI. Although additional Recruitment Fellowships are available to programs for minority recruitment, these are not seen as competitive compared to dedicated minority recruitment incentives employed by other institutions.

- 3) The metric-based criteria (primarily time-to-degree and completion rate) on which eligibility to participate in fellowship programs is based is insufficiently flexible to account for discipline differences and is eroding the ability of individual graduate programs, some of which are highly competitive nationally, to thrive.
- 4) The SIF program provided a mechanism for the GC to encourage experimentation and innovation in how programs supported students and encourage student progress. Its loss has negatively impacted the ability of graduate programs to transform and improve their quality and national standing.

Graduate College Program Reviews

The GC conducted two large-scale reviews of individual graduate programs, one that was completed in 2010 (tasked to the GC by former Provost Wallace Loh) that included all non-professional degree programs across the University, and a second that was just completed this past summer that included only PhD programs. These reviews represented a massive effort on the part of both the GC and the individual programs, which collected the data and provided a report to the GC. Positive outcomes from the 2010 review include reduced times to degree and increased completion rates. In addition, several structural changes to programs (merging of some and closing of others) occurred. Some of the Deans reported that the review process has been a helpful mechanism for communicating with individual programs in their colleges, but this impact has been uneven across colleges. The GC has used the outcome of these reviews to guide its strategic allocation of limited resources, mainly fellowships.

While these program reviews had many positive outcomes, both individual programs and colleges also reported significant limitations. The reviews were conducted *en masse* with a focus on specific metrics (i.e. time-to-degree and percent completion rates) which are difficult and can be misleading to compare across disciplines. Benchmarking of programs occurred across programs within the University rather than, as is typical in other universities, against those programs at peer institutions with whom UI competes for the best students and faculty. Feedback to individual programs following the most recent review was brief with little program-specific guidance regarding recommendations for improvement, and was structured in a way that made it difficult to compare the most recent review to the outcome of the previous (2010) review. Finally, the role of the GC in regard to any outcome of these reviews has been limited to service as a conduit of information and for how the increasingly limited GC resources are allocated.

Resources Dedicated to Graduate Education

Based on discussions with the Provost and Deans, the Review Committee's understanding is that financial support for graduate education at UI occurs primarily through the disciplinary colleges which are expected to allocate portions of their budgets to their graduate programs. This support occurs mainly in the form of Teaching Assistantships which colleges allocate to individual departments based on the size of their undergraduate programs. Many departments and programs without large undergraduate missions receive relatively little support through their colleges. The GC plays little or no role in strategic planning for the allocation of graduate support through the colleges nor in any review of the effectiveness of the allocation of college resources to graduate education.

The GC appears to be hamstrung in its ability to help itself generate its own resources. Access to support and resources at the Foundation has been essentially absent historically. The assignment this year of a Foundation staff member to the GC is a promising development, but unlikely to tap the potential that the GC represents. The GC is only one of a growing number of units in the assigned Foundation staff-member's portfolio, and the priority of the GC within that portfolio was unclear to the review committee. Compared to other Universities, there appears to be limited understanding of the kinds of things that could generate interest among donors interested in graduate education in general, in addition to interest in specific graduate programs. Discussions with Deans and Program/Center Directors regarding fundraising reflected a territorial attitude, one which appeared to lead units to be concerned about which donors belong to which units, thus resulting in what the committee perceived as missed opportunities for a cooperative effort across units that would be focused on graduate education.

The committee identified no other mechanisms open to the GC to increase its resources (e.g., through sharing of tuition revenue, graduate application fees, revenue from professional certificate programs, etc.). In contrast, access to these and other revenue streams are common for graduate colleges at other Universities with whom UI competes for the best graduate students and faculty.

Impact of Graduate Assistant Unionization.

Graduate assistants are unionized at the UI. Any graduate student who receives a teaching or research assistantship that provides service to the University is automatically a member of the union (COGS). Every two years a new contract is negotiated with the University. One outcome of these negotiations over the last decade is that the minimum stipend, tuition scholarship, and benefits package has changed from being among the worst of the big-10 schools to being among the best. This change removed a barrier to recruitment that existed for many programs in the past and thus reflects well on the University in many ways.

While recognizing the importance of appropriate levels of support for graduate students, administrators across the University expressed concerns that unionization has created

challenges in regard to providing support for graduate education at UI. With each student requiring greater support, fewer students can be supported.

Two general observations were made by the committee coming out of discussions about unionization and related topics:

- 1) First, while the minimum level of support for UI graduate students has increased significantly since unionization, the support package offered at UI is well within the range of those offered at peer institutions. The stipend level this year is a little less than \$19,000, compared to, for example, \$17,000 (on average) at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and \$22,000 at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Full tuition scholarships and healthcare benefits are standard components of graduate support packages across the nation.
- 2) Second, graduate education seems to be primarily understood by UI's central administration as an expensive component of the University's teaching mission, and as a result, they appear to pay relatively little regard to the role of graduate education as an essential foundation of the University's research mission. If this is an accurate perception, then it places UI at a disadvantage relative to peer institutions that reckon graduate education with regard to research productivity as well as training.

Graduate College Administrative Structure and Staffing

The graduate college recently undertook a major reorganization of its administrative structure. The new structure consists of a single Associate Dean (down from three) who oversees two Assistant Deans, one in charge of the newly established Office of Graduate Development and Postdoctoral Affairs and one in charge of the newly reconfigured Office of Academic Affairs, as well as a Faculty Administrative Fellow. In addition, seven interdisciplinary programs, and five departments or programs report to the GC. Several of these units include faculty lines with tenure homes in the GC.

The restructuring is recent, but so far appears to be largely successful. Both of the main offices represent services that are best provided by a central GC rather than disciplinary colleges or programs. The graduate success initiatives coming out of the Office of Graduate Development and Postdoctoral Affairs are considered excellent by both faculty and students and are highly subscribed (see separate sections above).

The Academic Affairs Office is implementing significant changes to the way records are kept and data are collected that should be useful in the future. A potential limitation of the new structure is that faculty participation in Academic Affairs within the GC is limited to the oversight provided by the Associate Dean, whose portfolio is extensive. The Academic Affairs Office staff is experienced, well-regarded by constituent units, and well placed to implement new initiatives of the college. However, academic affairs often require faculty perspective, something that has been minimized through the new organization. Actual concerns for how academic issues are currently administered by the GC were not apparent during the review

process, but how recent changes affect these functions of the GC should continue to be monitored.

A third component of the GC organization is that of diversity and inclusion. This aspect of the GC is less well clarified, and is addressed in a separate section of this report.

It was apparent to the committee that the GC staff members are stretched dangerously thin, and run the risk of failing due to their own success. With each new successful initiative coming out of the college (e.g., the new series of workshops and support services for increasing acquisition of major external fellowships), it generates new work for the staff because students are using the services. Consequences of the stress on the system are showing up in inconsistency in response rates and accuracy in day-to-day services that the GC provides to programs and others across the University, as well as in a sense from the staff that they are at a breaking point.

Graduate Admissions

There is substantial confusion regarding graduate admissions and the role of the GC in the process. Graduate Coordinators (staff) who are responsible for handling graduate applications are pleased with the recent move from paper to electronic submissions and seem to recognize that graduate admissions is run out of the central University admissions office that also runs undergraduate admissions. In contrast, many directors of graduate programs (faculty) expressed dissatisfaction with inflexibility and inelegance of the new electronic system. Several Graduate Directors and Deans were critical of the current system, and suggested that UI should have had an electronic system long before this. Frustration was expressed at not being allowed to use third-party admissions systems, given the lack of a good local one, and the GC was mistakenly believed to be receiving application fees through the admissions process.

These observations reflect ways in which the scope of the GC is misunderstood. Graduate admissions is run centrally through the same office that runs undergraduate admissions, not through the GC. Admissions fees do not pass through the GC. The prohibition against third-party systems comes from the University because the goal is to run everything through MAUI. The graduate system was delayed until after the implementation of the undergraduate system, and is limited because it was built on top of the undergraduate system.

Interdisciplinary Programs

The GC serves as the administrative home for seven interdisciplinary programs. Whereas other graduate programs receive support through their disciplinary colleges, these programs receive support through the graduate college. Interdisciplinary research, and by extension interdisciplinary graduate education is increasingly a focus of funding agencies. It is therefore important that it be well supported at the UI.

Overall, the central position of the GC is well suited to the administrative needs of these interdisciplinary graduate programs, particularly those that span multiple colleges. These programs generally appear satisfied with the level of oversight and support they receive from the GC, with the most significant support being in the form of assistantships for their first-year students. There are, however, challenges that these programs face by being housed in the GC. They do not have access to resources that come from links to undergraduate programs (e.g., teaching experience and financial support gained through teaching assistantships), and other supports and recognition from participating colleges can be uneven and changeable. In particular, those programs that were included in the new Biomedical Sciences umbrella organization are concerned regarding how they will be supported moving forward. Although the umbrella is perceived to have improved support and coordination across sub-programs, this is seen as dependent on unstructured cooperation between the GC and CCOM, and so its future could be imperiled by changes in leadership or commitment from either administrative unit. This uncertainty also affects biomedical programs that are not formally part of the umbrella structure, but still depend on shared cooperation between GC and CCOM for support and administration.

Departments and Programs that Report to the Graduate College

For varied historical reasons the GC has five separate programs or departments that report to it, Center for the Book, the International Writing Program, School of Library and Information Science, School of Urban and Regional Planning and the University of Iowa Press. Each of these units is outstanding and all contribute enormously to the visibility of UI nationally and internationally. And in several cases, the units were languishing prior to being housed by the GC.

Although the units expressed that the GC is very supportive and has been creative in providing support over the years, some of them are unable to develop further because of limitations that are consequences of their home being within the GC. Some communicated concerns that they are in danger of losing what gains they have made due to an inability to access mechanisms of revenue generation, as well as other structural limitations. An example of a limitation for some of the programs is that creating faculty lines is difficult to impossible with their current placement in the GC. Another example is lack of access to undergraduate programs. Another is an inability of some to fund raise through the Foundation because of their association with the GC. It is difficult to offer generalized observations regarding these units because each has its own story. Some are well-placed in the GC and others might thrive more in other homes.

With regard to impact of these programs/departments on the GC, it invests significant resources both financial and human into them. Each contributes in unique ways to the central mission of graduate education—a theme focused on writing, for example—but on the whole, the stewardship of these programs represents a charge that is a significant burden on the GC.

Role of the Graduate College in Diversity and Inclusion Efforts

Efforts surrounding diversity and inclusion efforts in graduate education at UI are distributed across the University in a largely uncoordinated way. It is clear that there is a common goal to support these efforts across the relevant groups, but discussions during this review process revealed significant coordination and communication difficulties that have had practical consequences.

With regard to the GC, a recent problem has been the discontinuance of the Dean's Fellowship (see *Changes to the Fellowship and other Funding Programs through the GC* section above). The elimination of the recruitment fellowship was a decision that the GC reached because they could not sustain these programs in the face of reduced and uncertain budgets. However, coordination of the discontinuance of this program with other units (Colleges, Provost Office, Office of Vice President for Research, and/or the Chief Diversity Office) could have minimized the impact of their loss on efforts to recruit and support underrepresented minorities to graduate programs at UI. A specific consequence of the lack of this coordination according to reports from multiple groups interviewed during this process is the loss of the UI Sloan Foundation grant. Clearly, the loss of the Dean's Fellowship is not the only contributing factor in this loss. Rather, the observation is that coordination across all the entities that have an interest in the critical issue of increasing diversity and inclusion in graduate education at UI is lacking. Moreover, for the purposes of this review, is the fact that the GC's central position means that it is in an excellent position to facilitate that coordination.

Recommendations

Based on the observations summarized above, the committee offers the following recommendations.

- 1) Deans of the individual colleges appear interested in clarifying the role of the GC in supporting and coordinating graduate education, but lack a structure to discuss how coordination of graduate education across campus could be improved. The committee recommends appointing a committee comprised of Deans from the individual colleges and an advisor from outside of the UI to structure this effort and formalize it as a priority. A general charge for this committee would be to provide recommendations for improving coordination of graduate support across the university, increase transparency of how central monies are used for graduate support, and increase consistency of graduate program reviews, with a focus on comparing programs to competitive peer programs. A specific charge would be to consider replacing GC program reviews with a more formal integration of the GC into regular departmental reviews that occur within the colleges. Goals of this change would include making reviews consistent across colleges and having the focus be on comparisons to competitive peer programs. An outside advisor with a broad view of different models of graduate education and administration, as well as extensive experience, would be important in this process. An example of such a person for this advisory role is Hunter Rawlings, who served as President of the AAU and is a former UI President.

- 2) The five programs/centers that currently report to the GC (Center for the Book, Library and Information Sciences, Urban and Regional Planning, International Writing Program, University of Iowa Press) are a drain on GC resources and focus, but each program has unique needs that are difficult to assess from a general review. A committee should be appointed to develop a reorganization plan regarding these five programs/centers. The charge of this committee should be two fold. First, it should recommend a change (or not) of administrative home for each unit. Second, it should review the impact of that change on the GC. The effectiveness of the GC in its central mission of supporting graduate education cannot be undermined through a reduction in resources due to these changes. The GC has invested heavily and successfully in the support of these units. Punishing that success with reduction in what it can do more broadly for graduate education across the University would be counterproductive.
- 3) Revise the system and distribution of Graduate Fellowships at the UI to allow support for both recruiting and completion, and maximize flexibility in supporting the different needs of colleges and programs. In particular, consider reinstatement of recruitment fellowships, while retaining the advantages of increased support for students at middle and later stages of their programs. This will probably require additional and/or shifted resources, which could be leveraged by cooperation with colleges to tailor fellowships to the needs of their unique student populations. A model that includes a mix of centrally GC controlled Fellowships and College controlled fellowships that are earmarked for specific purposes like recruitment, diversity support, and completion could be more effective than the current system. Both local views at college and program levels and central views at the GC level can contribute to the overall success of fellowships.
- 4) Complete the reorganization of the graduate college, filling out the support staff that is necessary to maintain the success of the Office of Graduate Development and Postdoctoral Affairs and the Academic Affairs Office and to fulfill the day to day services that the college provides to graduate programs and other units. Provide the staff support necessary to maintain the momentum of the graduate success initiatives coming out of the GC.
- 5) Elevate responsibilities for coordinating diversity and inclusion within the GC to senior leadership. Current organization places this responsibility under an office that is very successfully focused on promoting graduate and postdoctoral success, perhaps to the detriment of diversity concerns as a distinct mandate. Separating these responsibilities with more direct reporting and responsibility for Diversity and Inclusion Coordinators within the portfolio of senior leadership would improve the visibility of this effort across campus.
- 6) Given the increasingly important role of interdisciplinary research, and the central role of the GC in interdisciplinary graduate education, particular focus should be given to assuring the GC has sufficient resources to support these efforts, and that the use of those resources is coordinated well with disciplinary colleges.