

April 22, 2009

To: Dr. Michael Botwin, Chair
Academic Senate

Dr. Karen Carey, Dean
Graduate Studies Division

From: Dr. Marianne Jones, Co-chair and Dr. Albert Valencia, Co-chair
Graduate Culture Task Force Report

RE: Report Requested by Academic Senate RE: Graduate Culture at Fresno State

Committee charge

The Graduate Culture Task Force was charged with the following:

1. Define graduate culture at Fresno State (what is it now?)
2. Identify best practices for graduate education across programs at Fresno State
3. Identify and document excellent programs at other campuses
4. Define what a graduate culture should look like on our campus
5. Prepare a proposal including action strategies for enhancing graduate culture at Fresno State

Committee Work Product

The committee determined that relationships are central to healthy graduate culture. These relationships exist between:

- a. Students and faculty
- b. Students and the institution
- c. Students and students

It is further premised that culture is imbued with expectations for all participants: students, faculty, and administration.

The Committee developed and administered three surveys:

- a. Survey of graduate students
- b. Survey of graduate coordinators and faculty
- c. Survey of graduate coordinators

Graduate Coordinator and Faculty survey results:

Surveys sent via email to approximately 450 faculty emails yielding 96 completed surveys (21% response rate). Results are shown on Table 1.

Graduate Students survey results:

Surveys were sent via email to approximately 2200 graduate students yielding 154 responses (7% response rate). The committee felt that this was not an adequate level of response. Several possible reasons for the low return were cited, which we believed could be addressed so that a redo of the survey would have a better yield. The survey was resent via email, yielding a return of 386, more than double the original rate. Responses from the first round were not included, as we could not determine how many surveys were unduplicated. Results are shown in Table 2. In addition to looking at responses in aggregate, we also examined them by school. See Table 3.

Best Practices Graduate Coordinators survey results:

Surveys were sent via email to graduate coordinators. The survey contained two questions: 1) What are the exemplary practices that are in place in your graduate program? and 2) Of the practices listed in #1, which ones do you feel would be applicable to other graduate programs on campus? Four hundred and nine surveys were sent out. Ninety six program coordinators and faculty responded. A summary of responses are shown in Table 4.

Lessons from Other Campuses

In a review of university websites, the Committee found that graduate culture is greatly facilitated by having space allocated for graduate student use (i.e., a specific gathering spot in a central building or in departments, library study, research and group work space). Universities across the country address graduate culture in a myriad of ways. Many universities give faculty ownership of the entire range of decisions involving improving the graduate student experience including recruitment, admissions, orientation, mentoring, institutional policy making, and specific departmental procedures. Faculty recruit and admit students who “fit” well with existing faculty’s research interests. Many universities recognize the critical need for faculty mentorship of students which requires the willingness and commitment on the part of faculty view mentoring as a core requirement of their positions and offer monetary awards to faculty who demonstrate an outstanding contribution to students’ academic, intellectual, and professional development. Graduate programs need to be supportive and welcoming which can lead to increased talented domestic students pursuing graduate studies. Some universities also focus on professional and support staffs role in developing a supportive campus environment. These include the responsiveness and receptiveness of financial aid, student billing, student registrar and records, counseling, health services, student affairs, housing and admissions offices. The needs of graduate students are significantly different than those of undergraduate students including the design and provision of on and off campus housing, student co-curricular events, computing services, library services, students accounts payable procedures, mental health services and career counseling. Many universities have a graduate student council or association to address the specific needs of graduate students. Several university offer graduate writing, editing, and statistics centers to provide students with additional tutoring as needed. Others provide regular speaker series’ to expose students to leading scholars. Some universities address competition, cooperation on publications, socialization, and the openness of the campus in workshops and trainings with graduate students. The Graduate Student Center at Virginia Tech is the model. At Virginia Tech an entire building is dedicated to graduate students where they can study, socialize, work in groups, bring students and faculty together across disciplines, and provide all needed services to graduate students under one roof. They hold formal events and workshops and sponsor informal events for students and faculty to come together. They have a Graduate Scholars Society, cultural and social programs, and build community by having students across disciplines come together to make connections and engage in scholarly activity.

Committee Recommendations

1. Expectations be made explicit through “job descriptions” for graduate faculty and graduate students and that these job descriptions become part of program handbooks, websites, and other publications. The committee believes that culture relies on shared understandings and that these must be explicit to participants.

2. It is clear from the internal and external data that faculty are the lynchpin in graduate education and are central to the quality of graduate students' experiences. The committee recommends that graduate coordinators and faculty be supported in tangible ways that facilitate their taking active roles in recruitment, mentoring, and other related tasks.
3. Financial support to assist faculty with recruitment and other activities related to graduate work and financial support for students for travel, research, assistantships associated with their graduate work. The committee strongly recommends that the Graduate Augmentation be reinstated as soon as the budget crisis is resolved.
4. In the long term, a center for graduate education – space allocated on campus that would house the Graduate Studies Division, as well as study, research, lab, and gathering space for students.