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Response to the Academic Restructuring Task Force’s proposals for restructuring of the Graduate School.

Submitted to Dr. Zulma Toro, Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor
Submitted by Dr. Marc Seigar, Chair Graduate Council, on behalf of the Graduate Council.

On September 18, 2013, the UALR Graduate Council voted to adopt this document as its official response to Appendix 3 of the Academic Restructuring Steering Committee Final Report. Appendix 3 of the report recommended significant changes to the Graduate School.

The Graduate Council recognizes the enormous effort made by the Academic Restructuring Steering Committee (ARSC) in putting together their proposal. This was done in just a few months, mostly in the summer, at a time when few people were around to consult with. There is no doubt that substantial considerations were given to include inputs from all the stakeholders. However, we also believe that the proposed restructuring of the Graduate School (as outlined in Appendix 3 of the Academic Restructuring Steering Committee Final Report) could have unintended negative consequences for Graduate Education at UALR. We have therefore put together this document, in which we outline some alternative actions. In this document, we specifically deal with Graduate School issues. We do not deal with issues that pertain to the Research Office or ORSP (with the exception of topic 1). Below are our responses to the 9 recommendations outlined in Appendix 3 of the ARSC final report:

1. ORSP and the Graduate School should be separated. The position of the Vice Provost for Research and Dean of the Graduate School should be eliminated.

It is important to point out that the Vice Provost for Research administers more than just ORSP, but in fact the whole Research Office. This includes Research Compliance, Export Controls, and the Graduate Institute of Technology. It could (and probably should) also include the Center for Nanotechnology Sciences, the Center for Innovation and Commercialization, the Sequoyah National Research Center, the Center for Arkansas Center and Culture, and the Arkansas Earthquake Center. With these enormous responsibilities, separating the Graduate School and the Research Office seems to make sense, and in turn the position of Vice Provost for Research and Dean of the Graduate School should be broken into two separate positions.

2. A search should be opened for the position of Dean of the Graduate School.

We agree with this statement and would add that, should the Research Office and the Graduate School be two separate entities, a search should also be opened for a Vice Provost for Research.
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3. The processing of applications to graduate programs should be moved to Admissions and assigned to a point person who focuses on graduate applications. An important task to accomplish in this area is streamlining on graduate programs.
4. The processing of applications to graduate should be moved to Records and assigned to a point person who focuses on graduate programs.

Here we deal with points 3 and 4 together. Having a point person in Admissions or Records to deal with graduate issues is not going to make anything more efficient. The Graduate Council feels that it is important to indicate that the work that the Graduate School does in these areas requires more than one person (it is currently performed by four people), and it requires considerable familiarity with the individual graduate programs across campus. A concern raised by the Graduate Council is that if these functions get shifted away from the Graduate School, they may go to someone in Admissions and in Records who knows little about them, and who doesn’t have enough support staff to deal with them, and for whom they are not a top priority. This will lead to more work for Graduate Coordinators, making their jobs even harder, not easier.

5. The IT functions currently handled within the Graduate School should be moved to Information Technology Services and assigned to a point person who focuses on the website for the Graduate School and other IT needs. An important need in this area is the creation of an electronic submissions process.

It makes no sense to take away the IT work currently performed by Larry Beachler does in the Graduate School and give it to someone in IT Services or the Office of Institutional Research. Both of those offices have plenty of other issues on their plate, and the needs of the graduate programs will always be at the bottom of their priorities.

It should also be noted that the Graduate School does want to move to 100% electronic admissions process, but as with any move like this, there are issues that first need to be resolved. We recommend a review of possible software that could be used for this purpose and that would be efficient and easy for graduate coordinators and Graduate School staff. For instance, there are some academic programs that are actually resisting the move to electronic admissions because of the perceived shortfall of existing software.

6. The primary responsibility for recruiting graduate students should be moved to the Office of Enrollment Management and assigned to a point person who focuses on recruiting for graduate programs.

Once again, we feel that it is important to point out that recruitment of graduate students is fundamentally different from undergraduate recruitment. While the Office of Enrollment Management targets local High Schools for their recruitment needs, the Graduate School targets four-year universities in the U.S. and overseas. At the Graduate Council meeting on August 28, 2013, the Interim Graduate Dean provided a list of all career fairs that UALR has reserved space for in Fall 2013. This is an example of good efficiency at the Graduate School, and it is unclear why this needs to change. Of course, Graduate Coordinators and any faculty involved in Graduate Programs all need to be involved in the recruitment
process, and many of them are. We would like to see a tight link between the Graduate School person in charge of recruitment and the Office of Enrollment Management rather than a move of staff from one office to the other (which may amount to a loss of graduate-only focused staff). It is also important to realize that graduate student enrollment is and should remain a full-time position.

7. The certification of Graduate Faculty Status should be moved to the graduate committees within each college.

This action is currently performed by the Graduate Council. Any action to change how Graduate Faculty Status (GFS) is certified will need to be introduced as legislation to the Faculty Senate since it is the Senate that has charged the Graduate Council with this responsibility. The Graduate Council has been working on a new process for certification of graduate faculty status for some time and we will be re-introducing such legislation probably at the September meeting of the Senate. Our proposal requires that each program sets up a rubric for assigning and reviewing GFS, but the whole process requires the oversight of the Graduate Council. The Council will inform programs/colleges/departments when their faculty are up for review, and the Council will make sure that each unit adheres to the rubric that they submitted to the council for assigning GFS. We feel that a centralized faculty location for oversight is essential for ease of coordinating between programs and within each program and maintaining a sense of transparency and consistency across the university.

8. The work and compensation of the Graduate Coordinators should be reviewed.

The Graduate Council completely agrees with this statement, especially in terms of compensation. The Personnel committee of the Graduate Council performed an informal survey of graduate coordinators in 2012. The survey included some data on compensation, workload distribution, and the like. We would be happy to share the results of this survey with the Task Force or with the Senate (see Appendix B). We recommend the adoption of a consistent method/policy for compensating all Graduate Coordinators across campus. This is not currently the case. In some colleges, coordinators are on 10.5-month contracts. In other colleges, coordinators are given 3-hours of teaching release, or a combination of the two, or neither. Many graduate coordinators perform essential work in the summer, just after graduation, and then again before the new intake of students in the fall, and consists of jobs such as assigning assistantships to new, incoming graduate students, processing admissions, and advising both new and returning students. Given that this is happening during the summer, when 9-month faculty are off-contract, the appropriate compensation would be to move graduate coordinators to 10.5-month contracts. The graduate council therefore proposed moving all graduate coordinators onto 10.5-month contracts, although we recognize that other types of compensation may depend on the size and needs of individual programs.

9. Similarly, the support functions connected with the Graduate School should be evaluated to ensure that they are adequately staffed.
The Graduate Council believes that the Graduate School is, in general, performing an excellent job and has been steadily improving in efficiency for the last several years. We have generally found that the work they do is exemplary. One of the main complaints that we have heard from coordinators concerning the Graduate School is the excess paperwork burden. We do recommend an efficiency audit of the paperwork trail for all major functions in order to determine if legislation can be passed or policy approved that would diminish this burden on coordinators and faculty (and the Graduate School staff as well). Another “complaint” is that the Graduate School administration often puts up roadblocks. The Graduate School has responded that this is usually when the rules of a program are broken, for instance when we are trying to recruit students who do not meet the admissions requirements for a given program. However, this is supposed to be one of the functions (if not the main function) of a Graduate School at any university. If coordinators and/or faculty would like to change the admissions requirements for a program, the correct process is to submit the new standards, with an appropriate justification, to the Graduate Council for their approval. The Graduate School will then enforce the new standards. We recommend that the Graduate School be given all the detailed feedback from the various meetings of the task force and the graduate faculty and coordinators so that the Graduate School staff can seriously consider other problems that may need resolution. We feel confident that efficiency and other issues can be resolved within the Graduate School so that its main mission of supporting graduate education at the university can continue to be the main focus of its work.
Appendix A. Graduate Council Recommendations for Advancing Graduate Education at UALR

On January 30, 2013, the Provost delivered to the Graduate Council a charge. As a result, the Graduate Council explored four topics related to graduate education at UALR. Several recommendations were made as a result of this discussion. The Graduate Council feels that most of these recommendations would strengthen the Graduate School and graduate education at UALR. In the following pages, we include the recommendations that Graduate Council made in response to the Provost’s charge (from Dr. Nolen’s report dated Feb 26, 2013):

This report is the result of a systematic process to examine graduate education at UALR and to plan for its future. The members of the Graduate Council solicited input from faculty in their respective colleges across campus to make sure the resulting conversation was inclusive, constructive, and open to all opinions. After this information was collected, the council met on February 12, 2013 to attempt to identify common challenges, strategies for success, and specific action items that would have immediate and lasting impact on graduate education recruitment, retention, and program support.

We hope that this report can serve as a springboard for further strategic planning to establish a shared vision for the graduate education at UALR. We attempted to model decision making efforts that were data-driven and based on a transparent process that solicited a wide variety of opinions from the diverse constituencies.

The Provost’s Charge

On January 30, 2013, the Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, Dr. Zulma Toro delivered to the Graduate Council a charge. We were to explore three topics related to graduate education at UALR:

1. Identify simple and concrete actions to help Graduate recruitment.
2. Identify the strengths in Graduate Education and associated research at UALR.
3. Explore strategies or identify a mechanism to encourage collaboration (e.g., research, program development, resources) across colleges on campus.

As we began collecting input from across the campus and comparing notes, another topic quickly emerged that members of the Graduate Council thought warranted serious consideration. Consequently, we added a fourth topic:

4. Explore strategies to support graduate faculty and encourage faculty to seek and secure external funding.

The members of the council committed to expedite this task as we saw this as vital to the continued success and growth of graduate education and graduate faculty at UALR. We voted to dedicate the scheduled meeting on February 13th to draft action items and
strategies. To initiate the discussion of the state of graduate education today and the future directions of graduate education at UALR, each member of the council was asked to solicit specific and focused feedback from their colleagues in their respective colleges and report back to the group at the next meeting. As a collective, we engaged in an informal SWOT analysis where we identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to graduate programs at UALR. After engaging in the analysis, several major themes emerged from this process and are presented in this report. From these themes we attempted to identify a menu of specific actionable items that could take advantage of already existing resources and program when possible; those are also presented below.

I. Graduate Student Recruitment

Graduate enrollment has always been one of the primary concerns for UALR. Over the past three years, UALR has seen a significant and precipitous decline in first-year, part-time graduate student enrollment. This suggests a problem with enrollment and that these students are not choosing to come to UALR.

Current Challenges at UALR
• Program faculty are tasked with recruitment responsibilities for which they have no training, no support, no release time, nor resources.
• Institutional efforts have been focused primarily on undergraduate recruitment and retention.
• Program faculty have difficulty offering competitive graduate assistance packages to potential recruits.
• Traditional graduate assistantships are not incentives to part-time graduate students who work full-time or are otherwise already on the career track.

Specific Recommendations for Action:
1. We recommend that the Graduate School conducts systematic studies for graduate stipends. These studies should be more sophisticated than simply comparing UALR with peer institutions regionally/nationally. Rather, we recommend that programs should be compared with peer programs regionally/nationally.
2. We recommend creating a cadre of “Provost’s Graduate Fellowships” that offer 3-5 year tuition remission for highly qualified graduate students. These can be housed out of the Provost’s office and are evenly distributed across colleges (so that humanities students do not have to compete with EIT students, etc.). Build cohorts of ‘Fellows’ who are encouraged to collaborate on research; showcase at graduation; incorporate a service learning component.
3. We recommend allowing colleges to offer stipend/tuition (including tuition only) packages specifically tailored to the needs of their graduate student population.
4. We recommend coordinating ‘on-campus’ visit experiences for potential recruits through the office of the Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Management.
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5. We recommend creating a virtual 'on-campus' experience for potential distance/online recruits.

6. We recommend targeting a portion of the "Grads at Work" campaign towards graduates from advanced programs. (In other words, make the ad explicit in its focus on graduate programs.)

7. We recommend prioritizing graduate education in university-wide promotional materials, media campaigns and on UALR website.

8. We recommend redirecting graduate recruitment efforts and resources so they may be more focused and targeted to specific programs (i.e., traditional/residential, online, professional, doctoral, etc.) and populations of recruits (i.e., part-time, international, out-of-state, full-time, professionals, etc.).

II. Strengths in Graduate Education and Associated Research at UALR

We are often so preoccupied with challenges that we do not get a chance to celebrate the strengths. The members of the Graduate Council were quick to identify the points of pride within their colleges including:

• Graduate degrees (Certificates, Master’s, and Doctoral) that are unique to the state and the wider region.

• Graduate programs that demonstrated a robust collaboration between UALR and UAMS.

• Programs that have achieved the highest levels of accreditation.

• Highly visible graduate placements regionally and nationally.

• Highly productive faculty (i.e., national/international publications, presentations, external funding, etc.)

The challenge, however is that there is currently no mechanism to examine these strengths for common practices, innovations, and lessons that could transfer to structurally similar but struggling programs. Nor does there appear to be a concerted effort to translate these strengths to marketing initiatives.

Specific Recommendations for Action:

1. We recommend creating a searchable clearinghouse of program self-study materials that can be accessed by faculty and administrators.

2. Relatedly, we recommend creating a searchable list of faculty, their research interests/skills, and their grant experience. This list would be accessible by all faculty (password protected).
III. Encourage Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Interdisciplinary initiatives are a vital source of new ideas for research and creative activities. Although academic departments are important for organizing university administrative functions, today's complex problems often require interdisciplinary solutions. In addition, focused interdisciplinary collaboration is a way to promote excellence in a time of diminished resources. Interdisciplinary collaborations would also serve not only as a lever for graduate student recruitment, but also faculty recruitment and retention.

Current Challenges at UALR:

• It is understood among faculty that resources for research and program planning have been allocated along departmental or college lines. When resources are distributed along departmental lines it is difficult to determine how to support interdisciplinary research.
• Support structures, funding and infrastructure are insufficient to the enhancement and sustainability of high quality research or interdisciplinary research.
• Interdisciplinary research is not emphasized at UALR. There is little institutional or departmental encouragement to pursue interdisciplinary research.
• The faculty within various disciplines, departments, and colleges know very little about the assets, capacities, and skills of others across campus.
• In some disciplines there may be risks involved with encouraging and recruiting junior faculty to engage in interdisciplinary research.
• There are cultural differences between departments and disciplines. Some disciplines do not place a high value on interdisciplinary collaboration. In some cases, interdisciplinary collaboration may not make sense.
• There is currently no process for maintaining or ensuring equity in sharing faculty in joint appointments.

Specific Recommendations for Action:

To create an environment in which interdisciplinary collaboration can develop and thrive across departments and colleges, faculty have to feel empowered, incentivized, and rewarded to collaborate.

1. We recommend the creation of structures and mechanisms for the promotion of interdisciplinary collaboration. The deans and the graduate school should assist the development of inter-departmental faculty cooperation and understanding.
2. We recommend that the directors of UALR institutes and centers serve as brokers that bring together faculty and resources from across campus around central issues and ideas.
3. We recommend the creation of an internal funding mechanism for interdisciplinary research and collaboration.
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4. We recommend developing systematic university-wide guidelines for drafting inter and intra institutional agreements that clearly articulate the expectations and responsibilities of the partners and participants. (Note: these agreements already exist in some pockets of the university as several faculty have joint appointments with UAMS)

5. We recommend creating a mechanism or forum to inform faculty within the various disciplines, departments, colleges about the assets, capacities, and skills of others across campus.

6. We recommend that campus-wide, UALR do more to recognize and celebrate interdisciplinary success including the partners involved in those successes.

7. We recommend that deans encourage internally and recruit externally to create a climate in which more faculty will be interested in and enabled to do interdisciplinary collaboration. Perhaps make that a priority in faculty searches.

8. We recommend incentives for faculty to develop interdisciplinary courses, degree programs, and research opportunities.

9. We recommend using the ATLE in partnership with the Interdisciplinary Studies program to host 2-3 sessions each year that focus on interdisciplinary collaborative ‘successes’ on campus. How have faculty collaborated on courses? Program planning? Research?

10. We recommend sending Integrative Graduate Education and Research Traineeship (IGERT) rfp’s out to the campus writ large through FacFocus...or target specific colleges/departments to inform faculty of possible external funding for interdisciplinary initiatives.

IV. Faculty Support for External Funding

In addition to the three topics outlined above, the conversation among the members of the Graduate Council on February 13th revealed a fourth topic: Graduate Faculty Recruitment and Support. It became evident to us that the infrastructure and incentives needed to recruit highly qualified graduate students and support quality graduate programs, also serve to recruit and retain graduate faculty. One particular issue that faculty mentioned across the campus was related to seeking external funding in the form of grants.

Current Challenges at UALR:
- Budget cuts undermine support structures necessary for research and graduate student assistance. This makes grant funding critical.
- It was the consensus of those on the Graduate Council that the procedures and policies associated with grant writing/submission were cumbersome and unnecessarily bureaucratic. It appeared that in addition to ORSP, each college added its own level of
oversight thus slowing down and further complicating an individual faculty member’s ability to respond to rfp’s in what is often a short window of time.

• We also addressed issues of incentivizing grant writing for faculty. Because of the cumbersome process of seeking grant funding and the administrative effort necessary to manage a grant with little to no release time, many faculty simply avoid it altogether. Incentives such as release time are not uniformly available across the university, but vary by college. Heavy teaching loads, other scholarly interests, other entrepreneurial interests (consulting), committee work, and lack of advanced warning are all obstacles to grant writing. However, grant productivity is a criterion that determines Carnegie rankings in addition to providing budget support and thus should be a priority.

**Specific Recommendations for Action:**
1. We recommend critically reviewing the grant policies and procedures at UALR in an effort to streamline and automate the process while also adhering to federal guidelines and necessary oversight.
2. We recommend a more uniform provision of release time as well as technical and personnel support for faculty seeking grant funding.
3. We recommend that UALR provide opportunities for groups of highly successful grant seeking faculty to partner with/mentor faculty wishing to seek external funding.
4. Relatedly, we recommend creating a searchable list of faculty, their research interests/skills, and their grant experience. This list would be accessible by all faculty (password protected).
5. Celebrate those who are successful PI’s. UALR could identify a week during which sponsored programs and initiatives are highlighted on campus. There could be a concerted effort to showcase these individuals, the work they do and their contributions to the UALR community. Perhaps they could hold panel discussions/workshops for interested faculty on topics such as identifying potential funding sources, managing a large-scale grant, community collaboration, grant evaluation, and generating data and published research.
Appendix B. Results of a Survey of Graduate Coordinators performed by the Graduate Council in 2011

In the Fall semester of 2011, the Graduate Council conducted a survey of Graduate Coordinators. The survey was sent to all coordinators at UALR. We received 14 responses from coordinators in all 6 colleges. Some of the results of this survey are included below:

1. **Advising duties.** 13 coordinators stated that they are the sole or primary advisor for all students in their programs.

2. **Coordinator appointments:**
   a. 9-month contract: 8 respondents
   b. 10.5-month contract: 5 respondents
   c. 12-month contract: 1 respondent

3. **Release time for coordinator duties.** Coordinators reported that they receive either no specific course release for their coordinator duties (5 respondents), a 1-course (3-hour) release per semester (4 respondents), a 1-course (3-hour) release per year, which may include a summer release (2 respondents). 1 respondent indicated a release but did not specify the type of release. Another indicated that s/he does not get a release but one of the assigned courses is less work than a regular class (thesis seminar).

4. **A few other relevant comments included:**
   a. “I find this role to have too many needs given current levels of support. Thus, we are not doing all we could across key areas.”
   b. “A great deal of time is spent on this assignment with little rewards except from students.”
   c. “I receive a one-course release to coordinate the program but in reality this duty takes more than 50% of my time.”
   d. “Although I have teaching load release, most of the time I teach more than 9 hours and sometimes more than 12 hours due to demand and the fact that each grad level course is counted as a 4-hour teaching load.”