

Spring 2006 Faculty/Administration Roundtable
April 29, 2006
Plymouth Bluff Conference Center

Topic: Graduate Education, Problems and Prospects

Participants from Administration

Robert H. Foglesong, President
Peter Rabideau, Provost & VP Academic Affairs
Colin Scanes, VP Research & Graduate Studies
Ruth Prescott, Associate Vice Provost
Gary Pike, Director of Institutional Research
Mark Binkley, Division Director of AOCE
Laura Crittenden, AOCE

Participants from Faculty Senate

Mark Goodman, Communications & Senate President
Peter Wood, Sociology & Senate VP
David Bridges, Aerospace Engineering
Greg Dunaway, Sociology
Carlen Henington, Counselor Ed and Ed Psychology
Bob Wolverton, Foreign Languages
Peter Ryan, Animal & Dairy Sciences

Participants from the General Faculty

Bill Person, Director of Graduate Studies
John Boyle, Dept Head, Biochemistry/Molecular Biology
Roger King, Assoc. Dean for Graduate Studies, Engineering
Xiaohe Xu, Graduate Program Coordinator, Sociology
Matt Raven, Director, Learning Center
Harry Llull, Associate Dean for Public Services, Library
Rita Burrell, Administrative Coordinator, Office of Graduate Studies
Larry Barrow, Graduate Director, Architecture
David Monts, Graduate Program Coordinator, Physics
Barbara Spencer, Director of Graduate Studies, Business & Industry
A. Jerald Ainsworth, Assoc. Dean for Research and Graduate Studies, VetMed

Roundtable Summary

Discussion focused on several issues associated with graduate education at MSU, and was loosely guided by the February 22, 2006 Report to the Robert Holland Faculty Senate by the Senate's Academic Affairs Committee. The full report on graduate education is available at http://www.facultysenate.msstate.edu/Graduate_Ed.pdf.

History Of The MSU Graduate Program.

Roundtable participants reviewed the history of the graduate program at MSU, with particular attention to events since 1998. In 1936 the Graduate School was created, and between 1936 and 1999, MSU had a Graduate School and a Dean of the Graduate School. During that time the Dean was responsible for management of the graduate program and was involved in the development and implementation of graduate program policy. In 1998 Malcolm Portera was named President of MSU, and David Cole was named Interim Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs. The Dean of the Graduate School resigned effective December 31, 1998, and the Graduate School was subsequently reconfigured into the Office of Graduate Studies headed by a director who would report to the Vice President for Research, who in turn would report to the Provost/Vice President for Academic Affairs. This move terminated what had been known as the Graduate School. The deans of the various colleges were presumed to then operate as graduate deans for their respective college, and were supposed to meet regularly as graduate deans to manage graduate programs and policies. Meetings of the new graduate deans were to be called and chaired by the Provost. Currently, William Person is the Director of the Office of Graduate Studies, and reports to Colin Scanes, Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies, who in turn reports to Peter Rabideau, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs.

Administrative Issues Associated With The Graduate Program.

At present, while the responsibility for graduate student admissions and the day-to-day management of the MSU graduate program rests primarily with the Office of Graduate Studies and its staff, the responsibility for reviewing and developing graduate program policies and dealing with problems is divided among four entities: the Graduate Council, the academic college (graduate) deans, the Provost, and the Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies. As such, it is often uncertain who has responsibility for what. The Graduate Council is a group of elected faculty members from each college that takes up issues and concerns associated with graduate education usually in response to a problem or situation that has come to the attention of the Graduate Council. The Council is not charged with the establishment of graduate program policy. Based on feedback from at least one dean, the Graduate Deans have not met to discuss the graduate program in at least the 18 months prior to this date. There is apparently no explicit statement of the roles of the Vice President for Academic Affairs or the Vice President for Research/Graduate Studies with regard to their involvement in the graduate program.

In speaking of the decentralized nature of the current administration of the graduate program, the senate committee report observed ".....that the responsibility for establishing policy related to graduate studies has been transferred to four separate entities, and that there is no administrator at the policy-making level whose single focus is on graduate studies." Citing concerns

associated with the establishment of policy, advocacy for graduate programs, uniformity of quality of theses and dissertations, and a lack of clear guidelines related to authority and responsibility, the senate committee report recommended that the Graduate School and a Dean of the Graduate School (or Dean of Graduate Studies) be resurrected. In addition, there was general agreement that each college (particularly those that generate significant numbers of graduate degrees) would benefit from having an associate dean for research/graduate studies whose responsibilities focused on graduate education in that college. Currently, only three colleges support a faculty member in this position (engineering, veterinary medicine, and business and industry), and funding for such a position seems to rest with the colleges themselves.

As noted in the senate committee report, “The lack of a unified vision and an active advocacy for graduate studies has been one of the key areas of concern raised repeatedly during this review of MSU’s graduate program.” As a result, President Foglesong has directed that a search begin for a Graduate Dean and that the feasibility of appointing an Associate Dean for Graduate Studies in each college be examined.

Trends In Enrollments, Degrees, And Average GRE Scores.

Information detailing trends in enrollments and degree productivity (MA and Ph.D.) for the years 1997-2005 was provided by the Office of Institutional Research and by the Division of Academic Outreach and Continuing Education (AOCE). The numbers paint a picture that may be cause for concern.

Overall, enrollment in MA and Ph.D. programs has increased over the 1997-2005 period. The increase in enrollment in Ph.D. programs is particularly noticeable since 2002 (706) through 2005 (990). However, MA enrollment has actually declined since 2001 (2382 down to 2299 in 2005) after an increase during the 1997-2001 period. The number of MA’s granted has increased from AY 97-98 (716) to AY 04-05 (894), an increase of 178 degrees. The number of Ph.D.’s granted has fluctuated since AY 97-98 (104) to a low of 85 in AY 03-04, but rebounded somewhat in AY 04-05 (111).

It should be noted that the overall increase in Masters program enrollments from 1997 to 2005 (321) may be entirely accounted for by the increase in students enrolling in Masters programs offered through AOCE to distance students (340). Without distance programs, the number of students enrolled in MSU Masters programs would have declined over the past 8 years. In addition, well over half of the increase in Ph.D. students is due to enrollment in programs offered through AOCE to distance students.

With regard to MAs granted, the increase in Masters degrees granted over the past 4-5 years is almost wholly accounted for by degrees granted through AOCE. Based on numbers provided by AOCE, between 2002 and 2005 approximately 433 Masters degrees were awarded through AOCE (about 12.5% of all MA degrees granted by MSU during that period). With regard to the Ph.D., of the 111 Ph.D.s granted in 2004-05 roughly 10% were through AOCE, which implies that the Ph.D. production from traditional doctoral programs has remained stagnant or declined since 1997. This decline is one possible factor cited for MSU’s recent demotion in the Carnegie

rankings.

The Office of Institutional Research also provided data on GRE scores of incoming graduate students for 2000-2005 by college. In 2000 the average GRE verbal score was 438 and the average GRE quantitative was 575. By 2005 the average GRE verbal score was 431 and the average GRE quantitative score was 552. The 2005 scores correspond to approximately the 39th percentile (verbal) and 35th percentile (quantitative). Thus, the data indicate a drop in average verbal and quantitative scores for incoming graduate students during this period. 2005 college averages range from 388 verbal and 440 quantitative (28th and 16th percentiles) in Education to 472 verbal and 724 quantitative (50th and 74th percentiles) in Engineering.

In sum, any apparent increase in graduate enrollments or degrees granted over the past few years can be entirely or mostly accounted for by enrollments and degrees through AOCE to distance students. Enrollments and degrees granted through traditional graduate programs have either stagnated or declined during the same time period. In addition, average GRE verbal and quantitative scores for incoming graduate students have declined from 2000-2005.

Student-Related Issues.

Concerns regarding student-related issues centered on the following: graduate student stipends, health insurance for graduate students, funding of international graduate students, and housing issues for students. Data provided by the Office of Graduate Studies and by David Monts (Physics) reveals some disturbing trends.

Non-competitive stipends were cited as perhaps the most problematic factor in attracting quality graduate students to MSU. In Spring 2006, the average GA stipend at MSU amounted to \$1005.90 per month—about \$9000 per academic year. There has been little change in the dollar amount of stipends offered by MSU over the past several years, and for the last academic year (2005-06), the average MSU nine-month GTA stipend was over \$3000 less than the average offered by IHL-designated peers (Auburn, Clemson, Iowa State, Kansas State, New Mexico State, North Carolina State, Oklahoma State, Oregon State, Purdue, Utah State, Virginia Tech, and Washington State). Further, in 2005-06 the average MSU GTA stipend was about \$4000 below the average offered by other SEC universities.

Trend data reveals steady erosion in the MSU stipend amount relative to IHL and SEC peers over time. The gap between the average MSU stipend as compared to IHL peers and SEC schools became significant by 1990, and has continued to grow through the present. This makes it increasingly difficult to compete with other schools for top graduate students. In addition, differences in stipends are significant across MSU colleges and are even more startling within colleges. Within A&S for example, it was reported at the Roundtable that the current AY (academic year) GTA stipend in Sociology is about \$7700 compared to an AY stipend in Chemistry of about \$15,000.

Stories related by roundtable participants included graduate assistants who have opted to give up their assistantships since they could make more money working on the side while taking classes

rather than accepting an assistantship—which would restrict their outside employment options. Other accounts related that some graduate students have enrolled in the Food Stamps program in order to make ends meet due to the poor stipend amounts. In some cases the stipends offered by MSU are so low that graduate programs can't find enough students to accept those that are made available. It is disturbing that in many cases the dollar amount of stipends offered by MSU are so low that they are viewed as a disincentive to prospective and current graduate students.

Based on a count of graduate assistantships by semester during the 2001-2006 period, it appears that the overall number of graduate assistantships has either declined or remained stagnant. For example, in Spring 2001, there were a total of 988 assistantships while in Spring 2006 there were only 942. The overall decline includes a slight increase in the number of teaching assistantships and service assistantships (graduate students who work in administrative positions) combined with a decline in research assistantships over that time period. It is possible that the demand for more course sections has increased while the number of tenure-track faculty has decreased, thus creating demand for more graduate teaching assistants who can do the job much cheaper than hiring new faculty. It also appears that more graduate students are being used for administrative assistance in various offices and departments (data from the Office of Graduate Studies).

Related to the issue of stipends is the issue of health insurance—which is not provided to graduate assistants at MSU. It was observed that a graduate student who is married and has one child would spend \$4220 per year for health insurance through the available group student insurance plan. Consequently, it is typical that graduate students do not carry health insurance on themselves or their families, and will often enroll their children in the CHIPS insurance program (a program funded by State and Federal governments for low-income families). The cost to a graduate student to enroll only him/herself in the group student insurance plan is \$845. Many other universities provide health insurance to graduate assistants (along with higher stipends), and MSU's inability to offer any health coverage can only reduce the value of its assistantships even further.

With regard to international graduate students, discussion centered on the minimum amount of compensation necessary to issue an I-20 form which is required by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) of all international students in order to receive their visa to enter the U.S. The current minimum amount for MSU is \$25,939. In the example given at the roundtable, the percentage of the minimum amount to secure an I-20 that is covered by the MSU teaching assistantship in Physics has declined from 63% in 1997-98 to 40% in 2005-06. While the minimum amount required for an I-20 has steadily increased, the stipend has not. This means that departments seeking to enroll international graduate students must pick up a larger and larger share of the required I-20 amount. The erosion in the percent of the required I-20 figure that is accounted for by the graduate assistantship makes it increasingly more difficult to fund talented international graduate students. Consequently they enroll in other universities that offer better support in the way of stipends, housing, insurance, and other fees.

In sum, over the past few years graduate student stipends have fallen farther behind those offered by IHL-designated peer institutions and other SEC schools, and now average about \$4000 below those offered by other SEC universities. The number of graduate student assistantships has declined slightly in the same time period. The MSU graduate stipend

now accounts for only about 40% of the total compensation needed to issue an I-20 form to international graduate students—down from about 60% of the total in 1998. This places an additional burden on colleges, departments and individual faculty to make up the difference, and reduces our ability to attract international graduate students. And as MSU does not typically provide health insurance to graduate assistants, the value of the assistantship is further eroded and made less competitive when compared to support offered by other universities that do provide health insurance as well as higher paying assistantships. It is likely that these factors have played some role in the decline in enrollments and degrees granted in traditional graduate programs, as well as the decline in incoming GRE scores.

Online Graduate Courses And Degree Programs.

There has been significant increase in the number of graduate credit hours, courses, degree programs, enrollments, and degrees granted to distance students through AOCE. As noted in an earlier section, it could accurately be said that this portion of graduate education at MSU is primarily responsible for the bulk of (and in some cases the totality of) any increases in graduate student enrollments and degrees awarded at MSU over the past few years. AOCE currently offers three Ph.D. programs and 13 Masters programs to distance students. Five years ago none were offered through AOCE. Graduate credit hours offered through AOCE have increased from 4620 in 2002 to 12,371 in 2005. The vast majority of enrollments and degrees granted through AOCE are at the Masters level, and it is generally agreed that distance learning may be best suited for Masters programs of the non-thesis variety. This is due to concerns voiced regarding the difficulty in implementing a significant mentoring and research component associated with distance Ph.D. programs. Nevertheless, **while not all programs of study will work through distance learning, the expansion of graduate education through AOCE should be considered an opportunity for the MSU graduate program.**

One area of concern with regard to AOCE is the lack of program assessment. **It is imperative that an assessment plan be developed for each degree program offered through AOCE according to SACS requirements.** This is one of the problems that led to the placement of USM on probation during their last accreditation review. This should be done quickly and is the presumed responsibility of the department from which the degree program originates. Thus, each department that offers a degree program through AOCE must design and implement an assessment plan for each degree program at the earliest opportunity. It was also noted that some sort of annual review of programs offered through AOCE should be instituted by the Provost's office.

Recommendations.

While the above offers a brief review of discussion items addressed at the roundtable, this section attempts to summarize the various recommendations generated by the roundtable. First, after listening to and participating in the discussion, President Foglesong identified five “action items” that deserve near-term attention.

1) A Graduate Dean will be installed. Examine the appropriate “chain of command” by

which the Graduate Dean would report.

2) Implement a feasibility study of appointing an Associate Dean of Graduate Studies in each college—particularly those that generate significant numbers of graduate degrees and which don't have someone in that position (i.e., Arts and Sciences, Education, Agriculture).

3) The current overhead distribution policy (40/40/20) will be reviewed and possibly revised.

4) The current policy on counting student enrollments should be reviewed. Many students are not counted for several reasons, some related to the timing of the count.

5) A review of graduate stipend and insurance coverage issues will be implemented with the goal of increasing stipends to a level that is competitive with other SEC schools, and providing health insurance to graduate students and their families.

In addition to these actions directed by Dr. Fogelson, other recommendations that received general support were forwarded at various points in the discussion.

6) Look into the addition of doctoral programs in disciplines that seem ripe for expansion. This should include interdisciplinary degrees.

7) International graduate student recruitment should be enhanced. Talk to the current Associate Deans for Graduate Studies in Engineering and Veterinary Medicine to get an idea of what they are doing in this regard.

8) Develop assessment plans for all degree programs offered through AOCE. This should be done at the earliest opportunity by the originating departments and colleges.

9) Availability of online courses and programs should be made clear in university advising documents and course/degree listings. Finding such courses and programs should be made much easier than it is currently.

The 2006 Faculty/Administration Roundtable adjourned at 3:00 pm, April 29, 2006.

Respectfully,

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Vice President, Holland Faculty Senate
2006 Roundtable Organizer and Moderator