

External Reviewers' Report

Graduate School Program Review

University of North Carolina, Charlotte

July 25, 2019

The Review Team.

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Executive Summary.

The three external reviewers received the self-study and other materials related to the review two weeks prior to the site visit, and conducted the site visit July 8-10, 2019. The team met with the Graduate School staff, staff from the Center for Graduate Life, graduate program directors, a diverse group of academic leaders, a small but diverse group of graduate students, the Vice Chancellor for Research, and the Provost.

All groups spoke highly of the Graduate School as a whole. It is clear that the Graduate School staff are fully engaged and passionate about their role at the university. The Graduate School is managed well and the limited resources available to the school are used effectively. The team identified several cross-cutting issues and in this report makes a series of recommendations related to enrollment, student life, quality of graduate programs, and student funding. These recommendations should be evaluated with an eye on how: (1) the Graduate School fits within the vision of UNCC as an urban research university, (2) to increase the visibility of the Graduate School in the greater Charlotte metropolitan area, (3) to enhance and support a diverse and culturally aware graduate student population, (4) to improve funding for recruiting, admissions, and matriculated student support, and (5) to optimize the operation of the Graduate School administrative structure.

Overview.

The review team was asked to respond to four questions, keeping in mind the following four strategic areas identified in the self-study: (1) enrollment, (2) student success, (3) quality of education, and (4) student funding in the 2020-25 Strategic Plan. For questions 1-3, we have compiled a summary of responses and common themes from our meetings

with the different stakeholder groups. Question 4 is addressed based on our discussions and conclusions and are grouped by each of the four strategic areas above.

Question 1. What does the Graduate School do well?

The UNC Charlotte Graduate School is a viable organization, provides valuable services and serves as a vital resource for graduate education and graduate students at UNC Charlotte. The graduate school staff are enthusiastic and keen to provide outstanding service in support of graduate education throughout the life cycle from applicant to enrolled students, graduate and then alumni as well as to the faculty, staff and administrators of UNC Charlotte. The Graduate School executes its roles and responsibilities well under some limiting conditions and constraints.

Our goal in this report and with our recommendations is to encourage the Graduate School with the support of the Provost's Office to evolve to be able to better serve the needs and desires of a rapidly changing society, the diverse needs of citizens and to do so as an integral part of an urban research university.

Based upon the feedback and comments during our interviews, many strengths of the Graduate School were identified. Among these were:

- Funding for graduate students.
- Development of systems that assist in graduate education (e.g., Degreeworks, eGEM, eGrad, GPDNet).
- Professional development programs and the space provided through the Center for Graduate Life (CGL).
- Support services for graduate students throughout their life cycle (admissions through graduation).
- Communication with academic programs administrators and with higher administration.
- Willingness to solve problems.
- An emphasis on and promotion of holistic admissions review.
- Support and programming to improve student understanding and appreciation for career alternatives outside of academia.
- Partnerships with other divisions at the university that enhance the student experience or programmatic strength (e.g. Office of Student Life, Research Office)

Question 2. What can be improved?

During our interviews, we also heard some concerns and areas for improvement. These are expected. Instead of enumerating them individually here, those themes and our own observations have been incorporated into our recommendations.

Question 3. Are there threats/risks to success, and if so what are they?

- There is no university-level strategy for growth of graduate programs or how to market and brand the university as an urban research university.
- Lack of transparency in the university budget model, how graduate assistantships are funded, and how tuition increments are used to support the programs that generate the increments.
- Diversity of the student body both in terms of domestic and international students - with the exception of a few programs, such as those in Education and Social Work, there is little diversity in the graduate population. Furthermore, the viability of some of the largest graduate programs could be in jeopardy because most of the students come from one country (India). If that country's loan or other support programs are decreased or eliminated, there will be greatly reduced applicants and enrollments for these programs.
- Decline in applications, especially in programs that are heavily reliant on international students.
- Funding policies at the state level in terms of tuition waivers versus reimbursements, especially with regard to out of state tuition for graduate assistants. The policy also disincentivizes funding research assistantships on grants. This is a statewide policy issue and would need to be addressed in collaboration with the rest of the NC higher education system.
- Competition from cheaper, but less quality on-line programs.
- Apparent lack of quality assessment of graduate programs. Academic program review occurs, but it is not clear whether there are graduate program metrics, and if there are metrics, they apparently are not shared with the Graduate School.

Question 4. What are the most important recommendations?

A. Cross-cutting Recommendations:

The following seven recommendations cut across all four strategic areas.

1. It is critical to develop a shared vision for graduate education at both the university and graduate school levels that inform priorities and drive decision making.
2. Increase visibility of graduate education at the university and the greater Charlotte area in all aspects (e.g., website, signage, communication strategies)
3. Create an entity for diversity, retention, and inclusion both for recruitment and ongoing student support focused on graduate education.
4. Develop and foster more collaborative efforts with GPDs, Graduate Council, academic leadership and the Graduate School.

5. Examine policies and procedures to lower barriers to enhance graduate education and research.
6. Establish a close alliance with the Vice Provost for Research (VPR) to develop a shared voice for graduate education and research. This is something that the provost must support with not only the graduate dean and VPR, but also with the academic deans and other administrators/campus leaders who can further this mission.
7. Examine, as part of the strategic planning process, the Graduate School's organizational structure to fully describe current roles and functions leading to a vision of an ideal, cross-functional, efficient and transparent organization (using Lean methodology). This would be most effective if a neutral, external person with experience in academic organizational design and strategic planning could be brought in to facilitate. Each unit within the Graduate School should have individual strategic plans that align with and roll up to the broader Graduate School and University plans.
8. Examine how communications function across the office with regard to internal and external functions, web site, social media, recruiting, etc. All aspects and collaboration between public relations and communications persons.

B. Recommendations related to the four questions:

1. Enrollment:

Given the recent challenges that the institution has faced in terms of decreasing application numbers as well as declines in enrolled graduate students, it is critical that the application process be overhauled to something much more nimble and customizable. We strongly urge the institution to explore implementation of the Slate (Technolutions) system. An ever-increasing number of institutions across the academic landscape are moving to this environment, and it is especially amenable to the decentralized, program-level process that characterizes admissions at the graduate level. Furthermore, there is a very active Slate community both nationally as well as specific to institutions in North Carolina using the platform that serves as an excellent source of information to assist in developing a robust product. We heard that there was the notion of using Salesforce to serve this role, but that product was not designed specifically for the application processes, and given the need in today's competitive environment in gaining applicants, we strongly urge not pursuing that option.

Furthermore, given the national and statewide competition for applicants combined with the need to promote program-level recruiting efforts, it is critical that funding be made available to support general recruitment by the Graduate School as well as program-specific efforts. The current lack of recruitment support severely limits the ability of UNC-Charlotte to be a 'player' in graduate education.

Another critical element is converting the abundant data available to monitor and assess various aspects of graduate education into actionable information. This is especially critical if an informed enrollment management plan is to be developed that effectively engages stakeholders across the institution.

There is a need to identify niche research areas at UNC Charlotte that can be used to catalyze growth in doctoral programs in areas not already offered at other UNC schools. Successful examples at UNCC include interdisciplinary programs in bioinformatics and health psychology. These cross-cutting programs can provide attractive, non-duplicative, programs that: (1) take advantage of existing strengths at the university, (2) enhance the visibility of those strengths, (3) increase competitiveness for external funding, (4) provide access to PhD students to faculty in non-doctoral programs, (5) attract and retain high-quality faculty, and (6) attract and retain an increased number of high-quality graduate students and postdoctoral fellows.

Finally, there should be a renewed effort to work to set new minimum admissions standards that are more in line with best practices to enhance and modernize the process. One area where there has been significant movement nationally is in the use of GRE scores. Too often they are used incorrectly and can negatively impact diversity goals/aspirations. Many graduate schools have left their use as an admissions assessment tool to the discretion of an individual program, and we would encourage this approach at UNC-Charlotte as well. Furthermore, promoting holistic admission is also a role that the Graduate School should play a central role in. Under-represented minorities are primarily confined to a single college, the College of Education, and there needs to be a more concerted effort across the graduate landscape.

2. Student Success:

In establishing the Center for Graduate Life (CGL), the Graduate School has created a space and place for graduate students and many professional development programs. We encourage the continuation and expansion of these opportunities for graduate students. The feedback from graduate students is extremely positive and the CGL was identified as a strength of the Graduate School as well as a focal point of interactions with graduate students.

We encourage the development of a post-admissions survey to identify needs and interests of the graduate students so that they Graduate School and CGL can better meet their needs. This survey could also help in developing and implementing programs for individuals of diverse backgrounds and enhance a sense of shared community and greater cultural understanding. These efforts should be

coordinated with the establishment of a concerted effort (e.g., individual, office) focused on recruitment, diversity and inclusion.

Student success must be measured not only through professional development programs through the CGL but integrated throughout the Graduate School and its personnel who provide students services throughout the life-cycle of a graduate student (e.g., recruitment, admissions, academic progress, degree completion and graduation/alumni). There needs to be intentional collaboration across units within the Graduate School including “one-stop shopping” and cross training of staff. This would be helpful to potential students, current students and academic units and their coordinators and program directors. It would be important to consider co-location of the CGL and the Graduate School as the current space contributes to a separation of the CGL from the Graduate School.

Student success is at the core of a 21st century Graduate School and the Graduate School should take this opportunity to rethink and reimagine a Graduate School of the future leading change for an urban research university. Such a conversation could help envision functions and perhaps some structural changes that are more adaptable and dynamic in line with our rapidly changing society. In the process, principles underlying 21st century graduate education would become apparent and might also involve a review of some policies and procedures. This approach could result in some shifting responsibilities and positions in better serving the graduate students and programs as well as new synergies and partnerships.

3. Quality of Education:

It is impossible to assess the quality of graduate programs at any school without assessment data. Never, in all of our discussions with the groups we visited did anyone mention academic program review. An examination of the [UNCC program review process](#) indicates that each program chooses their own metrics for assessment (the self-study template lists an open-ended section for metrics - “*provide a general description of the measures and metrics that the program uses to assess progress toward its goals*”). Without standard metrics, it is possible that a program may not place much emphasis on graduate-level metrics. As a first step, the Graduate School should request copies of self-studies and program review reports and review them for an indication of graduate program quality. If there is inconsistency in metrics and a lack of emphasis on graduate programs in those reports, we recommend that the Graduate School partner with Academic Affairs Assessment to develop and evaluate a standard set of criteria and metrics for all graduate programs to be included as part of program self-studies. In addition, we recommend that the Graduate School seek assessment of outcomes using surveys of current students, exit surveys, engaged alumni, and employers. Obtaining academic

program review and stakeholder assessment data will provide important input to making decisions on resource allocation and programmatic needs.

4. Student Funding:

One of the most significant challenges facing graduate education at UNC-Charlotte revolves around the funding of graduate students, especially those at the doctoral level. Given the institution's stated mission of being North Carolina's urban research university, laying a solid foundation to support graduate student funding is imperative to the attainment of that goal. The Funding Task Force recommendations, which were put forward in February 2019, afford an excellent foundation on which to solidify and grow this necessary funding. Although the report's recommendations are more extensive, detailed, and comprehensive than is presented here, we feel that there are several critical issues that need to be dealt with in the very near future:

1. Consolidate the funds for Graduate Assistant Support Plan (GASP) that are currently in the graduate school to focus on the benefits of the plan needed above and beyond the stipend (e.g., tuition and health insurance coverage), and have the colleges and programs focus on supplying the necessary stipends. The current system, which still remains somewhat of a mystery in its details to the review team despite our attempts to understand it, place too much of the control and responsibility related to the allocation of GASP resources on the Graduate School, producing substantial tension between that unit and the various departments/programs seeking funding.
2. Related to the previous point, the current system does not appear to effectively incentivize the types of behaviors that the institution, at least outwardly, appears to be expecting. In our conversations, one of the inherent tensions arose from the overarching sense that the resource 'pie' is constant, and any gains will require cutting resources in other areas. This belies the nature of how funding is determined within the UNC System and the 12-cell matrix that is directly dependent on enrollment through student credit hour generation. The review team believes that if some of the funding increase that would accompany enrollment could be supplied to programs, this would have a tremendous impact in terms of boosting funding available to support graduate students.
3. Develop the expectation/culture that graduate assistant positions be included in grant funding, where it is possible to request such support. This needs to be coupled with institutional funding to help provide the encouragement for faculty to do this and supply tangible rewards in terms of some level of GASP for those who help build the institution's research capacity.

4. Work in collaboration with other UNC System institutions, primarily through the System Office's Council of Graduate Deans, to promote graduate education and research through removing the financial constraints necessitated by payment of out-of-state tuition (i.e., tuition remission). The current requirement to cover all of the tuition for out-of-state, especially that for international graduate students who can never achieve in-state status, consumes a significant proportion of the existing GASP funds.
5. Develop a system where minimum stipend levels are in place, but allow programs and individual PIs the ability to exceed those levels where it is needed based on disciplinary norms and efforts devoted to increasing the quality of enrolled students.

Resources.

Based on information provided, are resources used effectively and appropriately?

What actions, if any, would you recommend regarding resources and efficiency?

The review team did not evaluate a full staffing plan (position descriptions, job duties, etc.) and did not evaluate the budget for the graduate school. However, from the information we did evaluate and the results of meetings with all stakeholders, it is clear that the Graduate School is using their limited resources effectively and appropriately. However we ask that the Graduate School examine their organization to make it even more effective. In these resource-limited times, nearly all of the recommendations and those in the Funding Task Force report should be evaluated for enhanced efficiencies.

Final Thoughts.

Please provide any additional comments, strengths, and/or areas of concern that were not specifically addressed above.

Our overall assessment is that the Graduate School functions well and is respected. But we believe that the Graduate School and, more broadly, graduate education should have an increased visibility and responsibility to promote the goals and aspirations of an urban research university. Status as an urban research university requires robust graduate education programs and the leadership by the Graduate School to catalyze and promote graduate education across the institution. We trust that this report and recommendations will help you achieve this goal.