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About the Initiative

Defining graduate student educational goals and assessing outcomes is becoming the national standard for improving teaching and learning in higher education and figures prominently in the procedures used by higher education accrediting agencies.

While much of a graduate student’s time is spent on coursework, independent study, and developing their research, graduate education goes well beyond scholarly formation. The articulation of graduate student outcomes makes transparent to students and faculty the (often unwritten) program expectations that address the different aspects of professional and scholarly development.

At the University of Minnesota, a committee established by the Graduate School under the aegis of the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost has developed guidelines and other materials to help programs identify their particular educational aspirations for graduate students as well as potential measures of their achievement.

Each graduate program should produce a clear statement of graduate student educational goals and a written process for determining how graduate students are meeting them. Collegiate deans are responsible for ensuring that programs produce a statement of their goals and a plan to examine students’ attainment of them. These documents can remain works in progress as the program develops in the future.

Purpose of the Graduate Program Goals Initiative

- Encourage clear, transparent, and shared intentions for graduate programs
- Create productive dialogue between faculty and graduate students
- Respond to the public, legislative, and accrediting agencies’ request for statements that detail what specific programs intend their courses, research experiences, and professional activities to accomplish
- Provide information to current and prospective students
- Prepare for accreditation review in 2015-16

Components and Process

- Engage faculty and students through conversations, surveys or other methods in identifying the most significant and fundamental goals of the educational program in terms of student outcomes
- Identify the ways in which these goals are (or will be) put in place
- Establish a plan for assessment
- Produce and review a report
- Develop a long term plan for comprehensive review and update
**Background**

The Graduate Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment Committee was established in November 2012 by Henning Schroeder, Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Education (under the aegis of the Office of the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost), to identify graduate student outcomes and approaches to outcomes assessment.

The University of Minnesota initiative is in line with efforts underway or in place elsewhere to assess graduate student outcomes as a means to improve programs and to increase transparency of expectations for graduate students. The initiative also responds to increasing demands for accountability in graduate education and anticipates the needs of accrediting agencies, including the University’s accrediting agency, the Higher Learning Commission, which will visit in 2015.

**Goals of the Initiative**

- The primary goal of the initiative is to identify and implement program-specific graduate student outcomes for use in program self-assessment and improvement through a faculty driven process that includes consultation with students.

- Implementing graduate student outcomes assessment will allow programs to address:
  - The educational goals for students as a result of their participation in the graduate program
  - The specific student experiences in the program (e.g., courses, conference presentations, mentoring interactions) that provide opportunities for students to achieve articulated educational goals
  - The extent to which students are meeting these goals
  - The program changes suggested by an assessment of educational goals to improve outcomes in areas where students are not meeting program goals and to enable programs to make changes in a timely way

**Benefits of the Initiative**

Implementing graduate student educational outcomes will allow each college and system campus to address:

- outcomes and student experiences that are specific to the college and/or system campus
- accountability to stakeholders
- accreditation needs

Implementing graduate student educational outcomes will allow the University to:

- demonstrate accountability to stakeholders
- address accreditation needs

Institutional benefits of the graduate student educational outcomes initiative include:

- an improved graduate student experience
closer alignment of elements of the graduate student experience (e.g., mentoring/advising, research, coursework) with program, collegiate and institutional goals and employer needs

improved ability to articulate student outcomes, and to respond to internal and external changes in the environment in ways that improve student outcomes

improved ability of programs, colleges and the University to respond to external requests/expectations for institutional accountability

a more systematic/evidence-based approach to program assessment

faculty and student support for a program assessment process whose goals and outcomes are identified and implemented at the “local” level through a faculty-driven, consultative process

improved communication between faculty and students about program goals and expectations

Pilot Project

Three research-based programs and two professional programs were identified by July 1, 2013, and volunteered to participate in the pilot program during fall 2013. This group of five programs comprised the original pilot group. In all cases, the intent was to develop an approach to defining graduate student educational outcomes that aligned with existing evaluative processes, procedures, and measures.

The Charge

Each research-based pilot program was asked to: summarize its educational goals and student outcomes; summarize the process by which the program, in consultation with students, arrived at its outcomes; and describe the framework the program would use to assess its outcomes. In formulating their student outcomes, these graduate programs were invited to consult a draft set of six principles (or domains) that had been developed by a subcommittee of the larger Graduate Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment Committee. The research-based programs were asked to report their results by December 31, 2013.

The two professional pilot programs were asked to: map their existing student educational outcomes to the draft principles; identify any outcomes that could not be mapped to the draft principles; identify additional principles that were relevant to the respective programs’ outcomes; and summarize the process by which the program arrived at its results. These programs were also asked to report their results by the end of December 2013.

Participating Programs

The five programs in the original pilot, and their DGSs, were:

Research based programs (develop outcomes):

- Biomedical Informatics and Computational Biology (Claudia Neuhauser, DGS)
- Rhetoric and Scientific and Technical Communication (Donald Ross, DGS)
• Quantitative Methods in Education/Educational Psychology (Ernest Davenport, DGS; Michael Rodriguez, Track Coordinator)

Professional programs (map established outcomes to draft principles):
• Communication Sciences and Disorders (Duluth) (Faith Loven, DGS)
• Scientific and Technical Communication (Ann Hill Duin, DGS)

In addition, five research-based graduate programs were invited to participate in a “streamlined” pilot that required the programs to produce only a two-page document.

Programs in this group of programs, identified in fall 2013 following two focus groups with DGSs, were asked to provide: a brief description of the process by which the program identified its goals or outcomes (including participation by graduate students), a discussion of the program’s specific graduate student outcomes appropriate to the program, and an account of the way in which the program will assess its goals/outcomes.

These programs were also given the draft “principles” but were not asked to consult them in formulating their statements. Like the programs in the original pilot group, programs in the “streamlined” pilot reported their results by the end of December 2013.

The five pilot programs using the “streamlined” approach and their DGSs were:
• Aerospace Engineering and Mechanics (Perry Leo, DGS)
• Applied Economics (Elizabeth Davis, DGS [outgoing])
• Child Psychology (Michael Maratsos, DGS)
• History (Barbara Welke, DGS)
• History of Science, Technology, and Medicine (Michael Janssen, DGS)

Commonalities Among Submissions
All of the submissions reflected the individual character of the particular pilot program; however, commonalities also emerged among the ten submissions and these often reflected the six draft “principles.”

The most prevalent outcomes, cited by most programs, were:
• Knowledge and scholarship
• Research and methodological skills relevant to the field
• Communication skills
• Education for service, citizenship in the discipline, professionalism
• Pedagogy/training for teaching
• Collaboration/interdisciplinary skills
• Practical application of knowledge
Not surprisingly, the most frequently cited assessment methods were those that are already well-established in graduate education:

- Course completion/faculty evaluation of coursework
- Written preliminary examination
- Oral preliminary examination
- Written research project or paper
- Annual student progress evaluations/self-evaluation
- Thesis/dissertation prospectus
- Final defense
- Dissertation
- Publications
- Presentations/conference participation
- Participation on departmental (or other University or non-University) committees and in research seminars
- Teaching apprenticeship/graduate assistantship/teaching evaluations

**Project Planning Group**

The graduate student outcomes initiative is a faculty-driven, consultative process that has engaged faculty in all phases.

Membership of the initial Graduate Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment Committee included faculty representatives from the Senate Committee on Educational Policy (SCEP); faculty experts in the area of evaluation and assessment; a graduate student representative; and relevant staff from the Provost's Office, Office of Institutional Research, the Graduate School, and the Office of the Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs at Duluth. The Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Education serves as committee chair and project lead.

A subcommittee was charged in 2013 to generate an early document that posed initial ideas for a pilot program to develop graduate student outcomes, and draft principles to help guide this process. Subcommittee members were Professors Claudia Neuhauser, Michael Rodriguez and Elaine Tarone, and graduate student Andrew McNally.

A second subcommittee was formed in 2013 to review draft student outcomes submitted by the ten programs in the pilot study and to summarize findings prior to introducing the initiative to the University graduate education community in spring 2014. Members of the second subcommittee were Professors Lee-Ann Breuch, Claudia Neuhauser and Michael Rodriguez; Associate Dean Melissa Anderson; and Acting Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Education Sally Gregory Kohlstedt.

The methodology for the initiative also included two focus groups with faculty who represented a wide range of disciplines, and discussion of initial ideas with a broad constituency, including SCEP, the Faculty Consultative Committee, collegiate deans and associate deans, and the Council of Graduate Students.