

College of Arts & Sciences Strategic Planning Graduate Studies Working Group Preliminary Report

Overview

The Graduate Studies Working Group has been charged with developing “a set of recommendations that account for the emergent challenges posed by our rapidly changing graduate education landscape that will best position our college to positively impact the future of Texas, the nation, and the world.”

Per our charge, the working group assessed a range of topics, including graduate research, graduate teaching, the role of master’s programs, funding for graduate students, and aligning policies and procedures. We convened a series of meetings and structured forums to solicit feedback from our stakeholders. This included a Graduate Studies retreat attended by faculty and staff involved in graduate program administration, discussions with student leadership from graduate programs, an open forum for graduate students, and an open forum for faculty. A survey of department heads is ongoing, as is a survey of faculty designed in conjunction with Hanover Consulting.

Opportunities

The College of Arts and Sciences awards more than 50 graduate degrees and currently enrolls almost 2,200 doctoral and master’s students in 18 departments. Arts and Sciences is distinct among the largest colleges at Texas A&M because our graduate student body is predominantly (70%) doctoral students. Doctoral programs in our college enroll 28% of all doctoral students at Texas A&M University. Master’s programs have been identified as a key area for potential growth at a time when undergraduate enrollment is likely capped for the foreseeable future. The size, scale, and breadth of our graduate programs offer an extraordinary opportunity to promote interdisciplinary research and teaching. Stakeholders have consistently encouraged us to make concerted efforts to build linkages between departments and programs. This is clearly an opportunity for us to build on our vision of an Arts and Sciences model.

Finally, our graduate students are engaged in a range of research and teaching activities. More than 80% of our doctoral students receive support as graduate assistants, compared to 70% across the university. A majority of these students (54%) are supported as Graduate Assistant Researchers, with the rest are funded as Graduate Assistant Teachers or Lecturers. With good stewardship of our resources, Arts and Sciences can be a home to innovative, high-quality pedagogy in the service of Texas A&M University’s land, sea, and space grant missions. At the same time, we can train graduate students to conduct research that addresses the great challenges of the 21st century.

Objectives

Objective 1: Attract, recruit, and retain graduate students who are best poised to be great leaders

Rationale: Successful recruitment and retention hinge on offering competitive funding, clear mentorship, and a sense of community and purpose. Graduate students want to see paths to leadership—both academic and professional—and need structural and cultural support to achieve them.

Actions:

1. Strategically invest in college resources to target high-achieving prospective graduate students.
2. Develop college-level recruitment materials that highlight leadership training, mentoring, and interdisciplinary opportunities.

3. Encourage transparency around funding packages, especially for master's students and international students.
4. Create structures (e.g., leadership fellowships, peer mentoring, student advisory boards) to support leadership development, as well as strengthening existing efforts in this area.
5. Liaise with HROE to coordinate efforts regarding onboarding, benefits, and academic lifecycle management for graduate students.
6. Develop a more flexible budget model so that departments can strategically utilize resources to enhance graduate experiences and outcomes.

Objective 2: Enhance the competitiveness of Arts and Sciences graduate students for external research funding support

Rationale: Increasing student success in securing external awards would enhance professional development, reduce reliance on internal budgets, and raise the visibility of programs. External awards from the National Science Foundation and National Institutes of Health are a particular target, including training grants awarded to departments and faculty.

Actions:

1. Incentivize enhanced faculty participation in graduate student grant development throughout the college.
2. Create and maintain a college-level database of internal and external funding opportunities.
3. Provide targeted support for large-scale training grants that include graduate student support.
4. Coordinate with the Office of Research Development to offer training and mentoring for graduate students to encourage the number of external funding applications, including regular workshops and structured application support.
5. Streamline administrative processes related to grant management, including support for graduate students in engagement with university-level bodies like Sponsored Research Services.

Objective 3: Foster the development of degree programs in response to current and emerging workforce needs

Rationale: Graduate education must evolve to stay relevant. Students increasingly seek programs that prepare them not just for academic careers, but for leadership roles in a rapidly changing world. The College of Arts and Sciences has the disciplinary breadth and intellectual capacity to lead in the development of forward-facing, interdisciplinary, and cross-disciplinary graduate programs that respond to real-world problems and market demand.

Actions:

1. Encourage the formation of alumni advisory groups in all departments to provide guidance on trends in the field.
2. Offer faculty development and incentives for creating new programs, including support for online and hybrid course development.
3. Create a "Rapid-Response Curriculum" pilot program to streamline the creation of certificates, micro-credentials, and similar outcomes in response to market demands.
4. Engage with partners (including Hanover and EAB) to conduct market analysis as a component of new degree development and program reviews.

Objective 4: Develop leaders in the classroom by promoting high-quality, impactful teaching by graduate students

Rationale: Graduate students from the College of Arts and Sciences play a critical role in undergraduate education. The college teaches 72% of courses in the university's core curriculum. Our graduate students disproportionately support core curriculum teaching. More than 70% of undergraduates supported by our graduate student instructors are majoring in a subject outside of Arts and Sciences. However, teaching loads and training vary widely across disciplines. It is imperative to provide the highest quality pedagogical training to our graduate students for the benefit of undergraduates at Texas A&M.

Actions:

1. Incentivize departments to develop or enhance graduate student pedagogy courses.
2. Identify and share best practices across the College for effective graduate teacher training and mentoring.
3. Encourage departments to align the numbers of graduate teachers to effectively meet the demands of undergraduate courses and to establish equitable teaching loads.
4. Coordinate university and department-level teaching training and resources.
5. Develop workshops on matters of cross-departmental interest within the College, such as handling controversial topics in the humanities or teaching writing to scientists.
6. Create more opportunities for graduate students to receive feedback, mentorship, and recognition for teaching excellence.

Objective 5: Communicate the importance of graduate studies to internal and external audiences

Rationale: The College of Arts and Sciences needs to create effective messaging that highlights the excellence of its graduate students to a wide variety of external audiences, emphasizing student engagement in research, teaching, and mentoring. At a time of increasing public skepticism about the value of higher education, it is imperative that we communicate a positive message highlighting the role of graduate education in building a better world.

Actions:

1. Develop a communications campaign highlighting graduate students' contributions to teaching, research, and community engagement.
2. Emphasize graduate students' achievements in college and department newsletters.
3. Encourage departments to integrate graduate education impact into annual reports and development narratives.
4. Establish a Science Communication Fellow program in collaboration with Marketing and Communications.
5. Engage with community partners to establish a program for graduate students to present their research to broader non-academic audiences
6. Communicate the role that graduate students play in mentoring our undergraduate population.

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