

QUESTIONS ON THE DEAN'S PURDUE COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS  
GRADUATE PROGRAM UPGRADE INITIATIVE  
February 10, 2016

## OVERVIEW

In December, I shared a planning document with all CLA Heads designed to begin a process that would strengthen graduate education as part of our broader effort to raise the academic profile of the College. This document grew out of a Task Force on Graduate Education created at the end of 2015 spring semester and comprised of several CLA Heads. The Task Force was charged with: (1) Investigating the appropriate size and scale of graduate education in the College to ensure competitive stipends and student financial support and (2) Addressing how to improve the College's ability to mentor students to establish independent records of scholarship and creative activity. The Task Force was asked to consider a more decentralized model of graduate student financial support, in which academic units would have more autonomy in setting stipends. Finally, the group was asked to consider ways the College might offset a model with fewer graduate student instructors.

The findings of the Graduate Education Task Force Report clearly demonstrated that across our programs stipend levels are among the lowest (if not the lowest) in the CIC. In addition, student testimony collected by the Task Force made clear the financial stress many of our graduate students confront, and how the lack of competitive financial support limits their ability to focus on activities that would help advance their professional and academic careers. The Task Force Report included a number of recommendations to improve the College's programs. All faculty and graduate students in the College were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the report.

Based on this report and feedback, I asked the Heads to work with faculty and graduate students in their units to develop multi-year plans to achieve four objectives. Those are:

1. Enhance the College's ability to recruit the most prepared students;
2. Improve the experience for graduate students, by creating more balance between research and teaching opportunities;
3. Increase support for graduate student stipends and provide additional resources for research, conference participation, and professional development by working toward a more appropriate size and scale of graduate programs; and
4. Elevate the preparation of graduate students to be competitive in the labor market with improved placements at a broader range of research-intensive institutions as well as teaching-focused institutions and careers outside of academia, by instituting a redefined role in undergraduate instruction.

In these multi-year plans, academic units have more autonomy and flexibility to allocate graduate student financial support. Units are allowed to keep stipend levels unchanged; however, a unit's plan must explain why it would not be possible or prudent to raise all stipends to at least \$15K per year. In addition, Heads, in collaboration with their faculty, were also asked

to work on efforts that would: (1) set-aside at least 20% of GA lines for RA positions; (2) justify the number of students being admitted into a graduate degree program; (3) establish a general expectation that all full-time faculty would teach introductory undergraduate courses; and (4) reduce the variability across the College in the use of faculty teaching releases for administrative assignments.

The College currently invests approximately \$7.7M per year in graduate student financial support. With the help of the central administration, I am committed to maintaining this level of financial support to our graduate students and programs. However, we must make sure these funds are being invested wisely across our academic units to put forward the strongest graduate programs possible. If we move towards \$15K per year for graduate student stipends and continue to invest \$7.7M in graduate student financial support across the College, then we have enough money to fund 500 students. The College is comprised of ten schools and departments. When divided evenly, this means that each department would have enough resources to support approximately 50 students so this became my starting point. Of course, there are good reasons why some graduate degree programs should be larger, while others will be more modest in size.

The request to Heads for multi-year plans on graduate education is designed to provide an opportunity to explain the rationale and advocate for investing more in particular units. It is understandable that faculty and students may have questions about the size of graduate degree programs. The rationale for the size of a graduate degree program can be driven by many factors including the labor market, the relative standing of a particular field in the College, and a track record of placing students in jobs (especially in peer institutions) and cultivating scholars who elevate the overall reputation of an academic unit. In many comprehensive public universities, such as Purdue, the delivery of undergraduate education has played an important (and decisive) role in driving the relative size of liberal arts graduate education programs. While the delivery of undergraduate education is one factor, it should not be the predominant factor driving the relative size of our graduate programs.

It is worth noting the risk of linking graduate student financial support primarily to meeting the undergraduate mission of the University. Since 2011 (following the formation of the College of Health and Human Sciences), the number of majors in liberal arts has declined by 40%. Further, in 2011, CLA delivered 1 in 4 credits on campus. This has declined to 1 in 5 credits on campus. If the size and scale of our graduate programs are a direct function of the size and scale of our undergraduate enrollment and credit hours, then the financial investment in our graduate programs across the College should be substantially reduced. This is NOT being proposed. Questions have been raised too, about the stability of jobs for our tenure/tenure track faculty. Let me emphasize, this effort is no way tied to any plan to reduce the number of faculty in the College. That is absolutely NOT the case.

This initiative is designed to help strengthen graduate education and undergraduate education as part of a broad vision for the College to emerge as a leader in Liberal Arts education and scholarship. The academic reputation of our units depends on the scholarly and creative work conducted by our faculty as well as the placement and impact of our students. Many indicators suggest our scholarly impact is very strong, a tribute to the quality of our faculty. In 2014, citations to humanities scholarship (which is an imperfect, but commonly used, measure of

scholarly impact) ranked Purdue University in the 89th percentile (or the 26th most cited humanities faculty in the United States). We were more highly ranked than the University of Wisconsin, Ohio State University, Duke University, and Georgetown University, among other highly regarded peers. However, our rankings based on reputation are substantially lower. I believe one of the reasons for this gap is how we have managed our graduate programs and the trade-offs we have made to deliver large parts of our undergraduate curriculum by graduate students. Again, the relative size and scale of our graduate programs should not be driven exclusively by undergraduate education. It is important to note that other factors may be driving our reputational rankings. Faculty salaries and institutional messaging and marketing likely play a role. These factors deserve our attention and has been a focus of the dean's office.

Moreover, if we as a faculty believe a part of the curriculum is important enough to undergraduate education that it should be a requirement for all students, then we have a responsibility to play a substantial role in delivering these courses. As a faculty, we are scholars and we are educators. For me personally, some of the most meaningful experiences of my academic career are tied to student interactions, often with students who were not majors in my discipline, who shared stories of how classroom experiences affected their lives. We must never underestimate the value of teaching undergraduates. At every level of instruction, teaching is a noble profession. To ask all faculty to teach introductory courses is a tribute to the impact our work has on students at Purdue University. Instruction by our faculty also ranks as among our most compelling recruitment opportunities. For undecided students, a class with a great teacher can be the factor that influences the choice of major. As we work to turn the tide in terms of undergraduate enrollment, using faculty to our best advantage only makes sense to me.

All told, I believe this effort will give us a chance to revisit many of these long-standing issues and practices as we move toward upgrading graduate education in the College. It is important to remember that our undergraduate curriculum can be changed by the faculty (including university-level requirements). Decisions about what it means to have faculty teach introductory courses will be made at the academic unit level. A move from significant reliance on teaching assistants in some courses may prompt discussions about the pedagogy tied to those courses. In all of this, we have the responsibility and the opportunity to make choices and trade-offs in how best to balance the research, teaching, and service/engagement missions of the College.