The Non-Negotiables: Preserving What’s Most Important during Challenging Times

Suzanne Ortega, President, Council of Graduate Schools

For all the challenges it has brought us, the COVID-19 pandemic provides us with compelling evidence that graduate education is improving lives around the country and world. From the scientists working to develop innovations in testing and vaccines; to the public health experts working to mitigate the virus’s spread; to the professors, teachers and administrators demonstrating versatility and creativity in virtual classrooms; to the information systems engineers that are building new ways of safe, remote interaction; to the humanists seeking to understand how we make meaning from our experiences during this time—advanced degree holders are playing a critical role in the creation and sharing of knowledge at this pivotal moment.

While the power of graduate education may seem more visible than ever, CGS members are facing great challenges as they work to protect their programs and students. From my daily conversations with graduate deans, I know there is great worry about supporting the persistence and success of current students. There is concern about the situations of underrepresented (URM) and first-generation students who may be disproportionately affected by the social and economic impacts of the pandemic. And there are the challenges surrounding the recruitment and enrollment of incoming students, whose ability to join our programs may be uncertain for institutional or personal reasons. These challenges are compounded by the fact that most of us are called upon to solve bigger problems with fewer resources, and to do so without a clear sense of what the future holds.

If I’ve learned one thing in my positions as dean and provost and vice president for academic affairs, it’s that when our current practices are derailed, the most important thing we can do is start with the non-negotiable values that ground our work and then re-design our policies and programs with the end in mind.

So what are these non-negotiables?

The first, I would argue, is our commitment to providing learning environments that foster creativity and innovation and help students to realize the potential that they bring to graduate education. This commitment extends to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of students since wellbeing is a condition of learning, growth and the ability to succeed. Of course, one of the challenges presented by COVID-19 is that for most institutions, the pandemic has turned on its head our assumptions both about “learning” and “environments.” The temporary halts on place-based learning and research have, indeed, left many of us to question how much control we can really have over the patchwork of

CGS’s COVID-19 Resources webpage includes information on recent CGS initiatives and programs; CGS member initiatives; federal and state policy information; information on financial aid; and resources for international graduate students. Check in often, since this resource will be frequently updated with new information as it becomes available.
virtual and local environments our students now inhabit. But we must try.

It has been an inspiration to see how CGS member deans have confronted this challenge, convening graduate students in virtual town halls or, in an example that Karen DePauw (Virginia Tech) shared in an April webinar on responding to the crisis, virtual Office Hours. In a recent conversation with members about graduation ceremonies, I also learned about the wide variety of things that members are doing to create a sense of ritual, connection and celebration around the graduation milestone. Virtual community will never replace face-to-face connections, but for the time being, graduate deans have great power to help students maintain a sense of connection and belonging within their communities. A student may be struggling at home or in their individual program or lab, but we can find new ways to reach out, listen, and retool our support systems to help.

The second and related non-negotiable is more academic. It is our commitment to helping students develop the conceptual and methodological skills to formulate and answer research questions and, in the arts, to engage with challenging issues and develop new ways of representing them. Across many fields, it is also our commitment to preparing students to use knowledge and skills to excel in, and improve, professional practice. While the focus and approach may vary according to discipline and degree type, these are the purposes of graduate education writ large. In times like these, the rules we have developed in the past to uphold academic “rigor” can be easily confused with the student outcomes they were intended to yield— the mastery and stewardship of our (inter)disciplines.

An example may provide a helpful reminder that our policies are artifacts of the past. For a long time, universities had residency requirements that required graduate students to spend much or most of their program of study physically present on campus. The original purpose of this policy was to ensure that students developed a professional network and a sense of disciplinary norms, culture, and identity through interaction with faculty mentors and peers. But as student experiences and goals became more diverse, we rightly asked the question: are there other ways to achieve our goal? And will rigid insistence on the original rule actually work against the end we are trying to achieve?

On the Dean’s Discussion Board, in webinars, and in conversations with one another, these are the questions every dean is trying to answer. Our community is trying to decide when to make changes and exceptions, and when to hold firm because doing so would compromise the integrity of a degree program. An example that has received special attention recently is the Pass/No-Pass grading system that some institutions have adopted, which has generated questions about whether a “Pass” signifies successful completion of a graduate-level requirement. While CGS has not taken a position on this particular practice, we have, in response to requests from our board and membership, sought to articulate some core values around academic flexibility and holistic admissions in the hope that it will help you work with programs to refine admissions policies during this challenging time. This statement can be found on the CGS website and in the current issue of GradEdge.

It goes without saying that underlying both of these non-negotiables—a commitment to providing students with the conditions that will allow them to learn and thrive, and the training that will allow them to become future leaders and problem-solvers—is the idea that students must remain at the center of the work we do. That is the ultimate value that we all seek to uphold as we continue providing services and delivering programs. Our conversations with students may be really difficult at this time; as one dean put it in a conversation last week, “It’s hard not to have answers to many of the questions I’m asked, because there are still so many unknowns.” But keeping our lines of communication open, and our commitments to students clear in our minds is the only way forward.

No doubt, our principles will be upheld in different ways at different institutions. As we look to the future, I hope that you will continue to reach out to your colleagues at CGS institutions to share problems and solutions, and to find the moral support you need to keep moving ahead. In other articles in this issue, both Sally Pratt, vice provost for graduate programs at the University of Southern California and current chair of the CGS Board, and Barbara Knuth, graduate dean at Cornell University, attest to the value of networks in helping them overcome challenges. If there is any way that the CGS network can better serve you now or at any time, please contact me at president@cgs.nche.edu.
Over the past weeks we have all been asked to move our lives to a virtual space, where we teach our classes, meet with colleagues, hold office hours, and nurture connectivity. We are making great efforts to demonstrate that while things around us are uncertain, the great work of our institutions continues. For the first time in CGS history, our April CGS Board of Directors meeting was held virtually. On the surface it, too, looked like business as usual. We reviewed the CGS operating budget and investments, and considered ways to handle upcoming CGS conferences that both ensure attendees’ safety and provide high-quality content. But more than this, as we discussed ways to support and reassure our students, we realized that the board meeting itself served to nourish our own professional souls. The quarantine made us aware that business as usual is actually more than getting things done. It is an affirmation of a community with shared goals. It involves not just facts and figures, but the ease of working with like-minded colleagues, and even humor and joy.

Graduate education is a cornerstone of our member institutions’ activities. In times of budget cuts, it is often difficult to make the case for the preservation of funding for graduate education. It is more important than ever, then, that graduate deans have the data and tools to confidently demonstrate the value of their work to their institutions, both now and over the long term. The CGS staff and board are fully committed to helping member deans get access to the information, data, resources and networks they need to be strong advocates for graduate education.

The Council also recognizes its unique position to help our members build and nurture the graduate education community. While this benefit is easy to overlook, that sense of shared experiences—alongside inclusivity with regard to differences—is something we need to be thinking about and focusing on. After all, one of the most important lessons to emerge from our current circumstances is how valuable and vital that shared sense of community is to our wellbeing. Although we may not be able to replicate the relaxed, social nature of a CGS reception through GoToMeeting or Zoom, we can still connect with each other and we will continue to benefit from the vast expertise and wisdom in our diverse graduate education community.

CGS Statement on Graduate Admissions during the COVID-19 Pandemic

In mid-April, the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) received a letter from 128 student body presidents and leaders from 128 universities requesting formal acknowledgment of the “unprecedented challenges undergraduates have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic” and recognition of a set of principles regarding admissions policies. In response, CGS released the following statement on graduate admissions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The past few weeks have been filled with new challenges and extreme uncertainty for undergraduate and graduate students. Nevertheless, postsecondary students have shown extraordinary resilience during this time, balancing their studies and research in an online environment with personal responsibilities and planning for an unpredictable future.

Given the extraordinary disruptions we’re experiencing as a community, it’s important to ensure that our admissions practices continue to be as fair and transparent as possible. While CGS is not in a position to direct university graduate admissions policies, we encourage the graduate education community to continue to consider the impact of COVID-19 on students; to be flexible regarding existing deadlines, policies, and procedures; and to regularly communicate with both current and prospective students to reassure them of our support.

This guidance is consistent with the Council’s support and advocacy for holistic file review practices. Since we began our holistic admissions work in 2015, we have encouraged graduate programs to consider a broad range of candidate...
qualities when assessing graduate school applications rather than using strict GPA or standardized test score cutoffs. Determining a prospective graduate student’s potential to succeed in a program requires an evaluation of a broad range of attributes.

The principles of holistic review have special importance at a time when social and economic disparities are becoming starker. Undue emphasis on the quantifiable measures of academic achievement may disproportionately affect students who are managing greater responsibilities—including financial burdens—during this time, including underrepresented minorities and women. Examining the fullest range of student qualities possible, and placing scores and GPA’s in the broader context of a student’s personal and intellectual qualities, will help us assess all candidates more fairly.

Several CGS members have already issued formal statements to reassure prospective graduate students of their commitment to holistic file review, and some graduate schools suggest students consider addressing their unique challenges and experiences during the pandemic in their personal statements. These statements explicitly address student concerns regarding changes to university grading policies from designated letter grades to a P/F or S/U system for this semester. CGS encourages all members to take the opportunity to emphasize holistic review as a good admissions practice that benefits programs, institutions, and students under any circumstances.”

Graduate Deaning: It Takes a Village

Barbara Knuth, Dean of the Graduate School, Cornell University

As I write this, we are all, collectively and separately, managing through this staggeringly challenging time of dealing with the impacts of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Most or all of us are engaging in some form of physical distancing, and most of us are working remotely, most from our homes. I have been struck by the contrasts in how the early use of the term “social distancing” has morphed in some quarters into “physical distancing.” Signaling, it seems, recognition that we all need to maintain social connections while maintaining at least 6’ of physical separation from other people.

Reflecting on my nearly ten years as Dean of the Graduate School at Cornell University, it occurs to me that what matters most, and what has been most influential in shaping my vision and actions as dean, are indeed the social connections and networks that I have been privileged to be part of. Without those connections, I would have been far less effective in carrying out my responsibilities as dean. I’ve benefited greatly over my time as dean from the virtual “village” that supports graduate education—the formal and informal networks, regional, national, and international, that provide insight, experiences, and wise counsel. In fact, the immediate need now for physical distancing has made some of these established social connections more important than ever as we try to make the most of our remote, online interactions. I am able to engage deeply virtually now with my colleagues precisely because of the firm foundations already laid through our prior in-person experiences together.

I encourage everyone, from established graduate deans and associate deans to aspiring university administrators, to reflect on the professional relationships that are important to you or could be influential in the future and develop ways to actively engage in and nurture them. Here are a few components of the “village” that have shaped me and my deanship in meaningful ways, particularly my approaches to leadership.

Among my earliest professional social networks were those I developed as a PhD student at Virginia Tech, in fisheries and wildlife sciences, unrelated to university administration but certainly instrumental over the course of my career nonetheless. With active encouragement from my PhD advisor and mentor, I became quite active in the American Fisheries Society (AFS), the scientific organization for fisheries professionals. All of my involvement with AFS was as a volunteer. During my first year as a PhD student I was invited to run for the
position of president of the Virginia Tech Chapter of AFS, and to my surprise, I won the election. That began a long series of elected and appointed leadership roles within AFS, as president of statewide and regional chapters, chair of numerous committees, president of the parent organization, and even vice president of the World Council of Fisheries Societies.

I learned several lessons through all of those fisheries-related experiences. First, say yes to opportunities, including, and perhaps especially, volunteer opportunities. Volunteering let me develop, test, and build my skill sets in so many ways, without the pressures of having to perform for a supervisor. Indeed, everyone is so grateful for a volunteer’s willingness to spend time giving it a try, you don’t have to worry about excelling. Volunteering is an excellent training ground for a wide range of skills, including meeting facilitation, strategic planning, problem-solving, and managing people. Sounds just like what graduate deans do! Second, I learned that strong organizational and communication skills are paramount in getting things done, including motivating and enabling others to take action. Isn’t this a key talent for graduate deans given the numerous stakeholders and perspectives we navigate on a daily basis? Third, the professional relationships I developed throughout my volunteering and leadership roles with AFS have lasted through my career, and some have developed into personal friendships as well. These relationships opened doors for me professionally, and brought me joy.

Fast forward to my immersion in the world of graduate education, when I became Graduate School dean at Cornell University. Prior to that, I had been a department chair and a senior associate dean in a college. But I was new to the community of graduate education administrators. Where would I find the relationships and networks that I needed to learn from to be successful?

Outside of my local Cornell colleagues, my initial affinity group in my first months in the graduate education community was the Ivy Plus group of about a dozen graduate deans/vice provosts. The size of the group was particularly instrumental in getting to know individuals well and being able to share and compare details about our sometimes-similar and sometimes-different graduate education contexts. Comparable affiliation groups exist across regions and institutions, such as the Big Ten graduate deans, or state systems’ graduate deans, or regional groups such as the Northeastern Association of Graduate Schools and similar associations in the South, Midwest, and West. The Ivy Plus group was, and remains, one of my go-to sources for sharing ideas, learning about innovations, and building friendships. If you have access to a deans group of a manageable size, comprising institutions with characteristics relevant to your context, take advantage of the wisdom you’ll gain by being an active participant! That was the start to building my village.

A bit later in my first year as dean, I was introduced to the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) through the annual meeting. What an eye-opener that was! Attending the CGS meeting during my first months as a graduate dean tremendously expanded my perspectives on pressing issues in graduate education nationally and internationally and provided just-in-time, practical insights about the floodgate of challenges I was dealing with as a new dean. Exposure to the wide range of institutions attending the CGS meeting helped me understand more about my Cornell graduate education context within a private, land-grant institution deeply committed to public engagement globally and service to the people of New York State. I learned, and continue to learn, from the approaches that CGS colleagues from diverse institutions across the country, and internationally, take to address shared challenges such as international recruitment and enrollment, professional master’s programs, online learning and degrees, holistic admissions, fostering diversity, encouraging effective mentoring, doctoral career preparation, and many others. My graduate education village was expanding.

Over time, my village kept growing, with smaller, focused-interest communities of various types. One of the more impactful for Cornell graduate education has been the network called the Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching, and Learning (CIRTL). Similar to my involvement in AFS that I described earlier, I only became involved with CIRTL because someone had the thoughtfulness and foresight to reach out and invite me in. That’s an important lesson in leadership. As beneficial as it is to say yes to opportunities offered to you, also reach out and offer opportunities to others. Everyone benefits.

My engagement with the CIRTL network caused me to think more deeply about how graduate schools need to actively engage in preparing future faculty. Building support on my campus for Cornell to join the CIRTL network put me in touch with other networks within
Cornell, focusing on teaching and learning and on career preparation more broadly. CIRTL colleagues came from a range of regions and different academic backgrounds, widening my village even more.

Engagement with CIRTL led to being part of the CIRTL-AGEP (Alliances for Graduate Education and the Professoriate) coalition. My village grew further, to include experts in diversity and inclusion and assessment, committed individuals through all career stages of the graduate education profession. I have learned immensely from all of these perspectives.

There are numerous other groups of graduate education professionals in my village that have been instrumental in my effectiveness as graduate dean that I won’t detail here, such as the GRE Board, the Coalition for Next Generation Life Science, and the Association of Graduate Schools. I would be remiss, however, to leave out one critically important component of my village, Cornell’s Graduate and Professional Student Assembly. Being an effective dean requires understanding the most important stakeholders in our graduate community, our students. I am grateful to the graduate students on our campus who have committed themselves to serving their peers through elected leadership positions, advocating for graduate students’ interests, and providing informed counsel to me and my leadership team as we shape academic programs, create professional development opportunities, and strive to secure university and external resources to support our graduate students.

I treasure each of these components of my graduate education village. Their insights enhanced my abilities to be strategic and effective. I thank not only CGS, but all of my village, for the honor of receiving the 2019 Debra W. Stewart Award for Outstanding Leadership in Graduate Education.*

*Editor’s Note: Each recipient of the Debra W. Stewart Award for Outstanding Leadership in Graduate Education is asked to write about their experiences as a graduate dean for an issue of CGS’s GradEdge.

Federal Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Resources for CGS Members

Lauren Inouye, Vice President of Public Policy and Government Affairs, Council of Graduate Schools

As Congress prepares to craft a fifth legislative proposal to address the novel coronavirus pandemic, CGS has been advocating in collaboration with the higher education community to ensure students, institutions, and the research enterprise are prepared to navigate this new environment. The third COVID-19 package, the CARES Act, was signed into law on March 27 after heavy bipartisan negotiations between the House and the Senate. A month later, on April 24, President Trump signed a fourth legislative deal that mainly provided supplemental funding for the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and Economic Injury and Disaster Loans ($310 billion) after the initial amount included in the CARES Act ($349 billion) was quickly exhausted.

The Senate returned to Washington, DC on May 4, and the House is likely to return the week of May 11. That date may be extended further into the month, which could impact substantive progress on a fifth legislative deal. CGS has submitted initial requests to House and Senate leadership for this next phase of negotiations which include: providing an additional $47 billion to support students and institutions in the form of grant aid and other needs at the institutional level; additional funding for federal research agencies, including cost-extensions to support those funded through research grants; exempting scholarship and grant aid from being taxed, including any new grant funding allotted to students through the CARES Act, making federal loan terms and repayment terms more feasible for student borrowers and those already in repayment; and raising questions and concerns about the pandemic’s impact on the international graduate student pipeline.

CGS also joined its colleague organizations to weigh in on student veteran education benefits, to urge governors to ensure telehealth and telemental health services can continue to be delivered to students who have vacated campus, to recommend additional tax policy changes, and to urge the Department of Education to grant regulatory relief as it is expected to issue final guidance on Title IX sexual assault rules and Sec. 117 foreign gift
reporting. Letters outlining these requests can be found here.

CGS members can also access additional resources stemming from staff analyses of the CARES Act by visiting our COVID-19 Legislative and Regulatory Updates webpage, which includes a summary of three unemployment insurance benefit programs that may be helpful for graduate students and a summary of financial assistance provisions for graduate students. The association has also developed a broader resource hub, Navigating the COVID-19 Pandemic, which has information on the April 15 resolution, federal agency guidance, and other CGS initiatives such as a recent webinar and Office Hours with President Suzanne Ortega.

We encourage you to subscribe to CGS’s Washington Insights & Highlights, a newsletter issued every Friday that highlights five federal policy issues and to follow CGS on Twitter, @CGSGradEd.

If you have any questions, or would like to share your perspectives on what Congress and the Administration can do to further support graduate education during this time, please contact CGS’s Vice President of Public Policy and Government Affairs, Lauren Inouye, at Linouye@cgs.nche.edu.

Diversity and Inclusion in Master’s and Doctoral Education: A New Global Resource
Suzanne T. Ortega, President, Council of Graduate Schools

Throughout the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has created new obstacles to supporting diversity and inclusion in graduate education. Financial pressures on both students and universities are likely to make it more difficult to recruit and retain talented students with significant constraints on their resources—in particular, underrepresented and first-generation students. Restrictions around global and domestic travel are already making it more difficult to recruit international students that help make our labs, classrooms and campuses more globally diverse. And the disruptions to campus life may make it easier for some universities to deprioritize important work to support diversity and inclusion.

While these challenges are difficult ones, I’m pleased to let you know that a new resource is available to help. CGS, with support from Educational Testing Service (ETS), has created The Global Postgraduate Diversity Resource, a project that grew out of the 2019 Global Summit hosted by CGS and The University of Johannesburg. This online tool is designed to help universities improve their diversity programming by providing resources developed by university leaders, researchers, government officials, and journalists. The website currently includes over ninety resources from universities around the world as well as essays on pressing issues in global higher education diversity from university leaders. The resource will be regularly updated, and we invite your submissions.

What can you find on the website?
The Global Postgraduate Diversity website divides resources into six areas: Access, Student Success, Mentoring, Methods and Metrics, Curricular Innovation, and Case Studies. Within each of these, you will find new ideas and examples for diversifying your campus. The case studies, some of which are written by our global advisory committee members, address topics such as: resources for LGBTQ students and allies (Clemson University,) diversity and disability (Duke University,) indigenous students (Griffith University and University of British Columbia) and refugees (American University in Cairo).

It’s also possible to search the website’s resources by region. You will find submissions from the Asia-Pacific region, Europe, Middle-East and Africa, North America, South America, and Sub-Saharan Africa. While currently our list of North American resources is the most robust of the six, we hope that you and your colleagues can help us build a larger and more diverse set of articles, case studies, and other resources.
Additional Resources

The new global diversity website is only one of many that CGS offers. With disparities magnified by the current pandemic, I hope you will take advantage of the full range of CGS resources that can help support a diverse and inclusive student population. These include:

- **CGS Statement on Diversity and Inclusion**. With guidance from the CGS Board and the Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Committee, CGS recently updated its statement on diversity and inclusion in graduate admissions. This statement is designed to be useful for graduate deans seeking to articulate the value of diversity and inclusion on their campuses.

- **Innovation in Graduate Admissions through Holistic Review**. Underrepresented and first-generation students are more likely to be impacted by the current pandemic. As a number of universities and organizations have pointed out, this makes a holistic approach to admissions even more important. This guide on holistic admissions provides principles for advising graduate program directors about the elements of a holistic approach.

- **Webinar on Culturally Aware Mentoring: Optimizing Mentoring Relationships** (member log-in). This recent webinar provided guidance to CGS members on culturally aware mentoring, a mentoring approach that uses cultural awareness to have a more positive impact on graduate mentees. I encourage you to share the resource with directors of graduate studies and other campus professionals who mentor graduate students.

Please stay tuned for more virtual programming on this topic. CGS will continue to listen to our members’ needs in this area and to provide information, data and guidance designed to help you continue your work to create diverse and inclusive learning environments for your students.
Now more than ever, graduate education needs leaders and strong voices in the community. Nominations are being accepted for election to the CGS Board of Directors. If you are interested in serving on the Board, or if you would like to nominate a colleague, please send a CV to the attention of:

Christopher Sindt
Chair
CGS Nominating Committee
CGSBoardElection@cgs.nche.edu

New CGS Deans & Titles

- **Adam Bradford**, Dean, Graduate School, Idaho State University
- **María de los M. Santos Corrada**, Associate Vice Chancellor, Graduate Studies and Research, Universidad Ana G. Méndez, Campus of Gurabo
- **James Grover**, Dean of the Graduate School, The University of Texas at Arlington
- **Raj Mehta**, Interim Vice Provost for Graduate Studies and Dean of the Graduate School, University of Cincinnati
- **Simon Morgan-Russell**, Interim Dean of the Graduate College, Bowling Green State University
- **Jennifer Roberts**, Vice Provost for Graduate Studies, The University of Kansas
- **Steven Schmidt**, Dean of the College of Graduate Studies and Vice President for Research, Northeast Ohio Medical University (NEOMED)*
- **Sheb True**, Interim Graduate Dean and Interim Associate Vice Provost for the Division of Global Affairs, Kennesaw State University

*Deans at new CGS member institutions

New CGS Members

- Northeast Ohio Medical University (NEOMED) – *Associate Member*
Is Your Admissions Process Holding You Back?

A new guide from ETS shows how a holistic admissions process can help you reduce barriers to diversity and enroll applicants with great potential for success.

Visit HolisticAdmissions.org/Navigate

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