

April 1, 2020

Dear Dean Schulze:

In response to your request, the PhD Excellence Initiative Curriculum and Teaching Committee has compiled **a comprehensive report on the status of PhD programs across the College of Arts and Sciences, including a series of recommendations that reflect our understanding of what we could collectively do to position CAS and UB as national leaders in this area.** The present report is the result of dozens of hours of genuine collaboration between humanists, artists, natural scientists and social scientists, many of whom are also serving (or have served) as department officers and administrators. **Our findings and recommendations represent the Committee's broad consensus based on our review of the extensive literature provided by the College and the feedback collected from individual departments,** including separate sets of faculty and student responses to a survey generated by the Committee, as well as extensive conversations with departmental officers and graduate student representatives.

The Committee wishes to thank you and Senior Associate Dean Katherine Ferguson for this opportunity to work together on advancing the goals of the UB PhD Excellence Initiative. Additionally, we would like to thank Sr. Staff Associate for Human Resources Javier Bustillos for his meticulous record keeping, as well as Assistant Dean for Planning and Analytics Patrick McDonald and PhD Candidate Alexandra Dawson for their invaluable assistance in compiling and organizing the extensive literature and data sets included in the CAS PhD Excellence Initiative UB Box. Most of all, we want to thank department officers and individual faculty members and graduate students for their extraordinarily valuable input. We have learned a great deal from this exercise and we hope that our findings and recommendations will prove useful as UB strives to cement its place among the top Public Research Universities in the U.S.

There is a general sense among the faculty and students we surveyed and interviewed that **maintaining healthy cohorts of top quality tenure-track faculty across the College is vital to departmental rankings and a crucial factor in advancing the goals of the PhD Excellence initiative,** including in PhD student recruitment and placement success. The perception is that most departments within the College have shrunk too far as a consequence of shifting priorities at the highest levels of University administration and a resource allocation model that follows too closely individual units' credit hours. While investing in tenure-track hires does not mean that departments necessarily need to abide by the old "field coverage" model, it also should not result in a conversion of departments into narrowly defined employment programs. **The overall strength of the College lies in its ability to provide education in a broad sense, to help students think scientifically, empirically, analytically, and creatively.**

The current funding model has the unintended effect of discouraging rather than incentivizing inter-departmental collaboration as departments compete for resources. The fear is that without a change in the resource allocation model and/or an increase in College funding, the noble goals of the PhD Excellence initiative will remain ultimately unattainable despite the best departmental efforts to adapt to the rapidly

changing academic and employment landscapes. This committee believes that **a stronger and better funded College of Arts and Sciences would go a long way to cement UB's reputation** among the top public institutions in the nation in spite of its relatively small size vis a vis its closest competitors.

We find that many departments are involved in serious efforts to adapt to current circumstances, improve their programs and achieve greater excellence for themselves and their students. We intend our report to shed light on their **best practices** guided by what we have learned from our review of available literature and the results of our comprehensive faculty and student surveys and interviews. We very much hope that **our Committee's recommendations will help individual departments, but also College and University administrators to recognize the unique opportunity that the current moment holds as we all stand to benefit from creative thinking and bold action.**

While department officers and their faculty are committed to improving PhD "outcomes," they also believe that **CAS (and UB) ought to take stock of the wealth of national studies that are presently urging universities to think more broadly outside the box of standardized metrics, including those currently used to measure "placement success."**

In the interest of efficiency, we have divided our short list of recommendations into **three categories of potential institutional action**, even as we understand that leadership in these areas will require close cooperation between the different levels of university administration. We wish to clarify that we have largely focused our self-examination efforts and recommendations on PhD programs across CAS in keeping with the central charge of the Committee. However, we believe that it would be in the best interest of the College and the University to address "excellence" in all other terminal graduate degrees, particularly MFA programs, which are considered PhD equivalents in the studio arts.

We have appended to our recommendations a series of **supporting materials**, including 1) targeted **literature review** summaries; 2) notes from **conversations with department officers and student representatives**; 3) **faculty and student surveys**; and 4) the full **body of literature** compiled by the College and included in the CAS PhD Excellence Initiative UB Box.

#### **Recommendations for UB central administration/Graduate School:**

- **Provide continuous health insurance coverage for all five years of support** regardless of TA, RA or Fellowship status. Our colleagues and students expressed concern about the impact of coverage gaps resulting from changes in student support status.
- **Commit adequate resources to providing mental health services** for graduate students. Faculty and student representatives repeatedly remarked on the inadequacy of current mental health resources and identified this problem as an obstacle to reducing attrition and time to degree. Clear mental health service protocols should be established centrally and communicated to department officers, faculty mentors and students.
- **The Graduate School could offer broad as well as "targeted" TA training and professionalization opportunities** through CIRTl <http://www.buffalo.edu/ubcirtl.html> and in coordination with Career Services <https://www.buffalo.edu/career.html> **to be utilized by individual departments and programs at their discretion.** While field specific training is generally best provided at the departmental level, **the Graduate School and the Career Services office could work with departments to optimize their service capabilities and develop field specific training modules.** Centralized aspects of TA teacher training and professionalization should include, most crucially, **international student training and language assistance (oral**

**and written) and career diversity awareness and training.** Other areas of TA training that could be offered centrally are diversity sensitivity, prevention of and response to harassment, grievance procedures, awareness of campus resources for academically and emotionally troubled students, syllabus development and instructional assessment procedures, effective use of online instructional tools including ublearns and open education resources, and issues of academic integrity.

#### **Recommendations for CAS administration:**

- **Provide up to two years of Fellowship funding free of teaching obligations** to PhD Teaching Assistants across the College to be used at the discretion of departments.
- **Provide adequate departmental funding or resources to insure undiminished instructional capacity** to offset the predictable impact of TA Fellowship years.
- **Relax minimum enrollment targets for graduate courses until we are able to assess the overall impact of the PhD Excellence Initiative on individual programs** to avoid potentially drastic unintended effects.
- **Broaden the definition of successful outcomes to include jobs for which a PhD degree is either required or preferred.** Professional, industry, and field positions with a significant percentage of PhD graduates within their ranks (80 percent or higher) should be considered successful outcomes regardless of whether employers explicitly require a PhD degree. Standard definitions/metrics of successful outcomes are particularly problematic for programs that combine research and theory with “practice.”
- **Provide centralized infrastructure to incentivize and support the diversification goals of the PhD Excellence initiative,** including targeted recruitment and retention of tenure-track faculty and PhD candidates, cultural diversity training, and faculty and student mentoring,
- **Maintain and support a standing faculty committee to further the discussion and development of the proposals laid out in this initial report, monitor progress towards desired goals over time** and supervise the updating and reassessing of College “outcomes data” over a minimum period of five years after graduation.

#### **Recommendations for departments:**

- **Provide TA teacher and professionalization training and arrange for/require formal TA teacher certifications** in collaboration with central TA training and professionalization resources offered by such platforms as CIRTL and the Career Services office. Professional training opportunities should be extended to unfunded graduate students.
- **Implement, maintain and communicate clear advising and mentoring standards at every stage of the program** to insure timely progress to degree and reduce attrition. Our literature review suggests that there is a strong correlation between optimal advising and mentoring and student satisfaction and success. Shared mentoring and advising practices are desirable in most fields. In collaboration with the College administration, departments should **incentivize and reward excellence in mentoring and advising**, including reduced teaching loads for faculty performing extraordinary service in these areas.

- Work on **reducing PhD attrition and average time to degree over time (ideal averages should be between 5 and 6 years depending on the field)**. The new Fellowship years and additional TA teaching and professional training, along with more standardized advising and mentoring structures and curricular adjustments when necessary should **help students advance more efficiently towards their career goals**.
- Work with the College on **strategic plans to increase the diversity of tenure-track faculty and PhD student cohorts**.

We take this report to be the beginning rather than the conclusion of University-wide discussions on the future of graduate education at UB. We are nonetheless hopeful that this initial exercise in self-examination will prove helpful in encouraging faculty and administrators to think creatively about what is possible and ideally will lead to greater collaboration across departmental/disciplinary boundaries in mentoring and training students (and broader use of UB structures already in place—e.g., in the Graduate School). At the same time, it is important to underscore that faculty and students across the College remain convinced that their departments' best efforts will not suffice to significantly raise their rankings and increase the quality and diversity of their PhD applicant pools without a University-wide investment in graduate education and a firm commitment to recruiting and maintaining strong and more diverse cohorts of tenure-track faculty. **Recruitment and retention of highly qualified and diverse tenure-track faculty and PhD student cohorts should be a priority at all levels of University administration.**

We look forward to continue working with you and the College community.

Sincerely,

David Castillo, Committee Chair, RLL, Humanities Institute Director  
Rachel Ablow, English, Humanities Director  
Ashley Barr, Sociology  
Anne Burnidge, Theatre and Dance, Chair  
Colleen Culleton, Romance Languages and Literatures  
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