**Event:** GSA Executive  
**Date:** December 2, 2015  
**Led by:** Steven Dew  
**Presentation:** Slides (including initial feedback overview)  
**Scribe:** Amy Dambrowitz  
**Number of attendees:** 13

## Summary

### Themes

- The need for professional development of graduate students – most graduate students will not end up in academia, so need a broad set of skills, including adaptability and leadership.
- There is demand for graduate students to have access to off-campus learning experiences (community service learning).
- The situation of contract academic staff and the lack of hiring of assistant professors is discouraging to graduate students who would like to see the potential for future stable academic employment.

### Thought Provokers

- Graduate students who must work to support themselves have reduced time to dedicate to their studies: sufficient financial support for an appropriate length of time would free graduate students to do [more] great things.
- Time to completion is of much greater concern to the university than it is to graduate students.

### Tension to Drive Positive Change

- What we can measure quantitatively and compare to our peer institutions may not be of value. We need to understand and improve the quality of the student experience and strive for a happy, holistic graduate student experience versus being happy is great, but, in the end, my publication record will determine my employability, so we need to consider the impact of our publications.

### Strategies

- Mandatory professional development in every graduate program.
- Expanded community service learning opportunities.
- Financial support for graduate students for the reasonable expected length of their program (discipline-specific).
Preamble (SKD)

- The university is in the process of developing a new strategic plan and we are in the consultative phase
- Process to date: D Turpin visited 17 faculty councils (spring), DHT and SKD led a senior administrators’ retreat (late summer), created discussion paper questions based on the outcomes, currently completing a broad consultation
- ISP Advisory Committee: outlined membership, including Jane Traynor (nominated by GSA)
- Draft document to be released late January, early February timeframe for (smaller) public consultation
- Governance process aiming to end in BoG meeting in June
- Reminded the executive of the intention to visit the full council on February 23.

Discussion (Slides were presented, questions asked as slides appeared)

Will there be a committee member versed in indigenous issues/TRC? SKD: Yes

Why do we use US comparators? SKD: Aspirational targets set in the last round of strategic planning – although we have national peers, were also looking to compare ourselves to a broader group

Why not compare to European institutions? SKD: Not entirely clear, but linked to differences in revenue models and student body compositions

Does the UofA have plans for recruitment in other regions of Canada? SKD: Yes, and we will be considering how to manage international recruiting as well. This needs to include consideration of the supports for international students. Noted the rapid growth of the aboriginal youth population.

Reduced hiring of assistant professors is a discouragement to graduate students. Questioned if it is ethical to continue admitting PhDs if there is no option to become professors. Noted that CAS:T members would likely prefer to be hired into tenure-track roles.

SKD: The PhD is undervalued in Canada. Academia is not the only place where PhDs can work. Noted the Scandinavian example where a high percentage of those in leadership roles are PhD holders. Also noted that not all sessionals want to be professors – some are professionals wanting a chance to teach. Noted that the issue of contract academic staff has been an ongoing theme of the discussions to date.

How do we plan to measure excellence? How do we measure “uplifting the whole people” – qualitative measures should be used to truly see the value of the institution. Objective and readily measured does not equal meaningful.

SKD: Qualitative measures are limited because they do not lend themselves to objective comparison to peer organizations. However, we are still interested in qualitative information, as it is important to understanding our impacts.

One measure of excellence is student satisfaction. The quality of the student experience will impact the reputation of the university.

Maybe the only thing that matters is a happy, holistic student experience.
Counterargument: Being happy is great, but, in the end, my publication record will determine my employability.

Will there be a values and mission statement? SKD: This is important because it says who we are. GFC will be given the task of trying to update these.

Our impact (citations) is lower than our quantity of publications. Is this a concern? SKD: it may be influenced by the type of research done at the UofA (some fields are less citation-driven than others)

What is the timeline for the ISP? SKD: A 5-year mandate with a long-term view (20-30 years)

What is the value of a graduate degree? SKD: Only 15-30% of graduate students remain in academia, but this is not a new phenomenon.

This should affect how we teach students – we need to develop other skills. Do we need to reconsider the content of graduate degrees?

SKD: We are moving to a focus on learning outcomes. This improves the value for our students, and may well be legislated in the future.

Need to define what a graduate student is. Aren’t we employees? We are a hybrid between student and employee - a “hybrid organism.” SKD – please send us a definition.

What about the positive impact of the U of A on the community? What does the community want from the U of A? SKD: Depends on the community, but we need to listen and pay attention to the needs of the communities we serve.

Have there been proposals to determine how to de-measure qualitative contributions?

We need to stop measuring and aim ourselves at something valuable. Like valuing the development of the whole person.

How can we expand community service learning to include a broader range of topics? Graduate students are interested in expanded learning opportunities (the curated experience)? SKD: are you prepared to expand your time in your program?

Graduate students are not as concerned by completion times as the university is. They are more concerned about having a high quality experience. We need to decouple length of degree from achievement (both for those who take “too long” and “not long enough”).

Graduate students are concerned about the effect of funding on completion times. If graduate students were freed from financial stressors, they could do great things. If not supported, graduate students need to work, taking time away from their focus on their projects. Graduate students need to be funded for a period of time relevant to the time required for their particular discipline.

Professional development should not be “a la carte” – it should be a proscribed and required part of every program.

What kind of leader do we want our graduates to be?

- Professional skills
- Community service learning
- Reconsider the academic content of our graduate programs
- Leadership skills: adaptable leaders

HOMEWORK:

1. The GSA Exec has agreed to provide the ISP working group with a definition of “Graduate Student”

2. GSA Board Members would like to meet with the Provost, if possible, after the draft document came out but before SD came to GSA Council on February 22. (Possible GSAB dates would be February 10 or February 17)