The Graduate School supports graduate program review initiative

Colleges and units are undertaking extensive examination of graduate education at MSU

Like most aspects of the University, a graduate program is not a static entity.

Graduate students expect to participate in the process of discovering and applying knowledge within their chosen fields and they expect to remain active participants throughout their career. With shifts in disciplinary norms, advances in instructional and research technologies, and the natural progression of academic trends, graduate programs at MSU must grow, change and improve if they are to attract and retain highly qualified faculty and students who are committed to making important contributions to their field as scholars and teachers.

One way in which colleges, departments and units at MSU are measuring the effectiveness of their graduate programs is by initiating program review. The review can provide insight into the overall health of the graduate program and can give a program the vehicle to evaluate itself and make sure it is evolving as its disciplinary field evolves.

The Graduate School is now supporting the graduate program review process for all departments and programs. In June of 2000, the Graduate School developed a template to help colleges and units initiate a review, which is structured as a self-study. Copies of the Graduate Program Review template are available on webpage of The Graduate School: http://grad.msu.edu/progress.htm.

Administrators and faculty jointly undertake a review in the spirit of improving the quality and effectiveness of graduate education. The Program Review template provides the opportunity for departmental faculty and administrators at various levels to examine strengths and weaknesses, overall effectiveness, their unit’s current and future issues and priorities. Furthermore, a review is most constructive and useful when it combines both quantitative and qualitative data, subjective evaluation and judgment of disciplinary scholars, faculty and administrative leadership, and most importantly, when it results in a strategic action plan that will guide graduate program improvement.

The path toward program improvement proceeds smoothly when a review is conducted with the support of the university’s administration. At MSU, initiating and fostering a review is the joint responsibility of department/unit faculty undertaking the review, along with college and central administration, including the Graduate School, Office of the Provost and the Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies. The review process requires a substantial investment of departmental resources, and administrators may want to conduct the review in conjunction with a review of other parts of the department’s mission, such as undergraduate education, research, outreach or extension.

Seven questions* designed to guide a unit’s self-study of its graduate program:

1) Who are you?  
2) What do you do? Why do you do it?  
3) How well do you do it and who thinks so?  
   Are you competitive for the highest quality graduate students? How do you know?  
4) What difference does it make whether you do it or not? How do you know?  
5) Do your students, faculty, university, or disciplinary trends demand that you do something different?  
   If so, what would that be?  
6) How do you intend to change to reach your (evolving) future, given where you are now?  
7) How will you evaluate your progress and ultimate success?  

*questions adapted from Council of Graduate School’s Academic Review of Graduate Programs

Most colleges at MSU have established an ongoing review process of its units. For example, the College of Arts and Letters has an inclusive review model that involves a periodic review of each of its degree-granting units. Every ten years, a unit undergoes a thorough review process that includes, but is not limited to, an examination of the graduate degree programs.

Dean George Leroi of the College of Natural Science believes that regular reviews of his units have been a vital part of the College’s growth and development.

“Periodic self-studies, followed by external reviews of our departments and programs, have been crucial in establishing and improving new interdepartmental programs for graduate students and strengthening MSU’s competitiveness for top-level graduate students. Our program assessments help faculty and administrators better understand the continuing developments in modern research and identify areas where MSU might further develop its historic research strengths,” he says.

The program review model recommended by the Graduate School is constructed as a continuing process. The review provides a snapshot of data at the time of the self-study, or a picture of the previous three to five years, but units are strongly encouraged to think strategically about their future. The intended product of a self-study is a strategic improvement plan that looks toward a unit’s future with specific, realistic goals.

Getting to this improvement plan requires that each unit follow certain key steps. The Graduate School has devised its Graduate Program Review template with four basic elements: the data collection, the self-study, the external review and a final action plan.

The data collection

The process begins with a data collection that is the Graduate School’s written report of quantitative and qualitative measures from a variety of sources. They provide the department or unit with a set of questions, observations
and information that they hope the faculty will find useful and provocative in their self-study. The role of the Graduate School is not to perform a comprehensive study of disciplinary issues such as specific research strengths of the faculty; that is the role of an external review team of disciplinary peers which occurs later in the review process.

The Graduate School is selective in its use of quantitative information from the Office of Planning and Budgets Planning on topics such as students’ opportunities for professional development and placement. The unit’s level of competitiveness for University Distinguished Fellowships and its retention rates are also sources of valuable insight. Again, there may be other measures to be considered within a specific department or unit, and these are often included in the self-study and strategic planning phases.

The self-study

Once the unit receives its data report, it is ready to launch the second phase of its review, the self-study. There are seven specific questions which guide the Graduate School’s collection and analysis of data (questions are listed in box on facing page). These questions are designed to launch a unit’s thorough self-examination and were modified and augmented from a 1990 report from the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), the Academic Review of Graduate Programs. These seven questions serve as a useful guide to the department’s self-study that is made up of four over-arching components.

The first of these four components asks the unit to examine the breadth and depth of its capacity to educate/train within its discipline with inquiries along these lines: what are the disciplinary capabilities of the faculty who educate graduate students? What is missing from these capabilities given the future of your discipline? What are your admissions criteria (and why)?

The second component asks the unit to look at depth and breadth of its capacity to mentor graduate students with questions such as: how effective is your mentoring? How do you know? What are the efforts to provide education in the area of responsible conduct of research? In teaching/pedagogy?

The third component concerns the unit’s infrastructure and asks: does the unit have the necessary infrastructure for a productive research and graduate education environment for the discipline and profession? These components might include post docs/research associates, technical and other staff support, research funding, adequate space, equipment, access to literature, etc.

The fourth component asks the unit to examine its commitment to interdisciplinary connections with questions such as: does the unit have established connections that permit and encourage education/training of the graduate degree recipient beyond the confines of the unit? How do you use those connections? How can they be improved to strengthen your graduate program?

Dean Wendy Wilkins of the College of Arts and Letters finds that the self-study is usually the “most helpful” aspect of the review process: “The self-study gives units the opportunity to really focus on planning and review. This internal focus is important because it asks a unit to look at who they are, where they are going, and why.”

Meng Yue chose the Electrical and Computer Engineering doctoral program because of its reputation. He believes the strength of the program lies in its ability to guide students in finding immediate applications of their knowledge to problems in industry and daily life. The College of Engineering recently completed a review of its research and graduate programs, and according to Dean Janie Fouke, it gave them “a chance to calibrate ourselves against the universities with which we compete for graduate students and a chance to benchmark ourselves against those institutions.”

Profile Summaries, National Research Council data, ISI database sources and analyses, the Graduate School Alumni Survey and other Graduate School data sources. These sources measure the critical mass of both research-active faculty and graduate students, and report on assistantships, fellowships, research funding, publications, retention rates, degree production and diversity. These are selected as only a few key indicators of quality graduate education. The data the Graduate School collects will not be a perfect fit for every department, but the self-study is also an opportunity for the unit to collect additional data.

The qualitative measures that are included in the data report are used to add insight into the current status and future potential of the graduate education enterprise within each unit. This information is drawn from sources such as the Ph.D. Alumni Survey, the graduate student survey and exit survey, and focuses
Addressing the questions about “who they are, where they are going, and why” becomes part of the unit’s action plan, which is the final step in the review process.

The external review

After the department has completed its self-study, it moves to the third stage, the external review. This part of the review is conducted by a panel of scholars who are familiar with the discipline of the department under review but are not personally associated with the unit and may come from other colleges or universities. Input from this external panel is necessary to advance national competitiveness by validating program quality and relevance. Program reviews that include external perspectives help to ensure that the highest quality instructional, research and outreach programs are provided to a unit’s various audiences, that expectations are being met, and that there is visible accountability. External perspectives also help to identify best practices elsewhere and to incorporate appropriate improvements into current practices.

According to Dean Karen Klomparens of the Graduate School, an external review “allows experts in the disciplinary field to give an objective opinion on what is going on within the unit and how to improve. An external review is one mechanism we have to ensure the continuous improvement of our graduate programs.” Dean Wilkins adds that external reviews can be additionally useful because they can boost MSU’s profile in the eyes of outside professionals.

Graduate programs are not the only bodies subject to external review at MSU. Over the last five years, many colleges and their specific units have been subject to external review as part of the formal accreditation process or as part of federal funding requirements. In addition to formal reviews, colleges and departments have advisory bodies that bring in external perspectives on policy, curriculum, programs, marketing, placement, and research. Professional programs such as Business and Engineering are subject to periodic review by specialized accrediting agencies. The University’s comprehensive accreditations, which trigger eligibility for federal financial aid, falls under the aegis of the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. Both the specialized and the regional accrediting agencies increasingly emphasize outcomes measurement—i.e., what do your graduates know and do--as opposed solely to input such as budget, faculty, and research dollars generation. At MSU, external perspectives are essential tools in the decision-making process at the department-, college-, and university- levels. Similarly, outcomes measures are becoming increasingly important coin-of-the-realm for institutional decision-making.

The committee of external professionals conducting the review of a graduate program examines the results of the unit’s self-study as part of their own investigation of the program. At the start of the external review, each college dean or program administrator provides a specific set of issues that he or she wishes opposed solely to input such as budget, faculty, and research dollars generation. At MSU, external perspectives are essential tools in the decision-making process at the department-, college-, and university- levels. Similarly, outcomes measures are becoming increasingly important coin-of-the-realm for institutional decision-making.

The external review team brings an invaluable perspective to assist colleges and departments in understanding where they fit in relationship to comparable programs at other universities. “The College of Engineering recently orchestrated a review by a team of external evaluators of all its research and graduate programs,” reports Dean Janie Fouke. “This was a healthy exercise as it gave us a chance to calibrate ourselves against the universities with which we compete for graduate students and a chance to benchmark ourselves against those institutions. Further, this type of exercise is critical to strategically plan for growth in the College—intellectual growth as well as growth in the numbers of people or amount of space.”

The action plan

At the conclusion of its study, the external committee compiles and submits a report that summarizes its findings and addresses each item of “the charge.” The unit under review then responds to the external team’s comments with a strategically-focused action plan. This plan needs to be explicit as possible in addressing the areas needing improvement for the next five years or ten years, depending on the discipline.

Ideally, the action plan will outline the future of the discipline and its growth areas and dictate what needs to be done within the department if it wishes to be a part of this future. For example, one area of an action plan may address what the unit ought to do to attract two or three of the 50 best graduate students in the U.S. or the world, or how it might strengthen or change its research focus. The action plan will also describe how the unit intends to gauge its success and progress.

This plan should result in a Memorandum of Understanding between the department chair, the dean of the college, the Graduate School dean and the Provost. The Memorandum may focus on what to do with a static budget, or with a substantial increase or decline in budget from University funds. Because the Memorandum is shared among faculty and administration at all levels of the university, it can be especially useful when it is incorporated into the strategic plans being formulated at these various levels.

Although graduate programs in general must be flexible in the face of the ever-shifting academic culture within which they live, changes are often made very slowly or not at all. On the difficulty of initiating meaningful changes, the CGS report observes: “intellectual differences, bureaucracy, time pressures, vested interests, concern for survival, and simple inertia all make change difficult” (3). The Graduate School’s Graduate Program Review template is designed to help colleges, schools and departments negotiate the difficult process of evaluation and plan for the inevitable changes that come as a result.

The Graduate School realizes that review is a shared endeavor within the entire MSU community and its structured review process invites faculty, administrators and graduate students to take an active role in maintaining departmental and programmatic excellence for the present and future population of students.
History student Jan Bulman earns national recognition with Newberry Fellowship

As the sole winner of the prestigious Ecole des Chartes Exchange Fellowship, History doctoral student Jan Bulman will be spending the Fall semester in Paris this year. The Newberry Library Fellowship Award funds one fellow to spend a semester engaged in research at the Ecole Des Chartes, the oldest institution in Europe specializing in the archival sciences, including paleography, bibliography, textual editing, and the history of the book.

“Those who have conducted research in French know the Ecole des Chartes very well. It is where all French archivists receive their training in working with documents that are housed in the French National Archives. The Ecole des Chartes has always placed particular emphasis on writing French history using unpublished manuscript sources,” explains Bulman.

The Newberry Library, sponsor of the fellowship, is an independent research library concentrating in the humanities with an active educational and cultural presence in Chicago. Privately funded, but free and open to the public, it houses an extensive non-circulating collection of rare books, maps, and manuscripts. The Library offers long-term and short-term fellowships in addition to special awards like Bulman’s. Fellowship awards are made by the Newberry Library Awards Committee, an internal group of scholars and curators.

According to Associate Dean Patrick McConeghy in the College of Arts and Letters, “This award is a terrific honor, and it gives Jan’s work great visibility among medievalists and among scholars in France.”

The fellowship will allow Jan to continue the dissertation research that she began in France last year with support from a Merit Fellowship from the College of Arts and Letters. Her project uses the earliest surviving court book, a register of litigated cases, from a 13th century ecclesiastical court in south-central France, to investigate the relationship between written records, the administration of a medieval court, and the maintenance of communal social memory.

Bulman’s interest in this particular book grew out of her work in medieval history and cultural history. “I was involved with research on a medieval pope, Pope Urban V, and came across the 13th court book in a catalogue and it piqued my interest as the earliest surviving book of its kind.”

“This court book is housed in the departmental archives in a small French town, Mende. I worked in Mende for six months last year with this, and other records, from the medieval ecclesiastical court. Because this is most likely to be the earliest surviving court book in Europe, it gives historians an opportunity to see the operation of the bishop’s court nearly 100 years earlier than is possible from other surviving court records in Europe,” says Bulman. “Mende is located in a relatively isolated area of south central France; it is a very mountainous region, which contributed to its isolation in the Middle Ages, as it still does today.”

“By working at the Ecole des Chartes, I will interact with specialists who have expertise in areas such as how the court book was created, what it reveals about the way this new kind of record was used, and how and where the scribes were trained to write, among other questions,” adds Bulman.

Bulman applied for this award at the suggestion of her dissertation director, Dr. Charles Radding of the Department of History.

“Professor Radding suggested I apply for the fellowship since the nature of my project is so closely related to the work done at the Ecole des Chartes. He suggested that I would be able to write an impressive proposal to the Newberry Library in Chicago since I had worked with the material for six months. It is due to Professor Radding’s active involvement with my project that I applied for the fellowship.”

Dr. Radding emphasizes the prestige of the fellowship and the rare opportunity it provides for Bulman: “since graduate students at the leading universities in the Midwest are all eligible for this award, winning it is a very genuine honor. The Ecole des Chartes is one of the leading institutions of its kind in the world, and a place where Jan can draw on expertise that is perfect for rounding off her dissertation into finished form.”

The Graduate School extends its congratulations to Jan!