

Chancellor's Graduate and Professional Student Advisory Board Graduate Group Resources Subcommittee Report

Members: Dorothy Hoang (chair), Ginger Alonso, Kristen Bush, Nkechinyere Chidi-Ogbolu, Katti Crakes, Gwyneth Manser

Background and Accomplishments

The University of California, Davis' graduate group structure is unique, and we know of few similar arrangements within higher education. While graduate groups have advantages over departmentally-based programs, they also have disadvantages that shape the graduate student experience in important ways. Based on this, the Graduate Group Resources Review subcommittee was started in an effort to examine the differences between the graduate school experience of students in graduate groups and students in departments. As this was the committee's first year, we focused on information gathering, with the hope of making further progress during the 2020-2021 academic year. Our guiding questions were: What resources (such as office space, designated TA positions, programmatic support, funding, etc.) do different graduate groups have access to? Can recommendations be made to increase equity, reduce stress, and improve the overall experience of graduate group members of the UCD community?

In order to answer our questions, we set and accomplished three objectives¹:

1. Acquired lists of contact information for all graduate programs at UC Davis, which included both department and graduate group programs.
2. Interviewed graduate group coordinators in order to gauge their thoughts on strengths and weaknesses of graduate group programs.
3. Interviewed graduate students (including students in graduate groups and in departments) in order to evaluate what challenges are felt on the student level in comparison to staff and/or faculty members.

Below, we describe the findings of our interviews with graduate group coordinators (objective 2) and graduate students (objective 3).

Interviews with graduate group coordinators:

The subcommittee conducted five separate interviews with program coordinators. Since it was common that coordinators oversaw multiple programs, these five coordinators represented eight unique graduate programs. After compiling common themes from these interviews, we found

¹ Although we had hoped to interview more students, the constraints imposed by the coronavirus pandemic limited the scope of our outreach and engagement.

common strengths and common areas of concern amongst the coordinators. They saw that graduate groups are beneficial due to their multi-disciplinary structure, which they perceived as enhancing diversity amongst graduate group students, faculty, and staff. In particular, graduate groups allow for faculty creativity, as faculty have the ability to develop new coursework that may not necessarily fit into any existing department program. These courses allow for a wide range of topics to be covered. Additionally, the coordinators thought that the graduate group structure builds assertiveness, independence, and creativity in students. Faculty, staff, and students have the ability to host activities or events that bring multiple disciplines together which encourages cross-campus collaboration.

The coordinators' main areas of concern about graduate groups related to inconsistencies in: physical cohesiveness, resources and coordination of these resources, and social networking. These areas of concern are described in more detail below, along with recommendations for addressing these concerns:

- 1. Need for centralization.** Graduate groups lack the consistency provided by having a central space for students to convene. Without a centralized space, students miss out on opportunities for open dialogue about their research topics, ideas for collaboration, socialization with faculty, and acquiring academic knowledge. In addition to shared space, graduate groups are not able to provide individual student spaces so they can have a secure space from which to work on their research. While some major advisors step in in this capacity, this is not consistent across faculty. Overall, sharing spaces and resources (or not having space at all) adds to the complexity of navigating graduate groups.
- 2. Need for Coordination.** There appears to be a lack of coordinated or systematic communication. Both students and coordinators experience added burden of proactively ensuring that everyone is on the same page. Amongst coordinators themselves, meetings are regularly scheduled but are voluntary, so not all graduate group members are in attendance, thus making communication more difficult. In addition, coordinator communication with faculty requires extensive effort as mass emails do not garner the participation that is desired. There is also a need for coordination amongst the university as a whole. When program coordinators apply for funding or submit various university forms, these are primarily tailored to department programs, thus requiring coordinators to try to work around the system to tailor the unique requests of a graduate group so that it fits into the box of departmental requirements. Similar concerns were echoed by students in graduate groups.
- 3. Inconsistent faculty engagement.** A major area of concern is the level of faculty engagement. Some faculty join graduate groups to advise students but do not participate in any other committees or activities. The requirements for faculty to join a graduate group are not always clear in terms of what is expected to be an active member. Programs

may lack incentive for faculty membership or engagement since teaching courses in a graduate group may not count towards their teaching load. A more *intentional hiring process that is inclusive of graduate groups needs, as well as regular review and evaluation* of member participation so that requirements to participate in the graduate group are regularly brought to the forefront, may alleviate some of these concerns.

- 4. Lack of funding.** Because there is a lack of centralized funding and TAs, each graduate group has their own unique hoops to maneuver in order to secure funding; however, it is a common theme that all graduate groups do not have any secure, multi-year TAs or funding offers for their students. It then becomes the responsibility of the student to reach out to departments for opportunities for funding. There are block grants that are awarded to graduate groups to allocate to students, but these grants are often earmarked for recruiting students into the program, and thus commonly only support first year students. Continuing students do not have funding that is comparable to other students in department-based programs. Thus, funding is very shaky and adds a constant level of stress to students during their graduate career. These stressors are, in turn, felt by graduate coordinators.

Interviews with graduate students:

The subcommittee also conducted interviews with graduate students in departments and graduate students in graduate groups in order to assess potential discrepancies in their student experiences at UC Davis. Using a semi-structured interview guide, interviews were conducted with three students in departments, and four students in graduate groups. Interviews were then analyzed using SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis. On the strengths side, several students in graduate groups noted exceptional levels of peer support within their programs, fewer limitations with regard to taking classes outside of their discipline (and the subsequent ability to pursue more interdisciplinary approaches and scholarship), and smaller class sizes within their core courses. Relative to students in graduate groups, students in departments reflected on the benefits of higher levels of institutional support, the benefits of routine and regularly scheduled interactions (including colloquiums and workshops), high levels of departmental camaraderie, the benefits of having physical locations on campus (via departmental spaces), more faculty interaction, and dependable, long-term, and specific financial packages. In direct contrast with graduate group students, some students in departments noted a bias against interdisciplinary work.

While both students in graduate groups and departments noted anxiety around securing funding (particularly in summer), students in graduate groups noted additional frustrations due to the time and effort required to secure TA and GSR positions outside of their academic homes. One graduate group student interviewed noted: “Departmental professors already have their preferred

candidates [within the department], and so we are almost ‘discriminated’ against as grad group students.” Several students in graduate groups noted feeling overextended, working multiple campus jobs, and a lack of graduate group funding for events, scholarships, multi-year funding packages, and additional programmatic support staff. Beyond funding, students in graduate groups voiced concern based on a perceived overall lack of institutional support. This included a loss of opportunities and resources compared to departmental programs, including specific concerns related to funding, lack of physical office and program spaces, training, lack of organization and structure, lack of resources, limited faculty accountability and engagement (both in terms of mentorship and teaching core programmatic classes), and poorly run and/or limited course offerings specific to their fields of study and programs. In general, graduate group students felt they lacked opportunities for interaction with peers and faculty, and felt that administrative staff were often overworked and unorganized.

Based on the concerns of students in graduate groups, we would like to purpose several areas of intervention:

1. **Increased institutional support.** In general, graduate group members felt a lack of institutional support. *This could be alleviated somewhat by fostering a culture at the University that is more attentive to the needs and concerns of graduate group students.* For example, offering conference funding specific to graduate groups or implementing more inclusive language on forms (which often refer only to ‘departments’ on campus, and not graduate groups) may make students feel more supported.
2. **Reconsidering the TA hiring process.** Because they are competing with department-based students (many of whom are already guaranteed departmental TA and GSR positions through their admissions packages), graduate group students face additional barriers to finding, applying for, and getting TA and GSR positions on campus. This process is further exacerbated by inconsistent departmental timelines for making TA/GSR offers, and widely varying departmental application processes and structures. While Handshake helps to address some of these issues, these challenges could be further addressed by *creating a standardized application for TA positions (similar to the ‘Common App’)*, and having a common date by which applications are made available, and by which TA offers are made.
3. **Making space.** Many students in graduate groups felt that access to physical space for learning, socializing, and working was an issue. A university *commitment to providing common spaces and offices for students in graduate groups* would go a long way in fostering a culture of inclusion, and demonstrating a commitment to supporting students in graduate groups.
4. **More faculty support.** Students in graduate groups mentioned that class offering and faculty engagement within their graduate group were limited. Steps should be taken to

encourage faculty engagement and accountability to graduate group students, and to reward faculty members that demonstrate a commitment to supporting graduate group students through teaching and mentorship.

Recommendations

Based on our findings from this year, we propose that this subcommittee continues next year to follow-up with resource discrepancies that have been identified. We recommend a meeting with Dr. Jean-Pierre Delplanque, the Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of Graduate Studies, to discuss ways to address the issues above and move forward with suggestions that have been highlighted.