

Opening Remarks
Strategic Interventions for Doctoral Completion Conference
Maureen Grasso
June 5, 2005

Good evening, welcome to the University of Georgia and to the Strategic Interventions for Doctoral Completion Conference. I am so glad to see you all here tonight for many reasons.

First, it is always energizing to have faculty from across disciplines and from other institutions come together for discussion. That guarantees a lively exchange of ideas no matter the setting or purpose of the gathering!

Second, your presence indicates your commitment to excellence in graduate education.

And finally, I am glad you are here because I know that we will come away from this conference with a renewed resolve to investigate our institutional and departmental practices and implement solutions that will enhance the quality of doctoral education. We have an important mission to launch a strategic and systematic intervention for doctoral completion.

But first let me introduce Dr. Del Dunn.

DEL DUNN is Regents' Professor in the School of Public and International Affairs and Vice President for Instruction at the University of Georgia.

He received his master's and doctoral degrees from the University of Wisconsin in Madison and his undergraduate degree at Oklahoma State University.

He has served in a number of positions at the University of Georgia, including Director of the Institute of Government, Acting Head of the Department of Political Science, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, and Director of the Institute of Higher Education.

He has served as chair and member of numerous University and University System of Georgia committees.

He has also been a Visiting Fellow at the Australian National University in Canberra, Australia, an American Political Science Association Congressional Fellow, working in the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate, and a member of the staff of the Brookings Institute in Washington, D.C.

Del is an active member of the Graduate Faculty at the University of Georgia. He regularly teaches graduate courses and serves on doctoral preliminary examination and dissertation committees.

Dr. Dunn will bring us greetings from the University of Georgia.

When you are introduced, please stand and remain standing until everyone from your university is recognized.

Dean Gerhardt, University of Florida

Dean Sowell, North Carolina State University

Dean Grasso, the University of Georgia

Special thanks to the Deans, Robin Bingham, all contact people, faculty and students who responded to the survey/interviews, to Mike Johnson, Melissa Berry, Meve Williams, Amith Mathew, Dr. David Knox, and Dr. Tom Valentine who worked tirelessly on instrument development, data collection, preliminary data analyses, and making this conference come in on time.

.....

Our mission is to launch a strategic and systematic intervention for doctoral completion.

Why should we care?

Non-completion of Ph.D. students has become a topic of pressing, national attention for graduate deans, public and private funding agencies, faculty members, and graduate students. Concerns range from the waste of limited resources and our “domestic talent pool” to the effect on students’ lives.

Doctoral non-completion is an expensive proposition not only for society and the institution, but also for the individual. Doctoral education exists to meet society’s needs for highly educated individuals and individuals’ needs for advanced learning opportunities.

Doctoral coursework is expensive because, by design, it tends to have a much higher teacher-student ratio than undergraduate work and because each doctoral student requires many hours of one-on-one research supervision by a member of the research faculty. Whether or not a student graduates, 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 professional worlds as representatives of our university, with their accomplishments reflecting on the university and with their professional work serving as repayment to the taxpayers and other individuals and organizations that fund doctoral education.

When Ph.D. students fail to graduate, there is little or no return on these investments. For example, society misses out on any scientific or social advancement or literary work the students would have created later in their careers (Lovitts, 2001).

Would-be graduates also make substantial investments in doctoral education. Doctoral students move families, incur financial obligations, and surrender substantial opportunity costs in order to pursue their degrees. Furthermore, they make a substantial psychological investment, since doctoral study presents an incisive challenge to the ego integrity of academically oriented individuals. If they complete their degrees, Ph.D. graduates can move into professional positions that justify the costs incurred by students and their families. Failure to complete can leave individuals with psychological and family turbulence, massive debt, and limited career potential (Golde and Dore, 2001; Lovitts, 2001).

Why should the Graduate School care?

The primary purpose of a graduate school is to define and support excellence in graduate education and the research and scholarly activities associated with it. The graduate school, as part of the central administration of the university, is ideally suited to fulfill this purpose. One of the most important missions of the graduate school is to maintain the quality and integrity of the institution’s programs. For without that you have nothing. The graduate school must articulate a vision of excellence for the graduate community. We provide quality control for all aspects of graduate education. The graduate school establishes through you, the faculty, a set of policies that define good practice in all graduate programs, high quality in curriculum, excellence in student selection, and rigor in faculty appointments. The graduate school must stand firm against unproven fads or departmental whims that may be interesting but hardly beneficial in the long

term. We must maintain equitable standards across all academic disciplines because the name of our institution is on every graduate degree awarded. Our institutional reputation and yours is at stake in the awarding of that degree.

The graduate school makes that diploma mean something outside a department, outside a particular faculty culture. Sure, we are gatekeepers; sure, we often have long processes to implement new programs; and sure, we are strict. But because we are not reactionary, because we are collaborators with individuals from across campus, and because we are unwavering in our commitment to high quality education, we are absolutely critical to a university's foundation. And lastly, because we have a bird's eye perspective of the university, we can offer solutions. That is why this project is so exciting: we have three top-notch graduate schools collaborating to set a model that will influence our nation. And that, my friends, is enabled only because we are committed to excellence in graduate education.

Why us?

The University of Florida (UF), the University of Georgia (UGA) and North Carolina State University (NC State) are public research extensive, land and sea grant universities with a history of institutional reform in graduate education. The doctoral programs at the three universities are comprehensive. All three universities have instituted significant reforms in graduate education on three fronts: (1) increasing the diversity of their Ph.D. students and graduates, especially in the STEM area; (2) increasing the number and quality of their interdisciplinary programs; and (3) enhancing the mentoring and professional preparation of graduate students for both academic and nonacademic careers.

The three partner institutions have a long history of collecting data about graduate education and utilizing it to improve graduate education on their respective campuses.

In 2003, Dean Sowell and I worked together to collect and analyze data on doctoral completion rates from our two campuses. This was tied to work that Dean Sowell was doing as part of his work as Dean in Residence at the Council of Graduate Schools.

In April 2004, Dean Gerhardt, Dean Sowell and I met in Raleigh to continue the discussion on doctoral completion rates. As we engaged in conversation it was apparent how much we learned from one another about the practices on our campuses, what was similar what was different, what the issues were with regard to how we define terminology. How UF was using a most effective technique in graphing time to degree.

Then it happened ... We had a common thought...what would it be like if we could bring faculty from our campuses together to address the issue of doctoral completion? We envisioned this conference where we would bring you together to engage in a dynamic discussion about strategic and systematic intervention for doctoral completion. The three universities have been working since April 2004 to make this happen...because we know how critical this issue is to excellence in doctoral education and we want to be out in front on this important issue leading the way for others to follow.

We understand that different discipline areas need different structures. As graduate deans, we assert that we are not trying to create cookie cutter programs. We know that different disciplines will have different success rates, different norms for what constitutes completion. However, we believe there is a commonality to our business and we believe that disciplines can learn from other disciplines, that universities can learn from other universities that was part of the vision we had that April day in 2004. Thirty-six departments are working on this project now. With the collective knowledge we gain from this project, the deans will expand this project to other departments.

You have a special role. You are establishing the benchmark for the rest of the nation. That is why you are here, to work together to take areas of excellence and move those forward to a new level sharing with others how this was accomplished. You here also to take a good look, an honest look, at the areas that you need to concentrate on and move those forward to a new level of excellence by looking at other models from your colleagues here that may be helpful in approaching the issue. The rest of the nation is looking toward us for leadership in tackling doctoral completion.

As I stated earlier, one of the most important missions for the graduate school is the maintaining of quality in our instructional program and the degrees that result from that. So one of the things we look to do without interfering with disciplinary knowledge and the important work of each one of our departments is to find the common ground where we can really foster and encourage excellent programs. This project and conference allow us to fulfill one of our most important functions, that is helping faculty to continuously improve their programs. We hope that through this project, through the work that we do both in terms of research and information dissemination, that we will begin for all of us to get a little “smarter” about what an excellent doctoral program is and what one is not.

When we aggregate minds, backgrounds and philosophies as we are doing this week, we expose ourselves to new ways of thinking. I encourage each of you to consider fresh perspectives and be open to voices from places other than your own. As we look outside our disciplines, we begin to learn about methods, strategies and ideas that lend themselves to creative approaches that we then can take back to our departments and adapt for success. We have in this room a diversity of disciplines, and from that diversity we will meld and create smart interventions for improvement. I celebrate our differences tonight and look forward to the debates and resolutions that will surely spring forth over the next couple of days. This meeting will facilitate a cross-fertilization. Webster’s tells me that cross-fertilization means an interchange or interaction as between different ideas, cultures or categories, especially of a broadening or productive nature. How fitting indeed a description. How can we help but be productive?

Earlier I said that we will come away from this conference with a renewed resolve. That resolve will carry us through this project and help us formulate actions to improve doctoral completion rates. Improving these rates helps us as faculty and as mentors to a new generation of scholars and leaders. To go back to the horticulture theme, this cross-fertilization will enhance graduate education immeasurably. It may be a long row to hoe, but the yields will be priceless! Thank you for coming to Athens. Thank you for participating. Let’s get going! The nation is watching.

Introduction of Daniel Denecke

Dr. Daniel Denecke is Director of Best Practices at the Council of Graduate Schools. He received his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins and has served as faculty at the University of Maryland, College Park and Georgetown University.

He is co-author of *Ph.D. Completion and Attrition (2004)*, which reviews recent empirical studies on the topic, discusses the institutional factors that contribute to graduate-degree completion, and outlines salutary interventions and next steps for improving completion rates in graduate education.

Dr. Denecke is currently directing the CGS Ph.D. Completion Project, sponsored by Pfizer Inc and the Ford Foundation, and manages the Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) National Office at CGS. As Program Manager for the PFF program, he has worked

extensively with graduate deans, faculty, and program directors to promote and institutionalize professional development programs for doctoral students aspiring to faculty positions.

This spring, he traveled to Oxford University to consult on the development of a national PFF program in the UK. Dr. Denecke's personal research focuses on pedagogy, literature, and the rise of social science in nineteenth-century Britain.