



The University of Georgia

Graduate School

MEMORANDUM

TO: Department Heads and Graduate Coordinators

FROM: Maureen Grasso, Dean 

RE: Initiative for Optimal Doctoral Completion

DATE: December 19, 2007

As many of you know, the National Research Council (NRC) is in the final stages of its *Assessment of Research Doctorate Programs*. The results of the last nationwide *NRC Assessment* were released in 1995. Those results received considerable media coverage and had a profound influence on how individual doctoral programs were perceived by policy makers, funding agencies, and prospective students. The results of the current *Assessment* will be released this spring. The scope of the assessment has been broadened considerably to contain a wide range of program descriptors and quality indicators. For more information on the overall assessment, please visit the NRC Web site at <http://www7.nationalacademies.org/resdoc/>.

I am writing to you today to alert you of one of the most noteworthy additions to the 2008 *Assessment*: a focus on doctoral completion statistics. Although the details have yet to be released, each program participating in the *Assessment*—and the majority of 93 doctoral programs at the university are participating—will be evaluated on both the percentage of admitted students completing and the time it took to complete.

This is not surprising given the increased attention being given to doctoral completion in recent years. Numerous governmental and non-governmental agencies have argued that doctoral non-completion is an expensive proposition for society, for institutions, and for individual students. Each and every doctoral student represents a substantial investment in terms of time, scarce intellectual resources, and public and private dollars. When students graduate, they move out into various professions as representatives of the university. Their subsequent accomplishments reflect on the university and their professional work serves as recompense to taxpayers and other individuals and organizations that fund doctoral education. When doctoral students fail to graduate, there is little or no return on these investments.

The UGA Graduate School is well aware of the importance of doctoral completion and we have been preparing for the impending findings of the *NRC Assessment*. We just completed a three-year project examining doctoral completion and have received funding for an additional three years. Our project experiences will put us in a position to understand and strategically respond to the forthcoming findings and more generally work to improve completion statistics in *all* university doctoral programs, whether or not they are part of the *Assessment*.

MEMORANDUM

Page 2

Up until now, doctoral completion at the University of Georgia has not been systematically monitored. However, our preliminary research suggests that completion rates vary widely; in the twelve programs we have studied so far, completion rates ranged from 33.3% to 77.7%. Although no one involved in doctoral education believes that every student admitted will graduate, it is difficult to argue that graduating 1 out of every 3 admitted students is a satisfactory level of completion.

With the endorsement of Provost Mace, starting in January the Graduate School will launch a university-wide initiative to monitor completion and to assist programs in making any necessary improvements. At the Graduate School, we will be dealing with data quality issues and the establishment of a benchmarking system. We will conduct follow-up surveys of graduates and dropouts, and conduct analyses examining gender and racial equity. In addition, Institutional Research will begin publishing completion data for all doctoral programs available on the FACTS Web page; summary statistics will include percentage completion, median time to degree, and, for those who fail to complete, median time to withdrawal.

However, central administration can only do so much to address the issue of doctoral completion. Meaningful change at the program level can only be achieved by committed, empowered, and creative action on behalf of faculty members. The Graduate School will work actively to support individual program enhancement efforts. Specifically, we plan to enter into a dialogue with programs and provide them with materials they need to conceptualize and implement strategies to optimize doctoral completion.

In an attempt to ensure all of our doctoral programs are well informed, the Graduate School is sponsoring a series of information sessions to be held at the Georgia Center on January 28-30, 2008. All department heads and graduate coordinators are strongly encouraged to attend one of the three sessions. In addition, we request that department heads invite other faculty and staff that play an important role in doctoral completion at the program-level.

During the information sessions, we will have two nationally recognized guest speakers on this topic. Dr. Robert Sowell, Vice President of Programs and Operations at the Council of Graduate Schools, will be presenting the national results of the national doctoral completion study conducted by the Council of Graduate Schools. Dr. Lewis Siegel of Duke University, who is currently serving as Dean in Residence at the Council, will describe the pioneering work undertaken at Duke to track doctoral completion and develop interventions for improvement.

All sessions will be held in Master's Hall at the Georgia Center. Each participant must register for one of the following times at <http://www.gradsch.uga.edu:5080/doctoral>:

- January 28, 2008; 2:00 pm-4:00 pm (reception at 1:45 pm)
- January 29, 2008; 10:00 am-12:00 pm (reception at 9:45 am)
- January 30, 2008; 10:00 am-12:00 pm (reception at 9:45 am)

You are in the best position to ensure that our excellent university is doing everything it can to optimize doctoral completion. I value your ideas and hope that you will be able to attend to begin our conversation on this important matter. If you have questions or scheduling conflicts, please contact my project assistant, Scott Frasard, at doctalk@uga.edu