

## **Priorities for Implementation of the Recommendations of the Blue-Ribbon Panel (BRP) on Graduate Education**

### **Charge**

On February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Provost David Blackwell gave the charge to the Implementation Advisory Team for Graduate Education. It stated that *“The Graduate Education Implementation Advisory Team is charged with the review of the report from the Blue Ribbon Panel on Graduate Education submitted to the Provost and Senate Council. In its review the team will: Prioritize action items and suggest timelines based on the recommendations provided by the Blue Ribbon Panel; Demonstrate linkage of action items to the University Strategic Plan Goal #4 (Graduate Education); Work with the Provost Budget Office to estimate the cost of each prioritized action item; Discuss and consider any structural, policy or governance changes necessary to effectively implement the prioritized action items, building on the work of the Blue Ribbon Panel; Recommend and prioritize any needed changes; and Recommend how the effectiveness of the action items will be monitored and measured.”*

Members of the Provost-appointed Implementation Advisory Team were: Sue Roberts (Chair), Associate Provost for Internationalization; Douglass Kalika, College of Engineering; Betty Lorch, College of Arts & Sciences; Kristen Perry, College of Education; Eugenia Toma, Martin School of Public Policy & Administration; Lisa Vaillancourt, College of Food, Agriculture & Environment; and Nancy Webb, College of Medicine. The Implementation Advisory Team carefully studied the Blue Ribbon Panel (BRP) report and other relevant materials, and met with the Interim Dean of the Graduate School, the Vice President for Research, and the Provost’s Budget Office, in order to inform their work.

The following narrative summarizes the Implementation Advisory Team’s recommendations. The recommendations are also presented in two associated documents: (1) a table indicating how each of the Implementation Advisory Team’s recommendations link to the Blue Ribbon Panel recommendations, the University’s Strategic Plan, and to identified concerns relating to SACS reviews, indicating necessary changes to university governance, structure, or policy, and estimated costs; and (2) a PowerPoint slide deck summarizing each of the recommendations.

### **Foreword**

In recent years, the University of Kentucky (UK) has made great strides in improving the quality of undergraduate education and the undergraduate experience. Significant and diverse investments were made to ensure better outcomes for our undergraduates. Furthermore, recent years have seen increasing success in the procurement of extramural funding for research. On the other hand, graduate education has not been a university priority. In fact, graduate education has fallen farther and farther behind and is in a crisis at UK. The situation demands urgent action. It is time to invest strategically in graduate education at UK, as it is the missing element in a comprehensive plan to advance UK’s ambitious goals for education and research excellence. Frankly, without a deliberate refocusing of commitment at the highest level, and without additional recurring resources, none of the three strategic objectives for graduate education articulated in the 2015-2020 University of Kentucky Strategic Plan stands a realistic chance of being achieved.

## Summary

The Implementation Advisory Team highlights six key priorities based on the BRP's original recommendations for the advancement of graduate education at the University of Kentucky. These are presented in order of implementation (#1 being the highest priority), as follows:

- 1. Make graduate education an urgent campus-wide priority.**
- 2. Reorganize to embed the Dean in ongoing partnerships with university leaders in research and education.**
- 3. Conduct a national search and appoint a permanent Dean of the Graduate School.**
- 4. Restructure funding for graduate education to allow investment in outstanding programs and in new initiatives, including cross-disciplinary ventures.**
- 5. Build data analytic capacity to support graduate education.**
- 6. Strengthen graduate student services.**

Based on the recommendations of the BRP, the Implementation Advisory Team agrees that structural issues (recommendations 2, 3, and 4) surrounding the Graduate School should be given highest priority for implementation and should be initiated immediately. These issues influence the ability of the Graduate School Dean to serve as the primary advocate for graduate education at UK and to provide the services required to effectively support graduate programs and students. Once these structural matters have been addressed, the foundation is in place for improvements in the operations (recommendations 5 and 6) of the Graduate School, so that it functions more strategically to improve the quality of graduate education at UK and so that it can better serve graduate programs, faculty and students. It should be noted that while the BRP recommended that the Graduate School change its name to the "College of Graduate Studies", the Implementation Advisory Team does not view a name change as essential to advancing the stature or scope of graduate education at the University.

### **1. Make graduate education an urgent campus-wide priority**

The BRP Implementation Advisory Team recommends that graduate education be an immediate and campus-wide priority at all levels. As articulated above, and as documented in recommendation 4 below, graduate education has not enjoyed the intentional and strategic investment that has been made in undergraduate education over the last decade, and as such progress towards the goals articulated in the 2015-2020 Strategic Plan has been limited. A new emphasis on graduate education, with commitment from across all segments of the university, will be essential in advancing the mission of the university as a distinctive research institution.

### **2. Reorganize to embed the Dean of the Graduate School in ongoing partnerships with university leaders in research and education**

For the Dean of the Graduate School to be effective, lines of responsibility need to be defined and the Dean needs to have a regular seat at the table where decisions impacting graduate education are made. This requires clarification of the role of the Graduate School and its Dean vis-à-vis academic deans, the Provost, and the Vice President for Research. The quality of graduate education and research are inherently linked, and the same is true for graduate and undergraduate education. Recognizing this

requires that the Dean of the Graduate School be represented in both the educational administration and the research administration of the university. A mechanism for connecting the Graduate School and its activities through both research and academic program structures is essential. The Dean of the Graduate School currently sits on the Provost's Council, but there is no regular channel for the Dean of the Graduate School to articulate the strategic needs of graduate education with colleagues in the research enterprise. There needs to be formal, structured opportunities for the Dean of the Graduate School to meet with the Vice President for Research (VPR) and possibly UKRF to work together to align research and graduate education in positively reinforcing ways. Similarly, the Dean needs a presence when important decisions are made at the President and Provost level. This will help to maintain the proper balance between centralized and non-centralized efforts in support of graduate education and will improve communication to ensure that the Graduate School works closely with colleges and programs to better facilitate opportunities and to distribute shared resources (BRP Report, Executive Summary, Pages 3-4). The Implementation Advisory Team believes these structural changes need to be initiated in order to attract high-quality candidates in a national search for a new Dean.

### **3. Conduct a national search and appoint a permanent Dean of the Graduate School**

Advancing the role of graduate education on campus requires the hiring of a permanent Dean who can exercise leadership for graduate education across all parts of campus. As the diversity of programs is vast, the Dean must be a visionary leader who appreciates and embraces that programmatic diversity, and who can advocate for graduate education effectively across all sectors of the University. A strong, permanent Dean of the Graduate School would serve a key advocacy role for graduate programs, graduate students, and graduate education in general within the university. The timely recruitment of a permanent Dean of the Graduate School, from a national search, is crucial to the health of graduate education at UK and should be given highest priority.

### **4. Restructure funding for graduate education to allow investment in outstanding programs and in new initiatives, including cross-disciplinary ventures**

Funding for graduate education has been static for many years, despite substantial increases in UK's undergraduate student population and the expansion of research activity. This means that in "real" dollars, graduate education has been cut year after year at UK. To realize the necessary gains in graduate education, additional resources must be devoted to this crucial aspect of our research university's mission.

Currently, the Graduate School receives the majority of its resources from the general funds of the university and from Facilities and Administration revenue provided by the VPR. These two sources of funding have flat-lined over many years, in effect meaning a real decline in resources available for graduate education at UK. An increased, reliable funding stream for graduate education that reflects the increase in undergraduate enrollment and in sponsored research activity, together with an empowered permanent Dean, would mean the goals of the Strategic Plan for graduate education could be realistically achieved. A large share of the Graduate School's budget for graduate student support currently goes to escalating health and tuition costs. The net result has been to effectively starve graduate education of resources. The university's Strategic Plan recognizes the need to "provide graduate students with the appropriate balance of research, teaching, engagement, and/or experience in

creative activity that will enhance timely degree completion and long-term career success” (Strategic Initiative 3).

Because the strength of graduate education is closely tied to the strength of the university’s research profile and to the quality of undergraduate education, investment in graduate education will produce positive outcomes for the university as a whole. These funds would be used to support teaching and research priorities at UK as well as initiatives that enhance the graduate student experience. We recommend increased funding to support Graduate School operations, as well as for fellowships and other strategic initiatives that impact/reward program and student quality. Both general fund and VPR contributions to graduate education should be aligned to most effectively support UK's Strategic Plan with respect to graduate education and research.

Specifically, we recommend:

- Increase general fund allocations for the recurring annual operating budget of the Graduate School. Given how far the Graduate School has fallen behind, we recommend a one-time increase of at least 10% to enable the new Dean to realize needed operational changes, with provisions for future increases at least in line with inflation.
- Re-assess the annual support provided from the VPR, to ensure the funding is deployed to most effectively meet the strategic needs of research and graduate education. The funds from the VPR are an important source of graduate fellowships and tuition support and should be used to synergize with UK’s research and educational priorities.
- Increase central funding for tuition scholarships. Increase the number of tuition scholarships for TAs through increased allocation of CORE scholarship funding.
- Allocate at least 10% additional funding for Teaching Assistantships. TA funding has shown some incremental growth, but it has been insufficient to: (a) support additional TA lines for new graduate programs; (b) allocate new teaching assistantships in response to increased demand for TAs in growing undergraduate courses; (c) increase TA stipends, which are low compared to benchmarks, discouraging strong students from accepting offers at UK. A mechanism for prioritizing allocations of resources directed to TA support should be established.
- Conduct a review of the recently adopted block funding process. Currently, there is no mechanism in place for evaluating how block funds have been used or for prioritizing high-performing programs. While block funding has provided advantages in flexibility and the ability for colleges and departments to make rapid decisions to enhance recruitment, the amount assigned to the block (and to the source fellowships that preceded block funding) has remained static and has not supported the growth of new or high-achieving programs.
- Create a pool of funds to strategically invest in interdisciplinary (i.e., multi-college) programs that are responsive to market demand and/or align with UK’s research priorities.
- Establish a universal tuition system that does not disadvantage TAs and RAs funded by external traineeships and fellowships and does not disincentivize PIs from including graduate student support in externally-funded grants.
- Address how tuition is handled, so that post-qualifying doctoral students can benefit from advanced professional development opportunities (e.g., Preparing Future Faculty, Preparing Future Professionals, advanced coursework in a related field, etc.) and, specifically, develop a pilot program to cover the extra tuition for post-qualifying doctoral students taking Graduate School professional development courses.

### *Note on Interdisciplinary Programs and Initiatives:*

Currently, university regulations do not provide a mechanism for students enrolled in an interdisciplinary graduate program that spans multiple colleges to earn a single degree from more than one college. Philosophically, the Graduate School is an appropriate place to house interdisciplinary programs and initiatives. In a ruling by the General Counsel of the university in October 2017, it was confirmed that the Graduate School can offer degrees via educational units under its umbrella.

The challenge for developing new programs and initiatives to be housed within the Graduate School is the lack of college-level infrastructure commonly offered to educational units located within a traditional college. For example, the Graduate School does not have the infrastructure to provide IT support, grant administration, development support, or student service support to the units under its jurisdiction. If new programs are to be housed within the Graduate School, resources for establishing such college-wide infrastructure must be identified. Moreover, incentives must remain in place for colleges and faculty to develop new intradisciplinary programs housed within the Graduate School.

There are many operational activities under the umbrella of the Graduate School, including student recruitment, student admissions, regulatory oversight of student funding, oversight of graduate student teaching assistants, professional development programming, student diversity support, and data analytics. These activities affect the success of all graduate education programs on campus. Once the above structural issues are addressed and a permanent Dean is hired, the Dean should set priorities for improving the internal operations of the Graduate School.

### **5. Build data analytic capacity to support graduate education**

Meaningful data collection and careful analysis, both connected to thoughtful metrics, are essential to the functioning of a high-quality Graduate School. Robust data analytics enable the Dean of the Graduate School, as well as other stakeholders, to engage in strategic planning, meaningful program evaluation, informed decision-making, and fair and equitable resource allocation. Improved data collection and analysis are also essential in guiding the Graduate School toward achieving the initiatives outlined in the university's Strategic Plan, including (1) recruiting and retaining outstanding graduate students from all backgrounds, (2) investing in graduate programs that have distinctive synergy with UK's research priorities and/or whose graduate students demonstrate excellence at the national or global levels, and (3) elevating the quality and richness of the graduate student experience and increasing the national competitiveness of UK's graduate programs.

While the university has structures in place for data analytics, these are currently inadequate with respect to graduate education. Feedback from Directors of Graduate Studies, Associate Deans for Research, and other stakeholders indicate that current systems are insufficient for a variety of essential purposes. Additionally, UK has identified potential areas of concern related to the upcoming SACSC accreditation visit, many of which point to the need for significant improvements in data analytics for graduate education.

Our recommendations for enhancing data and analytics include building a small team of full-time data analysts dedicated solely to graduate education and ideally housed within the Graduate School, rather

than centrally at Institutional Research and Analytics. Our vision also includes close collaboration between the new Dean, a strengthened and empowered Graduate Council, Institutional Research and Analytics, and other identified stakeholders.

In addition, to meet the overall goal of enhanced data and analytics, we prioritize the following interconnected actions:

- Develop stronger and more efficient systems for data collection, analysis, and dissemination. These systems should be designed so that they align with existing systems, to avoid redundancy in data collection and reporting. These systems must also streamline interactions between, and make data easily accessible to, a variety of stakeholders, including Directors of Graduate Studies, Graduate Program Chairs, Deans, and the Graduate Council.
- Determine clear and meaningful metrics that carefully account for the diversity of graduate education programs across the university. Metrics that will be used for data collection, reporting, and decision-making must be flexible enough to account for the wide range of graduate program structures and student experiences, while also being meaningful for comparisons within and across program, college, and university levels. In addition to evaluating program effectiveness, metrics should be able to track student success both during enrollment in the program and after graduation.
- Streamline graduate program evaluations. A meaningful process must be developed by which graduate programs engage in assessment for both internal program improvement, and for cross-program comparison. Importantly, this process should not stop at inputs (i.e., the data that programs are required to gather and report); it should also involve thoughtful planning for how these evaluations may be used by programs, within colleges, and across the university.

Thoughtful development of more effective systems for data analytics and more clearly-defined metrics will result in improved ability to: (1) assess graduate program quality and graduate student success across the university; (2) support decision-making regarding allocation of funding and other resources, such as teaching assistantships and/or graduate assistantships; (3) provide meaningful incentives to programs and graduate students; and (4) contribute to effective overall strategic planning. Indeed, our recommendation for enhanced data analytics will support all three strategic initiatives for graduate education outlined in the university's Strategic Plan. Moreover, enhanced data analytics are a necessary element of seven of the ten action steps identified as necessary to achieving these strategic initiatives.

As the BRP noted, improved data collection and analysis and appropriate metrics will allow the university and the Graduate School to “evaluate program quality and accountability, and drive both resource allocation and incentives with the understanding that best practices are often discipline-specific.”

## **6. Strengthen graduate student services**

Attracting and retaining a high quality, diverse graduate student body is a critical element in the success of education and research across our entire university. Graduate Assistants teach undergraduates, both formally in the classroom as TAs, and informally in a variety of other campus and community settings. They are also a critical component of our research productivity. Moreover, graduate education at UK

contributes to the economy of Kentucky through research and discovery focused on local needs, and the development of human capital. International graduate students promote the global reputation of the university and of Kentucky when they return home to occupy leadership positions in higher education, government, and business. A positive experience for these graduate students will encourage them to develop professional and educational collaborations with UK, and to send the next generation of the best and brightest students to study here.

To achieve the initiatives outlined in the university's Strategic Plan, particularly (1) recruiting and retaining outstanding graduate students from all backgrounds, and (3) elevating the quality and richness of the graduate student experience and increasing the national competitiveness of UK's graduate programs, there must be an increased emphasis on centralized graduate student support services. UK recently put significant effort and resources into consolidating and improving services to undergraduates, including a focus on programs for recruitment and support of underrepresented students, freshman retention, and academic and career counseling. This has resulted in measurable increases in recruitment and retention, particularly of at-risk groups, improving the quality of the educational experience for all students. There should be similar effort now devoted to the graduate experience at all levels.

Necessary graduate student support services fall into two main areas: professional support and personal support. Both are equally important for the development of a positive and productive graduate education experience.

Many graduate students are interested in professions outside of academia. With the exception of accredited professional degree programs, most graduate students rely on their supervisors and departmental colleagues for career advice. Because these advisors usually have limited experience, and sometimes limited interests, the advice tends to be focused on a much narrower academic track and is entirely inadequate for the current era.

Recent studies report that graduate students suffer from very high levels of anxiety and stress in comparison with the general population, and this can affect student quality of life, retention, and work performance. The risk is particularly high for low income, first-generation, and international students, and members of underrepresented minority populations. The sources of stress and anxiety are diverse and include mental health, financial, and relationship issues, which are exacerbated by the intense demands of graduate school.

UK has identified similar areas of concern related to the upcoming SACS accreditation visit, including: (1) lack of employment/placement counseling devoted to the specific needs of graduate students; and (2) lack of an impartial, centralized area for services and complaints. Regarding the second point, graduate students have access to the same academic ombudsman as undergraduates, but graduate students have a very different set of issues related to their working relationships, including conflicts with supervisors and co-workers.

We agree with the BRP recommendation to "strengthen resources for graduate student academic scholarship, transferable skills, and non-academic support." This recommendation included the following overarching goals:

1. Improve funding and define workload expectations for graduate assistants
2. Bolster comprehensive support for students
3. Expand and improve professional development for graduate students
4. Improve interdisciplinary, international, and post-qualifying support opportunities

We suggest the following actions to support these goals:

- Fully fund a full-time Assistant Director of Graduate Student Professional Enhancement. This position is currently half-time and is operating on non-recurring funds and a temporary cost-share with CELT.
- Establish a central, accessible space and staffing for a Graduate Student Support Services hub. One possibility is to work with the incoming Dean of Libraries to re-purpose space adjacent to the Clark Graduate Study Center in the W.T. Young Library. This space could centralize professional and personal support services developed by the Graduate Student Professional Enhancement unit, as well as the new Graduate Ombudsperson (see below).
- Establish a robust on-line graduate student support services website and interactive resource to reach non-traditional and off-campus students as well as the on-campus population.
- Establish a Graduate Student Ombud Office to house a dedicated specialized ombudsperson and provide a central location for student complaints.
- Review proposals by the GSC to de-couple from the SGA and allocating recurring funding for a graduate assistantship (GA) and tuition waiver to support the President of the GSC.

Indicators of success would include measurable increases in recruitment and retention, the diversity of the student body (gender, racial/ethnic, economic, and geographic), and overall satisfaction with the graduate experience. To assess the latter, the Graduate School should administer regular surveys of the graduate students. Other important metrics would include improvements in placement in relevant professions, and in satisfaction levels in post-graduate surveys after several years in the workforce. Employer surveys of the quality of UK graduates would also be helpful in gauging the impact of the professional development curriculum.