

Holland Faculty Senate Roundtable
Graduate Education at Mississippi State University
March 29, 2003

The Holland Faculty Senate Roundtable on graduate education was held on Saturday, March 29, 2003 at Lake Tiak O'Khata. Participants in the event were: John Boyle, Susan Bridges, Sylvia Byrd, Ed Clynch, Richard Damms, Walter Diehl, Kathy Dooley, Dwight Hare, Keith Hodge, Charles Lee, Ruby Licon, Pearson Liddell, Bill Person, Chuck Pittman, Jonathan Pote, Linda Pote, Barbara Spencer, Dick Still, Bob Taylor, Paul Thaxton, George Verrall, Jim West, Scott Willard, Dwayne Wise, and Alan Wood. Each of the participants gave a brief introduction which included information about their involvement and interest in the graduate program at MSU.

To initiate discussion, a brief history and the current status of the graduate program at MSU was presented. A time-line graph (attachment A) was provided that looked at research dollars generated, the number of Ph. D. and Masters students enrolled, and events pertinent to the graduate program such as: having a Dean of Graduate Studies (1987-1998), the MSU web site (1993), elimination of the graduate tuition waiver (1995), the Graduate School web site and online registration (2001). The greatest negative impacts on graduate student enrollment appeared to be the elimination of the tuition waiver. A handout (Attachment B) was also distributed which provided information about other universities comparable to MSU and the structure of their graduate programs. Of the 52 graduate programs looked at (based on web sites), 62% were housed in the Office of Research, 23% in the Academic Affairs and 15% had other organizational structures.

The floor was then open for discussion. The major points of discussion were:

The decentralization of the Graduate School and moving it out of the Office of Research and into the Colleges.

Discussion:

-The reason for the decision:

-The Office of Research was told it needed to concentrate on increasing research dollars, rather than running the graduate program.

-It was thought that graduate programs would be more effective if departments/colleges were responsible for their own graduate programs.

-The question was asked "What is a Graduate School". The answer was; it is primarily responsible for rules and regulations, but there are also a lot of subtle, "behind the scene" activities that many individuals don't know about.

The ramifications of the decentralization of the Graduate School.

Discussion:

- There is no advocate for the entire graduate program at MSU.
- Leaving the graduate programs in the hands of the deans may have diluted the effectiveness of the program.
- The Graduate Program very seldom gets mentioned at Dean's Council, thus it does not seem to be a high priority.
- There was a question as to whether the deans had "bought into" the decentralization.
- One other constraint with the current structure is that the deans only meet once a year as Graduate Deans to discuss the graduate program at MSU.
- One advantage of the decentralization was that instead of a Graduate Dean looking at the Graduate Program, that central control has been eliminated and instead that control is now at the college level.
- The paperwork pertaining to the admissions process is more efficient when handled at the departmental level, however there is no advocate for the program at the university level.
- It would appear that we need both, a Dean of the Graduate School and involvement at the department/college level.
- The nurturing, recruitment, etc. belongs at the academic unit, but it sounds like we need a strong central point to advocate the entire graduate program.

The importance of the Graduate Program at MSU:

Discussion:

- It should be "the crowned jewel" of the University.
- If we are going to be a top-notch research institution we need graduate programs.
- If we are going to have a graduate program we need the University to make a commitment to it.
- You can not have a research program without graduate students.

What to do about the "flagged programs" at MSU:

Discussion:

- Why is there a decrease in enrollment in some of programs, but an increase in others?
 - Cultural change, eg. biotechnology is a “hot” area.
 - Some programs need to morph and adapt.
 - There may be areas of growth, but no money.
 - Sometimes there is political pressure to emphasize certain programs.

- We might need to broaden or combine programs, so that we aren’t so narrow in focus. Does it really matter what the degree is called?

- It is the burden of those units with flagged programs to justify their existence. We need to look at those flagged programs and see if we want to keep them.

- The problem with doing head counts on graduate students to determine which programs are in trouble is that you have a cycling, where you may have several Masters students one year and Ph. D.’s the next.

- If you already have a Ph. D. program, why not also have a Masters program, it wouldn’t cost any extra.

- When we lose faculty we often lose individuals involved in our graduate programs, and subsequently graduate student enrollment drops.

- Who is looking at the “big picture” at the university level. Who decides which graduate programs we keep or eliminate?

Interdisciplinary graduate programs:

Discussion:

- Where does the credit go (which department/center, etc.) when students are involved in the interdisciplinary programs.

- Interdisciplinary programs have “no homes” and are dependent on numerous departments to support them. Often there is no advocate for those programs.

Infrastructure of graduate programs:

Faculty:

- We need faculty that are willing and able to teach specialized graduate courses.

- Loss of faculty and not replacing them often results in loss of graduate courses offered.

-We need to encourage Assistant Professors to be mentors for graduate students, and ensure that they are given credit for this in the promotion and tenure process.

Courses:

-We have some very unique opportunities in the State, such as aquaculture, yet we do not offer a Ph. D. in aquaculture.

-There are an inadequate number of graduate courses offered in many of our graduate programs. With the loss of faculty there are even fewer courses offered.

-Is there an incentive for faculty to teach graduate courses? Does it count for promotion and tenure?

-The major problem with non-thesis master's programs is that it requires a large time commitment, yet publications or research are not generated.

-Often we do not have enough graduate students enrolled in a course, thus a course may not be offered. We need to find a way to support our graduate courses with low enrollments in "off" years and make sure faculty get credit for teaching those courses.

-We need to address the requirement of 6000/8000 level courses in a program of study. There are fewer and fewer 8000 level courses and they are often offered in alternate years. Many of the 4000/6000 level courses are rigorous and more applicable. We need to look at the possibility of allowing more 4000/6000 level courses to count in a Ph. D. program of study.

Graduate student recruitment:

Recruitment activities:

-We have to be aggressive, use web sites, meetings, career days at schools, etc.

-We need to start recruiting students from our undergraduate programs. Look at grooming our own future graduate students from promising undergraduates.

-More programs are needed to start grooming high school students to do research at MSU, eg. Mississippi School for Math and Science students working in MSU research labs.

-The difficulties with Immigration Naturalization Service (INS) will make recruiting foreign graduate students more difficult.

-We need to work on building networks, with other schools, departments, etc. that help locate graduate students.

-We need to sponsor training workshops at MSU that bring in undergraduates from all over the U.S. This could help recruit graduate students.

-There are a lot of grant programs out there that support graduate studies, but we need a “catalyst”, someone who brings this all together (the grant writing, meetings, information about these programs, etc.

-Faculty who participate in large collaborative grants for graduate support need to be able to use this for promotion and tenure. Our current system does not encourage participation in this type of endeavor.

Financial constraints and the Graduate Program.

Discussion:

-We see numerous big buildings going up, but no advocate for designating money for graduate students.

-It is unusual for a donor to designate money for graduate education, the Bagley gift to the College of Engineering is an exception. We need to look for more of those opportunities.

-IHL has a formula for undergraduate education and the money allocated, but this does not include graduate students. We need to advocate that we need extra money for graduate students.

-We need to look at potential industries in the state that might support graduate research/students.

-Our assistantships are not financially competitive with other universities.

-We also have hidden costs for our graduate students, such as the activity fee.

-We need to have mechanisms in place where we can recruit for graduate students continually. Often a highly qualified graduate student is identified, but the grant money is not available right away. These students have numerous offers from other schools and by the time our faculty locate money, they have lost the graduate student. Some sort of contingency fund would help.

-To ensure we fill a graduate position we need the financial flexibility to make offers to at least 3-4 graduate applicants. We do not have a pool of money to do this.

-In order to make assistantships available to more faculty, a department could give assistantships for one year with the understanding that the faculty member would generate money to support the student for subsequent years. This would allow a constant pool of money to be available, so faculty could recruit ahead of time.

-Reinstate the graduate tuition waivers. Currently many faculty are hiring post-docs or research assistants because once both graduate tuition and stipend are paid by the investigator, it is more economically feasible and efficient to hire post-docs or research technicians. It was pointed out that there might be money available to at least waive graduate student tuition for Ph. D. students.

-In our capital campaign for development money, each college needs to decide if their graduate program is a high priority.

Minority graduate student recruitment:

-There are numerous grants/fellowships that target minority graduate students. We need have an avenue to find out about these.

-We need to work with schools who have strong undergraduate minority programs, recruit aggressively at these schools.

-We need to work with schools who have strong undergraduate minority programs, and work with these schools on potential collaborative graduate programs.

-What incentive is there for faculty to work on university wide collaborative grants for graduate student support if you are one of multiple collaborators. Will this count for promotion and tenure?

Graduate student life:

-We need to work on creating a better graduate education culture. All activities sponsored by Student Affairs/Student Association is targeted towards the undergraduate student, yet the graduate students are paying an activity fee.

-Graduate students and undergraduates should not be “lumped” together. They have unique needs, life style differences, etc.

-Support the Graduate Student Association (GSA). Encourage students to participate in events/workshops, etc. for graduate students.

-The students are paying exorbitant activities fees for activities in which they don't participate.

-Graduate students also have to pay for their insurance. Many can not afford this and are going uninsured.

-With lower stipends, activity fees and insurance, we are losing the battle on being competitive with other universities.

-We need to give our graduate students the opportunity to participate in MSU facilities off campus (Stennis, CAVS, externships, etc).

-We need to make sure major professors strongly encourage their graduate students to attend activities for graduate students such as orientation. All of these activities need to be communicated to the graduate students, major professors and graduate coordinators.