The Central Role of the Director of Graduate Studies:

TEN YEARS OF DATA FROM A MID-SIZED PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

James C. Petersen, Laura Chesak,
Rebecca B. Saunders, & William R. Wiener

CGS *COUNCIL OF GRADUATE SCHOOLS*

Abstract

The Central Role of the Director of Graduate Studies: Ten years of data from a mid-sized public university by James C. Petersen, Laura Chesak, Rebecca B. Saunders, and William R. Wiener provides an overview of the role of graduate directors at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Drawing on longitudinal data, the authors explore features of the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS)/Graduate Program Director (GPD) role and the extent to which it has become formalized and institutionalized.

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THE CENTRAL ROLE OF THE DIRECTOR OF GRADUATE STUDIES:

Ten years of data from a mid-sized public university

Abstract

Almost no scholarly attention has been paid to the role of Director of Graduate Study (DGS) and Graduate Program Director (GPD) in the administration of graduate programs in U.S. universities. In order to address this absence of information, surveys of Directors of Graduate Study were conducted at five-year intervals between 2003 and 2013 at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, a mid-sized public doctorate granting institution. These longitudinal survey data explore how faculty were selected for the DGS/GPD role, the orientation they received, the resources associated with the role, the responsibilities of the position, and the challenges they face. While the DGS/GPD role has become central to the functioning of graduate programs, the position has yet to become fully formalized and institutionalized.

Keywords: graduate education, graduate program administration, director of graduate study, graduate program director

Quite in contrast to the rich literature on college and university department chairs and heads, remarkably little attention has been paid to Directors of Graduate Study (DGSs) and Graduate Program Directors (GPDs) in the United States. A somewhat parallel situation has been noted by Bruce Macfarlane (2011) in United Kingdom universities where he observed that there is a growing literature on senior administrative positions but little attention to more distributed forms of leadership by university professors. No survey data on those holding DGS/GPD positions have been published. Suzanne Ortega (2003) commented on the central role of DGSs in recruiting graduate students, advising students, and advocating for the improvement of graduate programs. Her article noted the poorly defined nature of the DGS role and presented information on the development of a statement of 'The Role of the Director of Graduate Studies' at the University of Missouri-Columbia and the creation of professional development opportunities there for those holding DGS positions.

Five years before the Ortega article was published, the Ad Hoc Graduate Education Committee of the American Sociological Association (1998) issued a report ('What Do Directors of Graduate Education Do?') based on interviews and campus visits at six universities. The report noted that 'it has only been in the last decade or so that large numbers of departments have appointed formal directors of graduate studies, and the process of institutionalization has been slow' (Ad Hoc Graduate Education Committee, American Sociological Association 1998, 1). They found variation among the universities in the responsibilities of those holding DGS positions although most devoted a good deal of time to recruiting new students, holding orientations for students, advising and socializing students, and handling student complaints and problems. There was a good deal of variability in how DGSs interacted with campus administrators beyond the department.

Barbara Lovitts' (2001) study of attrition in doctoral education included some semi-structured telephone interviews with Directors of Graduate Study as one of her sources of data. While she does not provide a comprehensive view of the DGS role, her research does recognize the central role they play in the lives of graduate students. She notes that DGSs generally conduct orientations for students, engage in advising that is a source of information about program requirements, and play a role in integrating students into the department.

Over the last several decades much emphasis has been placed on both the improvement of learning and on accountability to the public for the effectiveness of our educational system in higher education. From these concerns has sprung the assessment movement which has required universities to engage in continual cycles of

gathering data on student learning and making improvements that result in assurance that student learning outcomes have been achieved.

As part of this movement to evaluate curricula and improve learning, DGSs and GPDs have become recognized leaders within graduate studies and have come to be an integral part of the improvement of academic programs. As an example of increasing expectations, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) Commission on Colleges, a regional accrediting agency, in standard 3.4.11 has mandated that there be program coordinators at both the undergraduate and graduate level who engage in the evaluation and development of the curricula within their programs. The document states 'This standard assumes that individuals competent in the field oversee each major or curricular area or area of concentration in undergraduate and graduate degree programs in order to assure that each contains essential curricular components, has appropriate content and pedagogy, and maintains currency in the degree' (SACS 2012, 64). Thus the accrediting agency seeks evidence that faculty who take on these roles have appropriate credentials and that they have contributed to the development of the academic program.

Three surveys of Directors of Graduate Study (DGSs) at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) that were conducted between 2003 and 2013 provide an opportunity to explore stability and change in the role of DGSs over a ten-year period. UNCG is a mid-sized public doctorate-granting university with a Carnegie classification of a Research University with high research activity. For the first time, these data provide a window into how and why survey respondents were selected for the DGS/GPD role, the orientation they received, the resources associated with the role, the responsibilities of the position, and the challenges they face.

The 2003 and 2008 surveys were conducted by the Graduate School through a printed survey and yielded 29 respondents in 2003 (67.4% response rate) and 36 respondents in 2008 (83.7% response rate). In 2013 the survey was conducted using the internet and the 26 UNCG respondents (41.3% response rate) were obtained as part of a larger survey of DGSs in North Carolina and Virginia.

Institutionalization

Universities vary in how they are organized, in their budgeting practices, and in the extent to which certain functions are centralized or decentralized. Over time, however, the core functions of universities such as the recruiting of students, the development of curricula, the administration of departments, and the operation of graduate programs tend to become institutionalized. As in most organizations, procedures and roles are formalized through documents that spell out such things as how certain decisions or appointments are to be made, the responsibilities of various positions, and whether or not appointments are for fixed terms. The surveys examined such issues to assess the extent to which the DGS/GPD role has become institutionalized.

When asked how DGSs were selected in their departments, more than 70 percent of respondents (2003-72.4%, 2008- 72.2%, and 2013- 80.8%) reported that the department head or chair appointed the DGS. A handful of other respondents reported that a dean appointed the DGS, the DGS had volunteered, there had been a consensus of the graduate faculty, or there was no formal procedure for DGS appointments.

Criteria for the selection of DGSs were examined with a question that permitted respondents to select multiple responses. Table 1 gives the percent of respondents for each survey who selected a particular criterion. The total percentages for the item for each survey will, of course, exceed 100 percent. The 2013 survey added the term Graduate Program Director (GPD) that had come into common use, added a response of 'number of graduate students mentored/advised,' and did not have the response of 'not sure.' The data do not reveal a high level of consensus on what criteria are used in selecting the DGS/GPD although it appears that several factors have achieved importance. The professionalization of a position is often reflected in the credentials required for appointment to the position. Rank was cited by about half of survey respondents at all three time points. Graduate teaching experience and length of service at UNCG have grown in importance as selection criteria. 'Other' responses included leadership, willingness to serve, ability to work with faculty and students, and 'no set criteria'/up to chair.

In 2003 and 2008 the survey collected data on whether the respondent's term as DGS was limited or indefinite and asked respondents to specify the length of limited terms. In 2013 the question also included the label GPD and asked respondents to indicate if their term was from one through five years or was indefinite and included an 'other' option. Table 2 shows that DGS/GPD terms were generally for indefinite periods although limited terms were more common at the end of the ten-year period. This shift towards more standardized terms shows a progression towards a more formalized approach.

At all three time points, survey respondents were asked to report about the type of orientation they had received for their role. Table 3 shows that the passing on of a DGS handbook appears to have increased across the ten-year period. While conversations with chairs or deans were still common, they were less frequently part of orientation by the end of the ten-year period. Written materials seem to have taken on more importance.

In each of the three surveys, respondents were asked the following open-ended question: 'What additional information from the department would have been helpful?' Respondents to the question across all three surveys tended to suggest that a more formalized set of guidelines would make it easier to function in the position. Several respondents indicated that a document reviewing all functions and processes is essential. Development of a set of standard operating procedures would assist the new DGS/GPD in carrying out his or her duties. It was a common desire to have a calendar outlining critical dates. It was also suggested that a comprehensive database of students in their program would be helpful to the DGS/GPD in determining student need and tracking student progress.

Responses over the ten years evince a need for more time to work alongside a prior director, including perhaps a semester or year as co-director. Alternately, assignment of an appropriate mentor was viewed as helpful. Issues related to managing one's own career while in the role of program director surfaced across all surveys. Especially prominent was a desire for advice on time management and how to balance research expectations and administrative responsibilities. A perceived need for more comprehensive knowledge and improved competencies is evident in requests for departmental calendars with important deadlines, more explicit departmental policies in writing, and advice or training on effective recruitment and on making admissions recommendations. The latest survey reveals an increased sense of responsibility for program goals, student outcomes, and program review and assessment, supported by better longitudinal data on rates of admission, diversity, retention, completion, and placement. This suggests expansion of program directors' responsibilities related to assessment and institutional effectiveness. In the 2013 survey, respondents were asked to identify responsibilities that comprise the DGS or GPD role. What is most striking about Table 4 is the high percentage of DGS/GPD respondents who reported having a very wide range of responsibilities ranging from recruitment of new students to advising students in the program to completing final degree audits. Of the eleven responsibilities listed, at least 65 percent of the respondents reported nine of the responsibilities as part of their role. Only in the case of advertising assistantships (50.0%) and scheduling qualifying examinations (34.6%), did half or fewer of the survey respondents indicate that this was part of their role. The option of 'other' was checked by 46.2% of the respondents indicating that many additional responsibilities beyond those listed have become a part of the role requirements for the position. Most notably, several respondents indicated that their roles included involvement in the assessment of student learning, evaluating data on the graduate program, and reviewing graduate curriculum.

Overall, the data suggest that while the DGS/GPD role has a very broad range of responsibilities for the operation of graduate programs, it has not yet become highly institutionalized. Significant variation exists in the selection, appointment, term of office, orientation, and responsibilities of these positions. Written documents that formalize many features of university life do not appear to be a standard feature of the DGS/DGP role. While there is growing involvement in evaluation of the graduate program, it has not yet become a major component of the role responsibilities.

Resources

At all three time points, the surveys examined the kinds of resources that were associated with the DGS or GPD position. Table 5 reveals that a database of enrolled students and some type of assistant were the most common resources. The table also shows that some resources for the DGS/GPD increased until the onset of the recent recession. Between 2003 and 2008 the assignment of full-time administrative assistants grew from 13.8% to 25% and the assignment of graduate assistants grew from 34.5% to 38.9%. However following the recession, the percentage of survey respondents reporting any types of assistant declined as did those reporting having a budget.

In 2003, just one-fifth of those holding the DGS/GPD position had a budget and that percentage declined steadily across the three surveys to where fewer than 4% of respondents had a budget in 2013. The economic downturn of recent years and the concomitant reductions in available resources reveal losses in all forms of support, while the percentage of those stating that they have 'no' resources available has grown steadily to reach almost one-fifth of respondents. This undoubtedly correlates with the most frequent response to a closed-ended item on the biggest challenges faced by graduate program directors: nearly 81% in 2013 highlighted inadequate financial support for students.

In all three surveys, the following open-ended question was included: 'What other resources from the department would help you be more effective in your role?' Two themes emerged from the responses to the surveys over 10 years. First is the ongoing need for financial support for activities related to recruitment and retention of students and second, administrative support to include secretarial duties and website enhancement. Remarks indicate a certain degree of frustration at the expectations placed on directors given the lack of funding and material support for the position. Some directors have been able to use graduate assistants to their advantage in fulfilling role expectations, but the temporary nature of these appointments places an ongoing burden on directors for orientation and guidance of the graduate assistants to provide the desired administrative support. The 2013 survey results did stress the need for increased funding to support the appointment of graduate assistants. This request may be a result of the changing economic environment since the recession.

Survey participants were asked about what adjustments had been made to their faculty role when they assumed the DGS or GPD position. Table 6 shows that the most frequent adjustments were reductions in course load and some type of stipend. In both of these cases, however, such adjustments were less common in 2013 than in 2008. In both 2008 and 2013, more than one-quarter of those surveyed reported that no adjustments had been made when they assumed the DGS or GPD role.

In all three surveys, respondents were also asked this follow-up item: 'What other adjustments would make your DGS (or GPD) role easier to manage?' Three areas of concern were evident in the responses: the desire for a lighter teaching load, a reduction in committee assignments, and a salary adjustment to acknowledge increased responsibilities. At UNCG, department chairs make teaching and committee assignments, and Directors of Graduate Study are sometimes able to negotiate a reduced load to accommodate the demands of the DGS role. In other cases, however, department heads do not provide the DGS with any adjustment.

Likewise, some DGSs are more successful than others in obtaining financial remuneration for the additional responsibilities required in the DGS role. One particular sticking point is that, although faculty are on 9-month appointments, they often need to be active in the DGS role over the summer months. For example, they communicate with and advise incoming students, work with the Graduate School to obtain additional resources for students, and prepare orientation materials and activities for students. The lack of recognition for the time and effort spent on such activities during the summer is a source of dissatisfaction.

The 2013 survey asked 'Are you a member of the Graduate Studies Committee or Council for decisions regarding graduate education?' Over two-thirds (69.2%) of the respondents reported that they were not a member of such a group while 30.8% reported that they were members.

All three surveys asked about means of communication with graduate students. The 2003 and 2008 surveys simply indicated that e-mail and list servs were primarily used to disseminate information and reported other means of communication including face-to-face contacts, Blackboard, departmental bulletin boards, and notices placed in student mailboxes. The 2013 survey examined a broader array of forms of communication. Table 7 shows that the most frequent forms of communication with graduate students in 2013 were e-mail, individual communication, group orientations, and use of a website. Over the course of the three surveys, e-mail remained the most frequent form of communication. By 2013 it appears that less reliance was placed on list servs than was shown in the previous surveys and that increasing use was being made of social media.

Challenges

All three surveys included a question about the biggest challenges faced in the graduate director role. The 2003 and 2008 surveys included open-ended questions that produced comments about insufficient time to respond to applicants and students, difficulties balancing DGS responsibilities with teaching and scholarship, putting together adequate financial support for students, and recruiting well qualified students. The 2013 survey used a closed-ended item with an 'other' response for additional comments. Table 8 reveals that the most frequently cited challenges were financial support for students, adequate time, and the expectation of twelve month availability. One of the major challenges identified in the 'other' category was the growing administrative workload associated with carrying out the duties of the DGS/GPD.

Throughout most of the period covered by the surveys, the Graduate School held monthly meetings of the DGSs. Each of the surveys included items on how the Graduate School could assist DGSs in their role and what topics they would recommend for future meetings. There have been several themes that have been consistent across all three surveys regarding how the Graduate School might assist the DGS/GPD faculty. They have identified a desire for the Graduate School to act as an advocate for them in securing financial compensation and reduction in duties to recognize the additional time requirements of the DGS role, as well as advocating for better funding for graduate assistants. They also would like the Graduate School to work towards simplifying the administrative processes relating to application review and processing, and curriculum review. They clearly have an expectation that the Graduate School should be their partner in recruitment of new students.

In regard to topics for their professional development, DGS/GPD faculty across all three surveys identified information on strategies to recruit and retain students as an interest. In the more recent survey, issues of online programing and processing international students took on increased importance.

The 2013 survey also included a closed-ended item on the impact of the recent recession on their programs (Table 9). Nearly two-thirds of the survey respondents reported that the recession had impacted their program either 'a lot' or 'some.' Nearly all of the explanations for the impact centered on either the reduction in the number of assistantships or in the loss of students to programs that could offer more generous assistantships. An open-ended follow-up question asked, 'If enrollment in your program is in decline, what is your greatest impediment to effective recruitment?' Responses cited the loss of assistantships, reduced faculty lines, and the reduced graduate course offerings.

Summary

In this first study of Directors of Graduate Study and Graduate Program Directors, data are presented from three surveys conducted at five-year intervals between 2003 and 2013 at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Faculty are generally appointed to these roles by department chairs who use a variety of criteria including rank, graduate teaching experience, and length of service at the university. The term of these appointments has typically been indefinite and the orientation for the position is limited, often consisting of passing on a handbook from the Graduate School or conversations with the department chair or previous DGS. The DGS/GPD role is very broad with responsibilities that generally include providing program information to prospective students, recruitment, arranging funding, maintaining student records, advising, completing final graduation audits, and frequently other

responsibilities as well. Those holding these positions generally receive only a workload adjustment and very few resources to assist with their responsibilities. Perceived major challenges in the role include inadequate graduate student support, a lack of time to complete all the tasks while also engaging in teaching and scholarship, and expectations to be available all year while being on a nine-month appointment.

It is clear that the role of the DGS/GPD has become a critical part of the functioning of graduate programs, but the position has yet to become fully formalized and institutionalized. Appointment and terms of service while becoming more professionalized, are not yet standardized across the institution. The role responsibilities of the DGS/GPD are quite varied from department to department, and the responsibility for engagement in program evaluation is not universal. Survey respondents viewed the recent recession to have adversely impacted graduate program enrollment, reduced the resources available to those holding the DGS/GPD position, and increased role responsibilities.

Acknowledgement

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Tables

Table 1: What criteria are used in selecting the DGS (or GPD) in your department? (Check all that apply)			
	2003	2008	2013
Rank	55.2%	47.2%	50.0%
Length of service at UNCG	20.7	25.0	38.5
Graduate teaching experience	41.4	47.2	61.5
Number of graduate students mentored/advised			23.1
Other	44.8	36.1	38.5
Not sure	24.1	25.0	

Table 2: What is the length of your term as DGS (as a DGS or GPD)?			
	2003	2008	2013
Indefinite	75.9%	80.6%	50.0%
Limited	24.1	19.4	38.5
Other			11.5

Table 3: What type of orientation did you receive for the DGS (or GPD) role in your department? (Check all that apply)			
	2003	2008	2013
Handbook passed on from previous director	44.8%	55.6%	69.2%
Conversations with department Head or Chair/Dean	69.0	50.0	53.8
Conversations with previous DGS (or GPD)	65.5	52.8	50.0
Other	24.1	27.8	23.1
None	6.9	11.1	3.8

Table 4: Please check all of the responsibilities that are part of your role as a DGS or GPD. (Check all that apply)

	2013
Responding to requests for program information	96.2%
Advising graduate students	92.3
Reviewing and signing required forms	92.3
Completing final degree audits	88.5
Coordinating admission decisions for new students	84.6
Recruiting new students	80.8
Serving as a liaison between department and other units	76.9
Maintaining files on graduate students	73.1
Appointing students for assistantships	65.4
Advertising assistantships	50.0
Other (please explain)	46.2
Scheduling qualifying examinations	34.6

Table 5: Describe resources made available to assist you in your role as DGS (or GPD). (Check all that apply)

	2003	2008	2013
Database for students enrolled in your departmental program	48.3%	38.9%	38.5%
Full-time administrative assistant	13.8	25.0	23.1
Part-time administrative assistant	51.7	38.9	26.9
Graduate assistant	34.5	38.9	30.8
Budget	20.7	13.9	3.8
Other			26.9
None	6.9	8.3	19.2

Table 6: What adjustments were made to your (faculty) role when you assumed the DGS (or GPD) position? (Check all that apply)

	2003	2008	2013
Adjustment to teaching or course load	65.5%	69.4%	61.5%
Salary differential or stipend	6.9	36.1	30.8
Reduction of committee assignments within the department/school	3.4	5.6	7.7
Other (please explain)	10.3	44.4	7.7
None	10.3	27.8	26.9

Table 7: Describe the means you use to communicate information to graduate students in your program(s). (Check all that apply)

	2013
E-mail	96.2%
Individual advising	84.6
Group orientation	69.2
Website	53.8
List serv	46.2
Flyers in your department	42.3
Social media	26.9
Others (please explain)	15.4

Table 8: What are the biggest challenges you face in the DGS or GPD role? (Check all that apply)	
	2013
Financial support for students	80.8%
Sufficient time	57.7
Expectations for year round availability	53.8
Lack of promotion and tenure recognition	19.2
Other (please explain)	11.5

Table 9: What impact has the recent recession had on enrollment in your graduate program?	
	2013
None	11.5%
Little	23.1
Some (please explain)	42.3
A lot (please explain)	23.1