

## **College of Arts & Sciences Strategic Planning Graduate Studies Working Group Preliminary Report**

### **Executive Summary**

The Graduate Studies Working Group engaged in a consultative process to assess the state of graduate education within the College of Arts and Sciences and develop recommendations to improve experiences and outcomes for students, faculty, and staff. The working group considered the structure and function of graduate education in a changing landscape of higher education and funding. The report emphasizes the interconnections between teaching and research and the need to more effectively communicate the value of graduate education among internal and external audiences.

### **Process**

The Graduate Studies Working Group has been charged with developing “a set of recommendations that account for the emergent challenges posed by our rapidly changing graduate education landscape that will best position our college to positively impact the future of Texas, the nation, and the world.” Per our charge, the working group assessed a range of topics, including graduate research, graduate teaching, the role of master’s programs, funding for graduate students, and aligning policies and procedures.

The working group engaged in a highly consultative process to gather data and solicit feedback. Our internal discussions were marked by a significant level of openness and mutual respect. We greatly appreciated the responses that we received from faculty, staff, and students across the college.

We convened a series of meetings and structured forums to solicit feedback from our stakeholders. This included a Graduate Studies retreat attended by faculty and staff involved in graduate program administration (approximately 53 participants), discussions with student leadership from graduate programs (9-12 students at two events), an open forum for graduate students (35 participants), and an open forum for faculty (13 participants). We distributed a survey to department heads and received four responses. In addition, we consulted with the Graduate Instruction Committee and the survey distributed through Hanover. Finally, our group engaged with the audience at the college-wide town hall.

The writing of the preliminary and final reports was done collaboratively, with the co-chairs taking the lead on drafting the documents. We received feedback in writing and through a series of committee meetings.

### **Opportunities**

The College of Arts and Sciences awards more than 50 graduate degrees and currently enrolls almost 2,200 doctoral and master’s students in 18 departments. Arts and Sciences is distinct among the largest colleges at Texas A&M because our graduate student body is predominantly (70%) doctoral students. Doctoral programs in our college enroll 28% of all doctoral students at Texas A&M University. Master’s programs have been identified as a key area for potential growth at a time when undergraduate enrollment is likely capped for the foreseeable future.

The size, scale, and breadth of our graduate programs offer an extraordinary opportunity to promote interdisciplinary research and teaching. Stakeholders have consistently encouraged us to make concerted efforts to build linkages between departments and programs. This is clearly an opportunity for us to build on our vision of a dynamic and integrated College of Arts and Sciences.

Finally, our graduate students are engaged in a range of research and teaching activities. More than 80% of our doctoral students receive support as graduate assistants, compared to 70% across the university. A majority of these students (54%) are supported as Graduate Assistant Researchers, with the rest funded as Graduate Assistant Teachers or Lecturers. With good stewardship of our resources, Arts and Sciences can be a home to innovative, high-quality pedagogy in the service of Texas A&M University's land, sea, and space grant missions. At the same time, we can train graduate students to conduct research that addresses the great challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Objectives**

**Objective 1:** Attract, recruit, and retain graduate students who are best poised to be great leaders

**Rationale:** Successful recruitment and retention hinge on offering competitive funding, clear mentorship, and a sense of community and purpose. Graduate students want to see paths to leadership—both academic and professional—and need structural and cultural support to achieve them.

### **Actions:**

1. Strategically invest in college resources to target high-achieving prospective graduate students.
2. Develop college-level recruitment materials that highlight leadership training, mentoring, and interdisciplinary opportunities.
3. Encourage transparency around funding packages, especially for master's students and international students.
4. Create structures (e.g., leadership fellowships, peer mentoring, student advisory boards) to support leadership development, as well as strengthening existing efforts in this area.
5. Liaise with HROE to coordinate efforts regarding onboarding, benefits, and academic lifecycle management for graduate students.
6. Develop a more flexible budget model so that departments can strategically utilize resources to enhance graduate experiences and outcomes.

### **Assessment:**

We will assess progress through metrics such as the hit rate on graduate admission offers and time-to-milestones for enrolled students. Departments will be encouraged to incorporate data from My Grad Journey and contextualize data to allow for both cross-departmental comparison and a more nuanced understanding of program-specific outcomes.

### **Anticipated Challenges:**

Defining and measuring success will vary across departments, given their different structures and goals. Additionally, external factors such as fluctuations in grant funding and increased barriers for international students may obscure causal relationships in our assessment metrics. These variables will thus require thoughtful interpretation and consideration of the evolving landscape of graduate education beyond TAMU.

**Objective 2:** Enhance the competitiveness of Arts and Sciences graduate students for external research funding support

**Rationale:** Increasing student success in securing external awards would enhance professional development, reduce reliance on internal budgets, and raise the visibility of programs. External awards from

foundations and federal agencies are a particular target, including training grants awarded to departments and faculty.

**Actions:**

1. Incentivize enhanced faculty participation in graduate student grant development throughout the college.
2. Create and maintain a college-level database of internal and external funding opportunities.
3. Provide targeted support for large-scale training grants that include graduate student support.
4. Coordinate with the Office of Research Development to offer training and mentoring for graduate students to encourage the number of external funding applications, including regular workshops and structured application support.
5. Streamline administrative processes related to grant management, including support for graduate students in engagement with university-level bodies like Sponsored Research Services.

**Assessment:**

We will track the total number of graduate student submissions for major external fellowships (i.e., GREAT program-eligible fellowships) to monitor engagement and participation across programs. Additionally, we will monitor the number of students who receive any form of external support (e.g., society and foundation research awards) as a direct measure of success. These metrics will inform strategic efforts to expand application support and identify areas where additional mentoring or infrastructure may be needed.

**Anticipated Challenges:**

External funding success often depends on factors beyond student control. For instance, faculty support, field-specific funding trends, and institutional reputation can all have major impacts on success rates. Variability in funding landscapes across disciplines, as well as inconsistent access to mentoring resources, may lead to unequal outcomes. Ensuring equitable access to support structures and interpreting submission data in light of these contextual factors will be critical to effective assessment.

**Objective 3:** Foster the development of degree programs in response to current and emerging workforce needs.

**Rationale:** Graduate education must evolve to stay relevant. Students increasingly seek programs that prepare them not just for academic careers, but for leadership roles in a rapidly changing world. The College of Arts and Sciences has the disciplinary breadth and intellectual capacity to lead in the development of forward-facing, interdisciplinary, and cross-disciplinary graduate programs that respond to real-world problems and market demand.

**Actions:**

1. Encourage the formation of alumni advisory groups in all departments to provide guidance on trends and desired skill sets in the field.
2. Offer faculty development and incentives for creating new programs, including support for online and hybrid course development.
3. Create a “Rapid-Response Curriculum” pilot program to streamline the creation of certificates, micro-credentials, and similar outcomes in response to market demands.

4. Engage with partners (including Hanover and EAB) to conduct market analysis as a component of new degree development and program reviews.

**Assessment:**

We will assess progress by tracking the number of departments that establish alumni advisory groups, which can provide critical insight into evolving industry expectations. Surveys of recent graduates will be used to gauge the alignment of programs with career outcomes, and input from employer advisory boards or direct employer surveys will inform the relevance and responsiveness of our program offerings. Together, these data sources will help ensure new and existing degree programs are aligned with workforce needs and opportunities.

**Anticipated Challenges:**

Gathering timely and representative feedback from alumni and employers may prove difficult, particularly in rapidly evolving job markets. Furthermore, not all departments may have the capacity or networks to sustain advisory groups or conduct regular surveys. Maintaining flexibility in program design while ensuring academic rigor will be a persistent challenge.

**Objective 4:** Develop leaders in the classroom by promoting high-quality, impactful teaching by graduate students

**Rationale:** Graduate students from the College of Arts and Sciences play a critical role in undergraduate education. The college teaches 72% of courses in the university's core curriculum. Our graduate students disproportionately support core curriculum teaching. More than 70% of undergraduates supported by our graduate student instructors are majoring in a subject outside of Arts and Sciences. However, teaching loads and training vary widely across disciplines. It is imperative to provide the highest quality pedagogical training to our graduate students for the benefit of undergraduates at Texas A&M.

**Actions:**

1. Incentivize departments to develop or enhance graduate student pedagogy courses.
2. Identify and share best practices across the College for effective graduate teacher training and mentoring.
3. Encourage departments to align the numbers of graduate teachers to effectively meet the demands of undergraduate courses and to establish equitable teaching loads.
4. Coordinate university and department-level teaching training and resources.
5. Develop workshops on matters of cross-departmental interest within the College, such as handling controversial topics in the humanities or teaching writing to scientists.
6. Create more opportunities for graduate students to receive feedback, mentorship, and recognition for teaching excellence.

**Assessment:**

We will track the number of departments/programs that offer advanced pedagogical training for graduate students beyond the training required for employment as a Graduate Assistant Teacher. In addition, we will determine the number of Arts and Sciences students who participate in and complete the Academy for Future Faculty and similar programs offered through the Center for Teaching Excellence at Texas A&M University.

**Anticipated Challenges:**

Departmental teaching cultures across the college vary widely. Some departments make extensive use of Graduate Assistant Teachers, while others fund students primarily through externally supported research. There is also wide variation in the types of teaching activity, ranging from grading to laboratory supervision. It is therefore difficult to measure the impact of pedagogical interventions across the college.

**Objective 5:** Communicate the importance of graduate studies to internal and external audiences

**Rationale:** The College of Arts and Sciences needs to create effective messaging that highlights the excellence of its graduate students to a wide variety of external audiences, emphasizing student engagement in research, teaching, and mentoring. At a time of increasing public skepticism about the value of higher education, it is imperative that we communicate a positive message highlighting the role of graduate education in building a better world.

**Actions:**

1. Develop a communications campaign highlighting graduate students' contributions to teaching, research, and community engagement.
2. Emphasize graduate students' achievements in college and department newsletters.
3. Encourage departments to integrate graduate education impact into annual reports and development narratives.
4. Establish a Science Communication Fellow program in collaboration with Marketing and Communications.
5. Engage with community partners to establish a program for graduate students to present their research to broader non-academic audiences
6. Communicate the role that graduate students play in mentoring our undergraduate population.

**Assessment:**

The working group will keep track of the number of stories featuring graduate students disseminated by university-level Marketing and Communications. In addition, we will track stories about graduate students that appear in the regular College of Arts and Sciences monthly newsletter.

**Anticipated Challenges:**

Marketing and Communications is only partially within the College of Arts and Sciences' area of oversight. We therefore need to coordinate closely with embedded Marketing and Communications professionals to leverage the college's influence on the dissemination of stories featuring our students and their activities.

**Synergies**

The working group believes strongly that graduate study is inherently synergistic. As discussed above, doctoral students in the College of Arts and Sciences function at the intersection of our research and undergraduate teaching missions. Our graduate students perform vital roles as teachers, researchers, and learners across our intellectually diverse community. What is good for our teaching and research missions is good for graduate studies, and *vice versa*.

We share, therefore, the hopes and concerns raised in other elements of the strategic planning process. Changes in the federal funding landscape will disproportionately affect the funding of graduate students. Our graduate students will be deeply engaged in efforts to enhance our role in the core curriculum; provide robust undergraduate instruction in foundational science; social science, and humanities courses; and address the challenges of preparing for a rapidly changing workforce landscape.

Along with the rest of the college, we share a need to more effectively communicate the value of what we do with the outside world. At a time when public faith in higher education is decreasing, the need to make a strong positive case for the value of the university only grows. Our graduate students can and should be a vital part of the story that Texas A&M University and the College of Arts and Sciences tell about ourselves. We look forward to helping make that story as compelling as possible.

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