

February 8, 2021

TO: Graduate and Professional School Task Force Executive Committee  
FROM: Doctoral Subcommittee, Graduate and Professional School Task Force  
RE: Doctoral Subcommittee Report

The Doctoral Subcommittee of the Graduate School Task Force is comprised of Adam Seipp (Co-Chair, Graduate and Professional School), Mark Zoran (Co-Chair, Science), Antoinetta Quigg (TAMU-G), Jay Ramadoss (Vet Med), Idia Thurston (Liberal Arts), Narendra Kumar (Pharmacy), Bruno Ruest (Dentistry), Richard Malak (Engineering), Christian Hilty (Science), David Threadgill (Medicine), Istvan Szunyogh (Geoscience), Wayne Smith (AGLS), Ashley Seabury (Vet Med), Kara Bond (Education), Chante Anderson (Black Graduate Student Association), Mohit Kurana (Indian Graduate Student Association), Shannon Walton (Graduate and Professional School), and Gerianne Alexander (Research). The subcommittee has been tasked to “Review our current practices and programs related to the graduate school guiding principles and 2020-2025 university graduate and professional education strategic priorities and form recommendations to move our institution towards becoming a globally-recognized leader in graduate and professional education.”

The Subcommittee held an organizational meeting on October 29 to plan our activities for the Fall and Spring. After discussion, we decided to convene a series of forums with key stakeholders across the university community who are engaged in doctoral education. We elected not to hold “open” forums, but rather to invite functional groups to participate in order to enhance the focus of our discussions. All meetings were held via Zoom. On November 11, we met with faculty directors of doctoral programs (23 attendees). On November 12, we met with staff administrators of doctoral programs (22 attendees). On December 7, the subcommittee met with leaders of graduate student organizations, a session organized in conjunction with Graduate and Professional Student Government President Uthej Vatipalli (19 attendees). On December 3, we met with directors and representatives of Interdisciplinary Programs (21 attendees). In addition, one or both subcommittee co-chairs met with the Executive Committees of the Faculty Senate and Council of Principal Investigators and addressed the monthly meeting of the Council of Principal Investigators on January 13.

In addition to the feedback gathered at the forums, the subcommittee drew upon a variety of other data sources, including the Graduate Unit Benchmarking Report (hereafter, “*Benchmarking*”) prepared by Hanover Research, the Council of Graduate Schools report *The Organization and Administration of Graduate Education* (hereafter “*Organization*”), registration reports from professional development workshops, and the newly-available Fully-Funded Doctoral Student report.

The subcommittee's recommendations are guided in large part by the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) presented in our charging document. The subcommittee believes that the KPIs present an opportunity to generate a road map toward the creation of a dynamic, forward-thinking, and fair structure of doctoral education, one that can "play a critical role in elevating the quality and impact of individual graduate programs" (*Organization*). The Graduate and Professional School, in the eyes of this subcommittee, should act as a hub for doctoral programs, faculty, and students. The Graduate and Professional School should be a node that can disseminate best practices through professional development, serve as a facilitator for partnerships across institutions, and advocate for doctoral students in all parts of the university community. The subcommittee was also guided by the call in the charging document to be student-centered. As one doctoral program administrator expressed in our forum, "our shared goal is student success."

While the subcommittee's forums and meeting discussions ranged widely, we have identified seven key areas where we believe the Graduate and Professional School can act to the benefit of doctoral education at Texas A&M.

1. *Build a research development unit focused on enhancing fellowships, training grants and other external funding opportunities.* The Graduate and Professional School should create an office dedicated to "promot[ing] research culture that encourages submission of competitive grant proposals by faculty and graduate students" (*Organization*). This office would have several key functions. First, it would operate as a university-wide incubator for students and faculty members seeking to develop external research proposals with a doctoral training component. Such proposals might include NSF GRFP, Fulbright, or Ford Foundation fellowships. Activities could include holding workshops on grant writing and training for department and program staff on helping students with external funding applications. This has been successfully implemented at the University of California – Berkley Graduate Division (*Benchmarking*). This office would coordinate with other proposal development units across the university to ensure continuity of effort.

Second, this unit would be responsible for facilitating large and complex grant applications. These include NIH T32 awards that directly facilitate the recruiting and retention of highly qualified doctoral students. Some of this work is already underway, through an emerging partnership between the Graduate and Professional School and Research Development Services. The creation of a Research Development Unit will likely require additional staffing.

2. *Establish integrated, university-wide initiatives to recruit and retain URM doctoral students.* The Graduate and Professional School should position itself at the heart of the

effort to substantially enhance the diversity of the student population at Texas A&M University. While many initiatives, including the Avilés-Johnson Fellowship and Pathways to the Doctorate, have achieved notable success, there is considerable room for growth. Participants frequently observed that current efforts to recruit URM students take place at the department level. This has several drawbacks, including duplication of effort, placing a disproportionate load on URM faculty, and inhibiting the emergence of a whole-of-university response to this challenge.

The Graduate and Professional School should play a central role in bringing URM students to campus for coordinated recruiting visits, working with departments to disseminate best practices, and establishing partnerships or organized pipeline programs with Minority Serving Institutions. Since the goal is both recruiting and retention of URM students, attention should be paid to facilitating social and networking opportunities, which “promote retention by providing social support” (*Organization*). This may require additional staffing for the Graduate and Professional School.

While Texas A&M University continues to build partnerships with Prairie View A&M, the subcommittee urges the Graduate and Professional School to work aggressively to leverage our considerable assets toward developing formal pipeline arrangements. The Fisk-Vanderbilt Masters-to-PhD Bridge Program is a particularly compelling model. Between 2004 and 2018, 29 URM PhDs graduated with degrees with Physics, Astronomy, and Materials Science (<https://www.fisk-vanderbilt-bridge.org/>). A similar program, expanded to include social sciences and humanities, would position Texas A&M as a national and global leader in innovative doctoral education. A pipeline program with Prairie View A&M might be named in honor of Matthew Gaines. It would contribute to addressing the underrepresentation of Black and African-American graduate students highlighted in the recent report by the Texas A&M Commission on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. Additionally, the Graduate and Professional School should work toward establishing and maintaining partnerships with industry and national laboratories with the goal of enhancing research and career opportunities for URM students.

3. *Create new, and expand existing, professional development programs for faculty, staff, and students.* The Graduate and Professional School should establish a program of professional development that makes distinctions between the needs of various stakeholders in our doctoral programs. Regular meetings should be held for faculty directors of doctoral programs and, separately, for administrators (generally staff) who perform key organizational functions for graduate programs.

The need for professional development is particularly acute among program administrators, who report a “baptism by fire” with little of the networking and support that undergraduate program administrators have through venues like University Advisors and Counselors (UAC). The Graduate and Professional School should establish a council of graduate advisors, with representation from each college, and should facilitate regular training and meetings. This council should be a central node of communication for best graduate administration practices across the institution. The Graduate Coordinator Network at the University of Texas at Austin may serve as a useful model here (<https://wikis.utexas.edu/display/GCN/Graduate+Coordinator+Network>).

Professional development opportunities for students appear to be robust and popular. In FY20, the last time that pre-pandemic data is available, the G.R.A.D. Aggies Professional Development Program held 133 events with an average attendance of 26.8 students per event. Doctoral students at our forum who participated in these professional development events expressed enthusiasm for those that exist and a desire for more opportunities.

4. *Develop a standing committee to coordinate activities with branch campuses, academic programs and research units outside of College Station.* The Graduate and Professional School should establish a standing committee for the support of programmatic faculty, staff and students outside of the Texas A&M College Station campus. During our meetings and forums, we received considerable feedback from individuals at these other unit sites that more effort was needed to harmonize programs, rules, and support systems. Many of the friction points identified in our discussions were beyond the immediate control of the Graduate and Professional School. These include challenges in parking when conducting business on main campus, differential access to student services (particularly counseling services) that may not be available at all units, the need for multiple email addresses to manage different university processes, and the structure of fees for graduate and professional students. The Graduate and Professional School may be well-positioned to identify and, when possible, ameliorate concerns about what one participant called the “College Station centered-ness” of Texas A&M University.
5. *Advocate for and coordinate student services on behalf of graduate students.* One of the most important themes that emerged from our conversations with faculty and students was the widespread perception that student services at Texas A&M are primarily focused on the needs of undergraduates, to the exclusion of graduate and professional students. While the Graduate and Professional School does not offer many of these services itself, more attention should be paid to ensuring that student services explicitly serve the needs of graduate and professional students. The development of articulated partnership agreements among units may be fruitful where practicable.

Several examples came up frequently, particularly Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS). While CAPS offers programming for graduate students, that programming is relatively limited. Career Services likewise appears largely undergraduate-focused, although efforts are currently underway to expand graduate services. This problem appears particularly acute for students at sites outside of College Station. In some cases, notably graduate Ombuds services, there appears to be a lack of awareness among graduate students about the range and function of available services.

6. *Develop a visible and robust development strategy in partnership with the Division of Academic Affairs Development Office.* Forum participants stressed the need to pursue development opportunities to enhance the overall quality of doctoral research and education. Priorities might include a naming gift for the Graduate and Professional School and funds to enhance the retention of students from underrepresented groups. These efforts should begin with establishing what one forum called “a footprint in the foundation.” This may also be an opportunity to form a philanthropy or external advisory and development board as an initial step toward “creating a network of friends of graduate education” (*Organization*).

7. *Reimagine marketing and communications related to doctoral education.* Communication from the Graduate and Professional School should reflect the school’s student-centered approach. While the subcommittee acknowledged the fact that the pre-existing OGAPS website is undergoing substantial revision, we still discussed opportunities for meaningful change. Participants in these discussions pointed to a number of small and large changes that would help to better communicate the school’s mission. Student participants requested clear language outlining the rights and responsibilities of graduate students in what one participant called the “grey zone” between their roles as student, instructors, and employees. Graduate advisors expressed a desire to be consulted regarding the presentation of information for student consumption, and emphasized that clearer language on university-level requirements will help resolve problems that sometimes cause delays in earning degrees.

There was also discussion of the relationship between the Graduate and Professional School and the marketing of doctoral opportunities at Texas A&M. The Graduate and Professional School should seek out opportunities to coordinate with the Marketing and Communications teams at component colleges and schools in order to present a more harmonized message to external consumers.

A number of significant challenges remain outside the scope of this subcommittee’s charge. Our charge specified that we should not assume substantial budget increases, the question of

funding for doctoral education emerged repeatedly. The subcommittee identified and discussed extensively the problem of uneven support for doctoral students across the university and urges the Task Force to make sure that this issue remains at the forefront of conversations about doctoral education moving forward. In Spring 2019, according to the OGAPS Fully-Funded Doctoral Student report, 76.5% of doctoral students were fully funded, but this figure is highly differentiated across colleges and units. Some colleges, including Business (97%) and Science (90.6%) fully fund almost all doctoral students. Others, like Public Health (57.1%) and Education (43%) have far lower funding rates. One forum participant pointed out that existing internal funding programs like the Doctoral Merit Fellowship are structured around the financing model of departments that have substantial access to external funding. The subcommittee agrees that the Graduate and Professional School should not attempt to mandate levels of funding, but that more attention should be paid to ensuring that programs have access to resources to provide high-quality funding packages for doctoral students.

There are also substantial disparities in the level of funding. In Spring 2020, the median monthly assistantship stipend for a doctoral Graduate Assistant Teaching (GAT) position was \$2,000. Again, there is a significant range between, and within, colleges. The average GAT stipend at Mays Business School is \$2,300, while in the College of Architecture it is \$1,350. The subcommittee recognizes that there are many reasons for these differential funding levels. It may be useful to gather data about assistantship funding levels at peer/aspirant institutions so that programs can focus on making their stipends competitive within their disciplines.

Nevertheless, the membership urges the Graduate and Professional School Task Force to consider ways that the university might address the problem of equity in doctoral funding. Subcommittee member discussions included a range of ideas in this regard, including expanding the number of years of eligibility for doctoral funding and using funds from IDC return to fund doctoral students.

In summary, our subcommittee heard input from over 100 stakeholders in doctoral graduate education at Texas A&M University, including students, faculty, staff and administrators. Although we recommend seven specific, student-centered initiatives that will move the institution's global recognition for doctoral training, a simple request emerged from our many forums: the new Graduate and Professional School should be leveraged to make Texas A&M a better place for doctoral students to pursue their studies, but also used to promote doctoral programs in determined and forceful ways. Our recommendations each support a central goal of creating a new hub for graduate and professional education. For doctoral students spending five or more years on their research studies, a graduate and professional school should become a space for engaging community, incubating ideas, integrating disciplines, and sharing experiences.

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