

Notes on the Initial Report by the Reimagining Graduate Education Task Force

Introduction:

- 10800 currently enrolled grad students at Mason
- One of America's fastest growing public research universities
- Reimagining Graduate Education Task Force formed in April 2021 with the following goals:
 1. Support the mission and strategic goals of individual programs
 2. Design a more efficient and better run graduate program
 3. Design and create new and innovative graduate programs
 4. Create a supportive graduate environment

Specific Numbers:

7439 Masters:

68% part time

63% female

52% students of color

2182 Doctoral:

44% part time

52% female

52% students of color

38 doctoral programs, 95 masters programs

History:

- Graduate School was decentralized in 1993
- Shifted to hybrid model in 2009 with establishment of the Office of Graduate Education
- Office of Graduate Admissions formed in 2015

Graduate Education Models:

There are a number of ways that a graduate program can distribute responsibilities between a central office and the various departments. Responsibilities for grad programs include:

- Admissions
- Professional Development
- Communications
- Marketing
- Graduate funding
- Hiring

Distribution of these responsibilities depend on the institution.

Three different models of organization to consider

- Centralized:
 - Senior Administrative oversight handles most of the responsibilities
 - Advantages:

- Functional expertise and support across many areas
 - Economy of scale
 - Coordinates more with larger institutional goals
 - Disadvantages:
 - More challenging to consider diverse goals of multiple departments
 - Concerted effort needed to establish working relationship between departments
 - Less connected with individual students' and faculty's daily needs
 - Less flexibility
- Decentralized:
 - Responsibilities mostly handled by individual schools and departments
 - Advantages:
 - Individual academic units given great degree of decision power
 - Greater flexibility for addressing individual program needs
 - Disadvantages:
 - Less consistent and equitable quality assurance
 - Difficult to align new programs with university standards
 - Less resources than necessary to admin graduate programs
 - Challenging to foster interdisciplinary collaboration
- Hybrid:
 - A central body exists and covers some admin responsibilities, but leaves other responsibilities to departments
 - Advantages:
 - Allows cooperation between departments and administration on decision making
 - More financially accountable
 - Disadvantages:
 - Difficult to ensure consistent program integrity
 - Hard to identify which responsibilities should go where
 - Office of Grad. Ed. becomes more remote
 - More challenging to incentivize institution-wide change

A successful model creates economies of scale through administration and delivery of graduate degree programs while:

- Raising the profile of graduate programs
- Promoting student success
- Fostering collaborations among individual graduate programs
- Ensuring consistency of policies across programs
- Collecting and analyzing data to support university decisions

Current State of Affairs at Mason:

Marketing and Recruitment:

- All programs are responsible for developing and implementing their own marketing

- This results in highly disparate marketing investments due to unequal distribution of resources
- Some programs have dedicated recruitment offices, others don't

Admissions and Enrollment:

- Process begins in central office
- After initial approval centrally, applications are sent to individual departments
- Requires effective communication between departments and central office, which is currently lacking
 - Lacking due to shortage of staff and technology experts
- Mason's overall admission yield rate (amount of accepted students who enroll) ranges between 40-55%
 - Lower end compared to peer institutions
 - Enrollment is dependent on funding opportunities, but providing competitive funding remains a challenge at Mason
- Incoming students often receive little to no exposure to university-wide networking opportunities
- **Essentially, Mason offers less money compared to other universities, so prospective students follow the money**

Retention, Degree Completion, and Time-to-Degree:

- Funding and Award Opportunities:
 - "At Mason, graduate education is chronically underfunded"
 - Only provides funding to 75% full time doctoral students
 - Does not compete with fellow R1 universities
 - Penn State, Michigan and Maryland provide \$20000 on average for a nine month stipend
 - Mason provides an average of \$17,000
 - Doctoral students often run out of funding
 - Less than 7% of full-time master's students receive any funding
- Advising and Mentoring:
 - Less than 45% of 2316 respondents report having a mentor related to educational/career goals
 - This varies within programs - some have professional full time advisors, others rely on faculty
 - Graduate students feel like there is not timely communication, and don't feel connected or supported
 - Particularly felt by students of color and other underrepresented identities
- Mental Health and Wellbeing, Student Engagement, Community Building:
 - 60% of grad leaders believe grad student mental health has worsened
 - 63% of grad students are part time, making community building difficult

- Mason lacks a wide range of resources necessary to create an inclusive and accepting environment for grad students
- Professional and Career Development:
 - 50% of grad students have not utilized career and professional development resources
 - Some programs have dedicated career development programs, others don't

Technology, Systems, and Communication:

- Mason has struggled with branding Mason graduate education as an R1 institution-level asset
- Some departments face challenges developing effective communication with prospective and current students
- Mason's technology resources are falling behind
 - For example, no system exists that allows for tracking the complete life cycle of a grad student's academic experience

Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Work and Infrastructure:

- Tuition rate differences and tuition revenue distribution allocated based on courses and not instructors - this inhibits collaborative work across departments
 - Trying to organize a course taught jointly across departments may run into issues where students from one department have to pay more for the course, or instructors from one department get paid less than the other department
- When faculty from different departments face different requirements to build a joint course, cooperation is inhibited
- Bringing in external partnerships has been challenging
- Lack of shared facilities inhibits collaboration

Post-Doctoral and MFA Fellows:

- 90 Post-Doc, MFA fellows and research staff
- These positions lack administrative support

Advancement and External Relations:

- Lack of comprehensive alumni data leave former grad students without support
- Any outreach to alumni is up to the department

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion:

- 54% of undergraduates at Mason are from racial and ethnic minorities, but only 31% of grad students are
- Beyond racial and ethnic minorities, other comprehensive demographic data is limited.
- Grad students of color are less likely to have a mentor than white grad students

Possible Strategic and Programmatic Interventions:

Marketing and Recruitment:

- A central graduate marketing and recruitment department would allow individual programs to focus marketing on their specific professional disciplines and research areas
 - Programs would rely on the central marketing/recruitment department for assistance
- Having a macro-level marketing strategy would free up departmental-level resources
- Would be helpful for prospective students interested in more than one field
- Centrally developed strategies to reach underserved groups

Admissions and Enrollment:

- If above strategies are implemented, applications would increase, requiring a stronger connection between departments and the office of graduate admissions
- Increased collaboration would lead to increased quality of standards
- Would have more resources and technical know-how to help departments develop specific departmental requirements
- Could help develop programs like open houses for accepted students and increase the level of communication with admitted students about generic grad student services

Retention, Degree Completion, and Time-to-Degree:

- Funding and Award Opportunities:
 - There are many sources of graduate funding, including from Mason itself
 - A larger investment from the institution would allow for greater distribution of funds
 - A central planning office for graduate funding could work to ensure a certain standard, equitable funding model
 - Want to encourage full time study
 - Central office would be able to offer a greater amount of funds
 - Full packages should include a 12-month stipend, and 9 credits of tuition per semester
 - Extend health insurance from just doctoral students to masters students as well
 - The central office would be better equipped to develop various fundraising strategies as well as better facilitate student access to funding opportunities
- Advising and Mentoring:
 - A central office could build a network of graduate mentors, and provide resources to said network
 - Would be able to specifically focus on reaching first generation grad students and grad students of color
 - Introduce uniformity and clarity across the university for different mentorship roles

- Mental Health and Well-being, Community Building:
 - A centralized communication plan to ensure that all students are aware of the services available for mental health and community building
 - Would support the efforts of the Office of Grad Student Life
 - This would include the central office running dedicated child-care centers in easy to access locations
 - Would be able to plan targeted wellbeing sessions and mental health workshops
 - Would be able to develop a centralized plan to increase and provide grad student housing
- Professional and Career Development:
 - Centrally coordinate department-specific professional and career development activities
 - Increased advertising of these events
 - Create a consortium of professionals who facilitate career development services
 - Additional central support could incentivize graduate faculty to participate in centrally sponsored networking events

Technology, Systems, and Communication:

- Centrally dedicated IT team specific to graduate studies
- Also include customer relationship management, a graduate hiring system, comprehensive application and review portal, a graduate student progress and performance tracking platform, policy and appeal tracking system

Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Work and Infrastructure:

- Could leverage a neutral entity that would be the home of joint degree programs
- Central office could develop a model that encourages and incentivizes collaboration between programs and departments
- Set up a central database allowing for grad students to easily search for these opportunities
- Provide central financial incentives to promote these activities

Post-doctoral and MFA Fellows:

- Integrate post-doc and MFA fellows into the graduate program
- All benefits described above would also be available to post-doc and MFA fellows
- Be able to centrally plan specific programs for post-docs and MFA fellows

Advancement and External Relations:

- Central office would be able to facilitate outreach to alumni, using central database
- Establish a central liaison between local academic units and the central Office of Advancement and Alumni Relations to gather data while students are still at Mason

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion:

- Central office would provide strategic leadership on advancing diversity, equity and inclusion
- Increase funding into scholarships and outreach
- Enhance institutional data related to demographics, retention and completion
- Have regularly scheduled climate and needs assessments
- Centralize grad level DEI initiatives with university wide DEI initiatives

Task Force Recommendations for Elevating Mason Graduate Education:

The main recommendation is to build a more centralized Graduate Division that would serve the needs of all graduate students

- 1) Build on the work of Mason's current Office of Graduate Education
 - Build on foundation of the present Office of Graduate Education by undertaking a myriad of new functions
- 2) Design and implement coherent graduate marketing and recruitment strategies
 - The graduate division should have an integrated graduate marketing and recruitment team to manage branding strategies
 - Should promote graduate education, coordinate marketing opportunities across academic units, and assist graduate programs with targeted recruitment efforts
 - The marketing plan should align with Mason's university-wide communication and marketing strategies
- 3) Facilitate effective and efficient graduate admissions practices while maintaining standards and ensuring compliance
 - The Office of Graduate Admissions (OGA) should be integrated into the Graduate Division
 - The OGA should have additional dedicated and graduate-specific personnel to accommodate needs of specific departments
 - A more centralized OGA would help develop a more robust central framework that aligns and augments graduate programs' efforts in recruiting diverse and high quality graduate students while maintaining standards
 - The graduate division should facilitate increased communication between OGA staff and graduate directors
- 4) Build a robust foundation to maximize graduate student academic success
 - The process of marketing and recruitment should be accompanied by a commitment to promote student retention and degree completion
 - The graduate division should create non-discipline specific support structures to promote graduate student success
 - Offer comprehensive, multi-year, and competitive funding packages
 - Leverage financial investment from multiple sources to create a strong and competitive fiscal foundation

- Should streamline operations that apply to all graduate student support and hiring processes
 - Increasing the number of multi-year and competitive graduate assistantships should be a priority
 - All funding packages should offer stipends over the University's minimum compensation rate, full tuition remission, health benefits, and fee assistance
 - Every offer should allow students to pursue full time study
 - The Graduate division should be proactive in promoting proposals to funding agencies that offer support
 - Provide coordinated training and programs
 - The graduate division should foster inclusive mentoring practices across academic units
 - Should coordinate services such as affinity groups and academic unit-level initiatives
 - Should offer trainings to teach graduate faculty and staff to become effective advisors
 - Should provide centralized support and training for graduate teaching assistants and graduate lecturers
 - Optimize graduate student wellbeing
- 5) Contribute to workforce development and research productivity
- Should strengthen connections between graduate education, research, and the external community
 - Prepare all graduate students for long-term multi-career success
 - Should coordinate existing professional development activities and services, while expanding the amount of opportunities available
 - Facilitate interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work and create collaborative graduate infrastructure
 - Should also provide opportunities for transdisciplinary work and partnerships outside of the university
 - Establish the first Office of Post-doctoral and Post-mfa Affairs
- 6) Tap into the unrealized potential in external relations
- Should gather graduate-specific data on alumni career pathways to determine where Mason's master's and doctoral graduates are employed
 - Facilitate networking events for current students
 - Create a Graduate Education Advisory Board to facilitate the academic units' engagement with outside organizations
- 7) Improve diversity, advance equity, and foster inclusion in graduate education
- Should build partnerships with other central DEI units at Mason
 - The graduate division should oversee Graduate Student Life and provide a set of DEI initiatives
 - Additional financial resources should be dedicated to enhancing scholarships and other funding opportunities, and to recruiting and retaining graduate students of diverse backgrounds

8) Leverage technology and systems to enhance the overall administration of Graduate Education

- The graduate division should develop and implement user-friendly dashboards to provide graduate stakeholders with direct access to graduate student data
- Should have a dedicated IT team specific to graduate education
- Systems should include:
 - a graduate student hiring system
 - a comprehensive application and review portal
 - a graduate student progress and performance tracking platform
 - an exception to policy and appeal tracking system
 - automated and paperless workflows with integrated approval and notification sequences for all graduate processes

9) Performance measures

- Size and composition of applicant pools, and admitted and enrolled students that underpin creation of our aspirational and diverse graduate student population
 - highly qualified doctoral (especially full-time)
 - highly qualified master's
 - highly qualified graduate certificate and bachelor's-accelerated-masters
 - highly qualified fellows and scholars
- Number and composition of graduate students who enroll after being admitted (yield rate)
- Number and composition of fully-funded graduate students, full-time doctoral students
- Retention and degree completion rates for both master's and doctoral students
- Average number of years for time-to-degree for both master's and doctoral students
- Improvement in graduate mental health and wellbeing
- Number of offered professional development opportunities (internal and external) and number and composition of participants
- Number of offered trainings (e.g., mentoring) and number and composition of participants
- Number and composition of graduate faculty, students, fellows and programs participating in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research and teaching
- Collaboration, communication, and engagement between graduate students, program-level faculty and staff members, school and college-level administrators, and central administration
- Employment placement (pre- and post-graduation)
- Graduate-specific external financial contributions
- Graduate administrative effectiveness and efficiency (fewer human errors)