Graduate Education Council
Minutes
Monday, January 25, 2016
2-4 pm, 101 Walter

Present: Robert Blair, Lyn Bruin, Phil Buhlmann, Belinda Cheung (staff), Siddarth Iyengar, Kendall King, Deborah Levison, Liz Lightfoot, John Rohde, Henning Schroeder (Chair), Carissa Slotterback, Randall Victoria, Char Voight (staff), Andrea Wolf

Guests: Daniel Jones-White (OIR), Lauren Mitchell and Ashley Clayton (COGS Graduate Student Mental Health Committee)

1. Update spring 2016 GradSERU (Daniel Jones-White). Jone-White reviewed the major changes that have been made to the GradSERU for spring 2016. These included changes in the response/satisfaction scales for some questions. Jones-White also asked for GEC input on several proposed additions, as well as items that would be excluded. The proposed additions include 6-8 questions on harassment and academic incivility, and 4 questions on health and well-being. He would like input as soon as possible, as there is a very short turnaround time between the deadline for finalizing the survey and sending it out.

   There was some discussion about the questions concerning harassment and whether or not a list of examples should be included in the question, or whether that would be leading. GEC members thought the caveat about harassing that affected a person’s ability to work or study should be eliminated, as there is also interest in harassment that might not result in this type of disruption. There was also discussion about whether or not to include questions that ask students to identify their advisor, DGS/department chair as the source of harassment. Students have expressed concern over possible retaliation, despite the fact that the responses are de-identified. A compromise would be to list the advisor/DGS/chair as examples in the question about “faculty in my program.”

2. Support for Summer Doctoral Dissertation Writing Retreat (Emi Ito). Ito raised concerns on the part of some faculty and students that what had been considered a valuable experience for doctoral students has been eliminated. She told GEC members that the metrics for the group (primarily completion rates) were very high, at around 75%, and that the retreat provided the accountability and structure that students often need to complete their writing. Schroeder stated that the decision had been made not to continue to fund the retreat after consultation with stakeholder groups, including the GrAD group, that had expressed concern over the relatively small numbers of students being served.

   There was discussion about the varying levels of support for dissertation writing that students received from their programs, as well as the varying nature of the dissertation depending on field. Schroeder stated that colleges, such as CLA, which have had issues with student writing support are working to address that at the collegiate level, and that a central solution would not be more effective. A question was raised as to
whether accepting more students into the retreat or making it longer could address concerns about the limited impact.

GEC members wondered how students interested in forming writing groups are supported currently. Are they facilitated in any way to find others who want to form groups? SPH has encouraged their students to form their own groups. How could GS facilitate students finding each other? Do students need meeting rooms? It would be useful to have space reserved once or twice a week for that purpose. Schroeder mentioned that this is another reason the Graduate School continues to advocate for a dedicated space. Support for the writing process is also important. Belinda Cheung mentioned the possibility of funding for writing consultants similar to what is provided in the Community of Scholars Program. We need to promote writing skills early on and throughout the student’s graduate career. At the same time, the retreat is not about teaching writing skills. Hopefully students have gained those skills by the time they’re writing the dissertation. What they learn are the cultural norms and expectations about academic writing having to do with reviews, etc.

GEC members suggested a two-pronged approach to supporting students’ writing. One would include the “writing hunker” model, which required dedicated space, regular meetings for accountability, deadlines, etc. The other piece is the writing support from a person or people who have the expertise to guide students through the process. Council members asked if the Graduate School could help to provide the infrastructure that would be needed to support student writing and dissertation groups. Schroeder said yes and asked people to think about what they believe the specific role of the Graduate School as a central unit should be in supporting this.

3. Update Policy Review Subcommittee (Siddharth Iyengar, Belinda Cheung). Iyengar shared with the GEC that the subcommittee is currently looking at a set of 4 policies: Performance Standards and Progress (master’s and doctoral) and Completion (master’s and doctoral). Because these are all intertwined, they will come to the GEC together. The subcommittee would like GEC input on the question of time extensions for doctoral students. Should the limit be changed (shortened)? Should approval of extensions beyond the limit be granted by the vice provost and dean of graduate education? Should we limit the collegiate role in granting such extensions?

Currently, programs (e.g., CFANS) are using the extension/readmission procedures as outlined in the policy as a way to impose new rules and expectations to encourage student completion, or to terminate students who don’t show promise of completing. Belinda Cheung clarified that if the program does not support the application for an extension, then the request will never come to the Graduate School. The form requires program and collegiate sign off. She also indicated that the Graduate School would support collegiate and program requests when these came in.
Some concern was expressed about cases where it’s not the student who is responsible for the delay. What do we do about advisors who want to keep their students here working? There was also some concern about the complexity of the process as it was described, anxiety on the part of students, and administrative confusion about roles, responsibilities and process. GEC members would like to see something proposed in writing. The subcommittee will bring drafts for review.

The policy subcommittee also reported that the DGS policy went to FCC as well as PAC. However, at least one member of the FCC had issue with the perceived weak language in the policy regarding the need to consult with faculty before naming a DGS. There was a lengthy discussion about the differing practices within programs when it came to naming a DGS, and the various ways in which faculty are or are not consulted regarding this decision. There was also a question raised regarding whether the appropriate language is “should consult” or “must consult,” and no consensus about GEC members on this issue. Cheung will consult with the policy librarian for guidance.

4. Volunteers for subcommittee(s) to review 2016 Internship Applications (Henning Schroeder). Schroeder asked for volunteers for subcommittees to review this year’s internship applications. We don’t yet know how many proposals we will receive (the deadline in March 22), but we will likely need 6-8 faculty members. Anyone who is interested can respond by sending an email to cvoight@umn.edu.

5. GEC Spring 2016 election (Henning Schroeder; handouts: current GEC membership and term expirations, collegiate GEC representation spring and fall 2016). Schroeder reviewed the timeline for the spring GEC election (call in late February, nominations due March, election late-March with results announced mid-April). The process that has been used for the elections has varied over the three years in which elections have been held, ranging from a slate of candidates selected by a GEC nominating committee, to pairs of candidates based on each of the 11 CGS broad categories, to collegiate affiliation last year. There was confusion over the process to be used this year. Schroeder stated that the Graduate School could provide GEC members with additional information, such as the student/faculty ratios by college, to help them assess if any additional collegiate slots beyond the 5 being vacated and those that were already unfilled (e.g., CSOM, CBS) should appear on the ballot.

6. COGS Mental Health Committee findings on LOA policy (Lauren Mitchell, Ashley Clayton; COGS Mental Health Committee members). Mitchell and Clayton reported on their conversations with other graduate students concerning health and mental health issues and the LOA policy. For some students, there are consequences to taking a leave, such as a loss of benefits and pay, tuition reimbursement, or even just displeasure on the part of a PI or advisor. As a result, some students who need a leave and should request one do not. Others may do so, but experience consequences as a result once they return. The timing of the leave to the semester is problematic, since students requesting a leave mid-semester may find themselves without health benefits
or salary, and with a tuition bill. Visa issues can become a problem for international students.

The current leave policy is not tied to the benefits or HR system, which is one source of the issues students experience. However, tying these together would likely mean being more selective about the criteria for requesting and granting a LOA. Currently, the policy is very generous and does not require much in terms of justification for the leave. It may be the case that graduate students need short-term disability insurance. GEC members discussed the possibility of setting up a short-term disability pool. The GEC could issue a strong statement in support of this. Council members also wondered what other CIC institutions do. Are they more inclusive? How many students are affected by this issue and how much would it cost to fund an insurance pool? It was also suggested that at least for thesis credit registration, tuition could be prorated so that students would only pay for (and earn) those credits corresponding to the time they were registered before taking a leave (if taken mid-semester).

There is also an issue with re-entry management. How do you reintegrate people coming back from a leave? Students would like to see this become more systematic and a process that is overseen by the faculty advisor. It would also be helpful for the Graduate School or HR to provide some guiding documents for students to indicate what situations should be considered for LOA. Is there a neutral third party who can advise about whether and when to take a leave if they don’t want to talk to their advisors? It would also help to provide clarification on the use of GRAD 999 versus LOA.