

February 4, 2009

Joseph R. Oppong, Chair  
Ana D. Cleveland  
David Schwarz  
Ruthanne D. Thomas  
Margaret Vestal  
Kathleen K. Whitson

**Executive Summary.** The Internal Graduate Education Review Committee (IGERC), a committee of UNT faculty and staff appointed by Provost Wendy Wilkins, collected information from a variety of sources concerning graduate education at UNT and specifically the Toulouse School of Graduate Studies (TSGS).

For UNT to meet its goal of becoming a top-tier student-centered research university, the IGERC recommends that the Toulouse School of Graduate Studies take the following steps:

- **Develop a plan to address deficiencies in graduate student funding**, perceived among many campus stakeholders as the number one problem in graduate education at UNT
- **Improve communication with both its internal and external customers.** As a first step, **overhaul and upgrade the TSGS website.**
- In collaboration with the academic departments, **develop and implement a graduate student recruitment strategy.**
- **Streamline the admissions process and remove confusion about student admission to the graduate school vs admission into individual academic programs.**
- **Improve the process for screening international applicants.**
- **Develop programs to promote graduate student professional growth.**
- **Encourage and reward graduate student research.**
- **Review and, where appropriate, adjust requirements to avoid hindering graduate student research.**
- **Develop a stronger working relationship with the Office of Research and Economic Development.**
- **Review and clarify the role of the Graduate Council.**
- **Move decisions concerning ability of faculty members to chair graduate thesis/dissertation committees to the academic departments/programs.**
- **Modify graduate program evaluations.**

To facilitate the implementation of the above recommendations, the IGERC recommends that the University take steps to **revitalize and expand the role of the Graduate Dean.**

## **Introduction**

In the Spring of 2008, Provost Wilkins assembled an external review team who were brought to UNT to assess and evaluate the full range of the Toulouse School of Graduate Studies (TSGS) activities. Their full report, hereafter the External Graduate Education Review Committee report (EGERC) accompanies this document. As a result of their work, the Provost appointed and charged the Internal Graduate Education Review Committee (IGERC) with the task of evaluating the external review report, continuing the review process, and making recommendations to the Provost regarding needed changes for graduate education within the University.

The committee comprised:

Joseph R. Opong, Department of Geography

Ana D. Cleveland, Department of Library and Information Sciences

David Schwarz, Faculty Special Assistant to the Provost, and College of Music

Ruthanne Thomas, Associate Vice President for Research and Economic Development, and Department of Chemistry

Kathleen K. Whitson, Department of Counseling and Higher Education

Margaret Vestal, Special Assistant to the Provost

In order to accomplish this charge, the Internal Graduate Education Review Committee met with:

- The Dean and Senior Staff of the Toulouse School of Graduate Studies
- The Executive Committee of the Faculty Senate
- The Faculty Senate
- The Chair of the Department Chair's Council

The IGERC also received input from the university community in the following ways:

- The IGERC held two open forums for faculty on Monday, October 13, 2008 and Thursday October 16, 2008. On both occasions, faculty could participate from one of several locations—Chilton Hall #245, Gateway #049, Discovery Park #B-15 or Environmental Science Building #163.
- Faculty could also contribute comments to the committee through a special e-mail address: [IGERC@UNT.EDU](mailto:IGERC@UNT.EDU).
- Faculty could also login with their EUID number to a wiki where they could express their opinions.

- In addition, 4 focus group discussions were held—two for graduate students and one each for Department Chairs and Graduate Program Advisors/Coordinators.

### **Findings and Recommendations**

In general, the IGERC concurred with the External Graduate Education Review Committee (EGERC) assessment. In particular, the IGERC agreed that, “It was apparent that the Graduate School was reasonably well-staffed for a monitoring function, but perhaps not for a leadership/facilitation function for an ‘emerging research university’” (EGERC 6).

In fulfillment of the monitoring mission, the Dean and staff of TSGS attend to detail and support programs in the admissions process. When presented with questions and problems, they respond readily and with their best efforts. The staff is helpful and has a positive attitude.

However, there is a prevailing perception that the TSGS is predominantly a clerical office, not in tune with the larger graduate education process. Nationally, higher education is moving in new directions and within this context, UNT is seeking to become a top tier research university; new directions require new approaches. To support this transformation, TSGS needs a new mission detailed in role, scope, and responsibilities. The IGERC identified the following specific areas which need to be addressed by the TSGS in order to fulfill its new role:

### **Graduate Student Funding**

Overwhelmingly, the most frequently raised concern with graduate education at UNT was the inadequacy of graduate student funding. This includes:

- Lack of tuition waiver or reimbursement for graduate assistants
- Limited graduate student travel support for professional activities
- Lack of funding for student research
- Inadequate financial aid packages
- Lack of scholarships for continuing students
- Limited scholarships for recruitment of new students
- Untimely release of scholarship information and funds

### **Recommendation**

The IGERC recommends that in collaboration with the academic units, the TSGS take a leadership role, to: (1) determine what needs to be done for UNT to be competitive in graduate student support and (2) to develop a plan to address this issue.

## **Communication**

Throughout the review process, communication emerged as a major concern within every activity of the TSGS, with both internal and external audiences. Many members of the UNT community find the TSGS website inaccessible, difficult to navigate, and containing outdated information which sometimes conflicts with program guidelines. The EGERC also noted a similar finding:

The Graduate School website appeared to focus mostly on recruitment of new students. It was not obvious where continuing students would find information. For example, none of the Review Team members were able to identify the names of the Graduate School staff from the web site (EGERC 6).

Specific examples of poor communication voiced at the forums and focus groups include:

### **Internal**

- Unknown or misunderstood policies and processes of the TSGS
- Inadequate information about graduate assistantships
- Lack of clarity and timeliness regarding deadlines

### **External**

- Unclear TSGS admission requirements vs requirements for full acceptance into specific academic programs
- Inadequate information regarding assistantships and financial support

## **Recommendation**

TSGS should make every effort to ensure effective communication of its programs, policies, deadlines, opportunities, and expectations. First and foremost the TSGS website is a primary communication tool for both external and internal audiences. Therefore, we recommend a complete overhaul of the TSGS website. Considerable human and financial resources should be invested to create and maintain a website that communicates and invites “come on in.” It should publicize the successes and accomplishments of our students and faculty and be an important marketing and recruitment tool without obscuring information for current students. Graduate students should be able to get information about scholarships, deadlines, opportunities, forms, requirements etc. from the website. This should be the UNT graduate students’ most visited website. Similarly, graduate advisors should be able to track admission information and status through this website. Furthermore, as noted by EGER, “there should be ample reference to graduate student research if UNT wishes to be considered a research university (EGERC 6).” TSGS should make efforts to demonstrate accessibility to graduate students. TSGS should exemplify an atmosphere of deliberate access and service to our graduate students and programs.

## **Graduate Student Recruitment and Admission**

There appears to be no clear objectives/goals for the current graduate student recruitment strategy at UNT. In fact, many faculty members do not know if a strategy exists and are disconnected from the recruitment process. The Graduate School admission process is perceived to be inscrutable and inconsistent for all students and particularly confusing for international students. These problems are exacerbated by the dual application process (TSGS vs. specific program).

### **Recommendation**

TSGS needs to develop and implement its recruitment strategy in close collaboration with the departments. The recruitment strategy should be clearly articulated, with clear objectives, and shared deliberately with graduate programs. In fact, recruitment funds may be better spent working with and through departments and programs. As noted by the EGERC, UNT needs a review of its Graduate School function from the point of view of centralized / de-centralized operations and criteria (EGERC 7).

The admissions process needs to be streamlined to be effective and efficient. The website should be a primary recruitment tool. In addition, a web-based, comprehensive and user-friendly electronic application system is required. Finally, graduate advisors should be able to determine the application status of any student with a simple visit to the TSGS website.

Finally, UNT needs a better method to screen international applicants, with smooth coordination and communication among TSGS, the International Admissions office, and graduate programs.

## **Professional Graduate Student Development Programs**

There is a perception that UNT currently lacks opportunities for professional graduate student development. A need exists for more inter-disciplinary networking, collaboration, skill, and professional development workshops and events for graduate students.

### **Recommendation**

To become a top-tier, student-centered research institution, professional development opportunities for graduate students have to become a top priority. TSGS should create structures that not only equip students, but also foster an expectation to produce research. In this effort, funding should be made available to support students' research, and degree program requirements should be reviewed to accommodate changes that will promote research.

Workshops, seminars, and coursework in areas such as the meaning of graduate education, how to be a graduate student, research and grant opportunities, grant writing, professional writing, career prospects, life in academia, teaching, international education, etc. should be provided on a

regular basis for all graduate students. A Graduate Student Research Grant competition (similar to the Research Initiation Grant for faculty), is critically needed. Such programs, as a key emphasis of TSGS, will definitely make TSGS more relevant to graduate students (EGERC 8).

### **Graduate Student Research**

TSGS currently focuses on its credentialing and monitoring functions at the expense of graduate student research productivity. Graduate student research is currently not perceived as a high priority as evidenced by a lack of allocation of funds or support. In fact, there is no clear communication across UNT that graduate student research is expected and rewarded.

### **Recommendation**

To meet its target of becoming a top-tier research university, UNT needs to increase the research output of graduate students, by encouraging and rewarding it. UNT needs research competition grants and awards. Degree Requirements and time to completion rates must be reviewed regularly to remain competitive relative to UNT's peer institutions and competition. Residency requirements for programs should be reviewed to accommodate the research emphasis. In sum, an environment should be created that draws students to the joy of academic discovery rather than a mere concern with satisfying credential requirements.

### **TSGS Relationship with the Office of Research and Economic Development (ORED)**

There appears to be a disconnect between TSGS and the Office of Research and Economic Development. The EGERC similarly observed: "To promote and enhance UNT efforts in maintaining and increasing its status as a research institution, the Graduate School will need to assess its relationships and collaborations with the Office of the Vice President for Research, academic deans and faculty" (EGERC 7).

### **Recommendation**

UNT needs strong working relationships between TSGS and Office of Research and Economic Development (ORED). UNT's goal to be a top-tier student-centered research university requires that the missions and goals of TSGS and ORED need to reinforce each other at all levels. This strong relationship should include joint programs, projects, and formalized channels of communication such as regular meetings.

## **Graduate Dean and Graduate Council**

The role of the Dean is perceived to coincide with the current perception of the clerical and monitoring focus of the TSGS. The role and responsibilities of the Graduate Council are unclear. There is a pervasive concern among faculty that the system of qualifying the 3-tiered graduate faculty is obsolete, and the designation of faculty eligible to direct theses/dissertations should not be placed with the Graduate Council.

### **Recommendation**

The role of the Graduate Dean should be revitalized and expanded to reflect UNT's goal to become a top-tier, student-centered, research university. In this regard, the graduate dean should take the leadership role in exploring new ideas and implementing innovative approaches to enhance the graduate education experience at UNT.

There should be a review of the role and purpose of the Graduate Council. This review should include clarifying its role to make it more effective or eliminating it.

The decision on the ability of faculty members to chair graduate thesis/dissertation committees should be the purview of the academic departments/programs.

## **Program Evaluations**

The EGERC concluded that "UNT does not presently have an effective process for graduate program review" (EGERC 2). The IGERC agrees with this finding. The purpose of the current program review is not clear and the metrics are not adequate. In addition, these periodic evaluations appear to simply end with the production of a report that is rarely used. Faculty and programs resent the arduous task when they perceive it is not going to produce anything tangible or substantial.

### **Recommendation**

Program evaluations should reflect Texas standards and peer institutions in addition to internal data. Such reviews should be tied to some substantive outcome (e.g. resource allocation process) to make it worthwhile. The metrics for such evaluation should be clear and transparent to programs and departments. Recommended specific metrics can be found in the attached report (EGERC 2-4). The Graduate Dean should be an integral part of the process of program evaluation.