

Improving Institutional Circumstances for Graduate Students in Languages and Literatures: Recommendations for Best Practices and Evaluative Questions

Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in
the Profession

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IMPROVING INSTITUTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS IN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BEST PRACTICES AND EVALUATIVE QUESTIONS

PREFACE

The recommendations and questions below enumerate key factors that may help a department answer the most important question about a graduate program: does it give its students the time and resources necessary to complete their degrees in a timely fashion?

This document offers best practices in seven general areas for improving the institutional circumstances of our graduate colleagues as students, scholars, teachers, and active members in the profession. The series of questions under each recommendation is intended to assist in the evaluation of policy and practice in programs and institutions. This document does not attempt to quantify thresholds of affirmative responses that could be taken to register institutional conditions as below standard, standard, or above standard. Rather, the purpose is to help faculty members, departments, and institutions identify areas of policy and practice where progress has been made and areas where change can and should be sought.

I. FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Graduate students require adequate financial support to protect their time to study and write, so that they may finish their degrees in a timely fashion. At a minimum, full-time students who teach or serve as research assistants should receive a stipend equivalent to a living wage, full tuition remission, and health-care coverage from departments or institutions for the duration of their programs as defined upon entry.

- Do full-time graduate students who hold teaching or research assistantships receive a stipend that represents or exceeds the living wage for the location of the institution? (The living wage for any county in the United States may be found by consulting the Living Wage Calculator, developed by Amy K. Glasmeier and MIT and available at livingwage.mit.edu.)
- Do full-time graduate students receive full tuition remission, and are student fees paid by their university or department?
- Are graduate students provided with adequate office space, including access to computers, printers, copiers, scanners, and spaces for meeting with students?
- Upon admission, do students receive a contract or letter of understanding detailing what financial support they will receive and for how long? Are students notified as far in advance as possible if this support will change?
- Are department faculty members informed about the particular financial and visa concerns of international students? Are international students provided by the department or university with sufficient financial support for the issuance of an F-1 visa?
- Does the department offer financial support to students traveling to conferences or for research purposes? Is this support guaranteed or competitive, and is it renewable?

- Do graduate students have access to employment opportunities at their university during the summer? Do international students have access to assistance in obtaining university employment in the summer if visa restrictions prevent them from working off campus?
- Are graduate students supported by their department, college, and university in their efforts to secure external funding?
- Is funding or tuition remission available to cover foreign language courses if language proficiency is required for a degree?

II. GRADUATE STUDENT POLICIES

Graduate students should be involved in crafting all policies that affect them, and all policy regarding graduate students should be transparent, standardized, and applied fairly.

- Do graduate students serve on departmental, college, and university committees, including search committees? Do they have voting privileges?
- Are graduate students informed of normative time to degree and attrition rates in the department?
- Do the university and the department have a commitment to graduate students' academic freedom in both teaching and research, within the parameters of the requirements of their graduate programs?
- In the event of a program or research track being discontinued, are provisions in place to ensure completion of study for students already enrolled in the program? If a faculty member will be moving, are advisees notified as soon as possible?
- Does the department have a clear, written policy for determining academic good standing for graduate students? Does this policy clearly state the department's expectations for students' progress?
- Are performance reviews regularized and viewed as opportunities for mentorship and self-reflection?
- Are grievance procedures for graduate students in place at the department, college, and university levels?
- Are all graduate student policies available in their most recent form on a departmental Web page?

III. GRADUATE STUDENT TEACHING

Given the large amount of teaching done by graduate students, departments and universities should provide ongoing training and support to prepare graduate students for a variety of teaching situations.

- Does the department provide pedagogical training workshops for graduate students?
- Do graduate students have access to a range of teaching opportunities relevant to career prospects?
- Are graduate students informed of upcoming teaching assignments in a timely fashion? How does the department determine an appropriate teaching or grading load for graduate students? Do graduate students have input in determining their teaching schedules?

- Do graduate students have access to a teaching mentor with whom to discuss teaching strategies, address challenges, and develop a personal pedagogy?
- Do graduate students have the opportunity to design their own courses or versions of a standard syllabus?
- Are regular teaching observations for graduate students performed by faculty members or by program administrators? Are graduate students encouraged to observe one another's classes?
- Are procedures in place for dealing with undergraduate complaints or grade challenges that include due process procedures for graduate student instructors?

IV. ADVISING AND MENTORING

Advising and mentoring of graduate students should be individualized, reliable, and attentive to students' needs as scholars, teachers, and professionals.

- Are there clear expectations for regular meetings between faculty advisers and graduate students?
- Do dissertation committee chairs and advisers provide clear and timely feedback on dissertation chapters? Does the department have procedures in place for dealing with situations in which advisers do not return work within a reasonable time frame?
- Do faculty advisers inform graduate students of travel, research, and sabbatical plans, and do they remain available to advisees while away or on leave?
- Are grading policies and criteria for graduate-level courses clear and reasonably consistent across all courses? Are students given feedback throughout the semester regarding their progress in each course? Do graduate courses and advising include feedback on writing skills?
- Are expectations for successful graduate student course work, exam performance, and dissertation research and writing clear?
- Does the department provide international students with access to the extra resources necessary to succeed in their academic work (e.g., writing centers or international student services)?

V. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PLACEMENT SUPPORT

In the light of the difficult academic job market, departments and universities should be committed to aiding graduate students in professionalizing, job search preparation, and placement support to the full extent possible. Faculty members should educate themselves about alternative career paths and support students who choose not to pursue academic careers after graduation.

- Does the department or program sponsor professional development activities for graduate students (e.g., professionalization workshops on publishing, grant writing, and the job search)?
- Does the department have a placement officer or committee to assist graduate students on the job market?

- Does the department assist students in accessing career options beyond the academy and in preparing for a variety of nonacademic job markets?
- Do graduate students receive financial assistance to cover the costs of a job search? Are graduate students made aware of these costs as part of their preparation for a search?
- Are MA and MFA students included in professionalization activities?
- Do graduate students have access to their files and placement dossiers? If not, are students encouraged to ask a faculty member to examine the files?
- Do graduate students have access to placement records of graduates from the department in the last three to five years?

VI. INTEGRATION INTO THE LIFE OF THE DEPARTMENT AND INSTITUTION

As early-career teachers and scholars, graduate students should be integrated into departmental and institutional communities to promote a smoother transition into future careers, academic or otherwise.

- Does the department conduct an orientation for graduate students?
- Do graduate students have the opportunity to present and discuss research to all departmental peers? Do faculty members attend presentations made by graduate students?
- Do graduate students and faculty members engage socially in official and unofficial department activities?
- Does the department encourage and support graduate clubs or organizations that organize lectures, research workshops, and social events?

VII. UNIVERSITY-WIDE POLICIES

To decrease attrition, departments and universities should adopt clear and flexible policies that support a diverse student population, including women, students of color, LGBT students, students with disabilities, first-generation college graduates, and students from other underrepresented groups.

- Do full-time graduate students have access to student-rate health insurance at the institution? Are they able to enroll spouses, dependents, and domestic partners in this health insurance plan at a reasonable cost? Are mental health services included in graduate students' health insurance policies?
- Do the department and the university have policies covering maternity and paternity leave for graduate students and leave for students acting as primary caregivers? Do policies on good standing and time to degree allow for exceptions due to extenuating circumstances (e.g., psychological issues or bereavement)?
- Is day care available to graduate students on campus? Is emergency child care available? Are lactation rooms available on campus?
- Are all relevant university, college, and departmental policies inclusive of domestic partnership? Are campus facilities and policies designed to accommodate the needs of transgender and intersex students?