

**Survey of challenges to graduate education at UC Davis**  
A report from Academic Planning and Development – a standing committee  
of Graduate Council

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## Introduction

In early summer of 2006 Graduate Council and Academic Planning and Development (APD) undertook a survey of all graduate programs at UC Davis. The program chairs or their designees were asked to identify and rank the top 5 challenges facing their individual graduate programs. A list of 19 challenges, established from analysis of all most recent program review summary statements, conducted between 1998 and 2005, was provided. Opportunity was given to add challenges not included in the list. The chairs were further asked to evaluate the degree of the identified challenge (1 = minor to 3 = major problem) and to provide additional comments.

## Data analysis

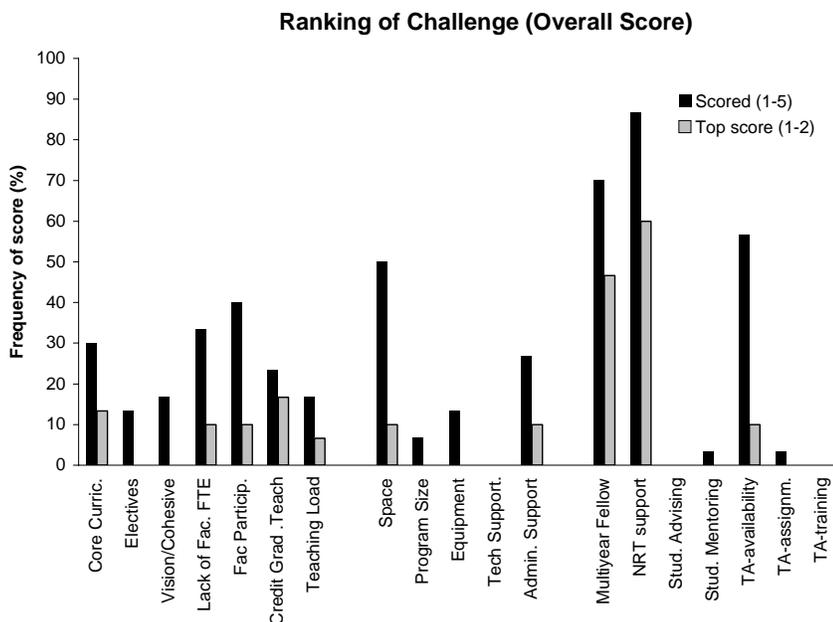
**Overall survey results** The overall response rate was very good. Close to 80% of the graduate programs responded to the survey (66 responses of 83). Many of those that responded provided further assessment of the underlying causes of their problems with extensive comments. The 20% of programs that chose not to participate were similar to the responders, both in terms of overall quality and with regards to the ratio of departmental versus non-departmental-based groups (roughly 40% : 60%). Quality of the programs was determined by APD members based the most recent summary review statements.

A slight caveat should be noted: There was some inadvertent ambiguity in the wording of the survey. This ambiguity led to surveys being answered in two distinct ways. Forty-six percent (30) of the surveys scored the top 5 challenges as intended by APD. The other 54% (36) of returned surveys ranked the top 5 challenges for each subcategory of challenges (faculty/curriculum; infrastructure; student-related concerns). Data analysis was carried out separately for these two types of replies. While this made the analysis somewhat more cumbersome, the overall outcome of the survey appeared not to be affected and the overall responses were very similar.

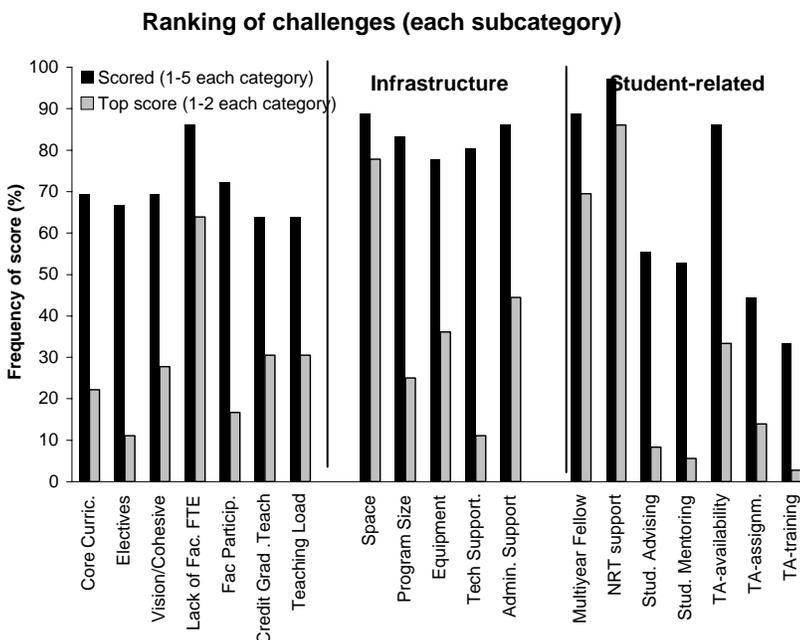
**Top ranking challenges** All survey results were tabulated by recording the rank and severity of the identified challenges for each program, using Excel software. A list of comments was also generated. Tabulation was done separately for the two types of survey responses received (see above). Analysis was conducted by determining the overall frequency with which an individual challenge was identified and the frequency with which it was ranked either as top or second-most challenge.

**Figure 1** summarizes the data obtained from the 46% of surveys that scored exactly 5 challenges. As evident from Figure 1, most of the key challenges originally identified by APD were listed among the 5 top most challenges by at least one program, showing the overall validity and completeness of the list of challenges given as options. However, challenges identified by graduate programs as being among the top two were clustered much more tightly.

**Figure 2** shows a similar analysis for the other 54% of surveys that scored 5 challenges within each of the 3 categories (curriculum/faculty concerns; infrastructure; and student-related concerns, respectively). Since each subcategory only contained between 5 – 7 choices, the frequency by which a particular challenge scored (as shown in the black bars) is of lesser significance here. More informative here is the focus on the top-2 challenge for each category.



**Fig. 1** Frequency with which the 5 top challenges to graduate education were identified by graduate programs Results from the 46% surveys returned that indicated the top 5 challenges to graduate education among the entire list of challenges provided (X-axis). Black bars indicate the frequency with which a particular challenge scored. Grey bars indicate how often a challenge scored as the top or second-most challenge for a particular program.



**Fig. 2** Frequency with which the 5 top challenges to graduate education within three subcategories were identified by graduate programs Shown are the frequencies by which 54% of the surveyed graduate programs listed a particular challenge as ranking among the top 5 challenges for one of three subcategory (from left to right: faculty/curriculum concerns, infrastructure, and student-related concerns, respectively). Those categories are separated by a vertical line. Black bars indicate the frequency with which a particular challenge scored. Grey bars indicate how often a challenge scored as the top or second-most challenge for a particular program. Note the similar trends between Figures 1 and 2.

**Fellowship support** There was overwhelming concern about the lack of multiyear fellowships and nonresident tuition (NRT) support. Over 80% of respondents scored this as a top priority (with 45 and 60%, respectively, among those performing overall ranking across the subcategories). Repeatedly, the statement was made that individual programs are non-competitive in attracting the highest quality students, who will go to other universities that offer multiyear fellowship packages.

Many programs find it increasingly difficult to admit out-of-state students. Comments included: "We have stopped accepting international students unless they can demonstrate support from their home country"; "Our competitive market is worldwide. NRT is a competitive disadvantage - both within the US but more importantly vis-à-vis foreign competition"; "Because of student fellowship support shrinking (NRT etc) program is shrinking, courses cannot be offered each year".

**Availability of faculty** The second major problem area is best described as a lack of available faculty time. There was widespread report on a general lack of faculty available to participate in graduate programs, including for administrative oversight, teaching of courses and development of coherent, comprehensive programs. This was reflected in the relatively high frequency of surveys listing lack of faculty FTE, or faculty participation as a problem. It scored as a top problem for >60% of surveyed. In addition, nearly 40% of respondents found a lack of faculty participation and >30% a lack of faculty FTE to be among the top 5 identified challenges.

Interpretation of the comments suggests that the lack of faculty time was variably scored as lack of faculty FTE, lack of vision/cohesiveness, insufficient core curriculum or electives. Reasons given were the lack of credit for graduate teaching and a lack of available faculty members with expertise to teach certain aspects of graduate programs. From the comments provided, it seemed that graduate education was often not regarded as a high enough priority for faculty, due to other more pressing demands on faculty time. Comments that reflect this notion were: "Graduate education seems lower on the "prime time" list than it should be". "Faculty simply does not have time to teach graduate level courses or participate in graduate education". "Dedicated faculty needed". "[It is] difficult to develop and maintain new interdisciplinary courses that serve the GG with no FTE to call our own".

**Teaching assistant (TA)-ships** A third major category of listed challenges involved student TA-ships. Nearly 60% of those scoring the top 5 challenges overall identified the availability of TA ships as a major problem (>10% within the top). Graduate Groups appeared particularly vulnerable, as they do not control TA-ships. "Total lack of TA-ships for our graduate program". "TA-ships for summer courses that are newly offered would help". "No TA-ships. Huge problem for us. No undergraduate classes. Students TA for so many different classes hard to train them for all". "Would be important to have some TA ships assigned to GG. As we have no upper division classes - no TA'ships to call our own". "Graduate groups don't control TA and RA'ships and they don't come through in time for admissions". "TA-ships are not based on enrollments- no way to increase enrollments".

**Infrastructural challenges** By far the most often cited concerns among potential infrastructural problems were the lack of space for graduate students. This appears to be a pervasive and serious problem particularly in the humanities. Of those surveyed who ranked the overall top 5 priorities, lack of space (for students) scored > 50% of time and about 10% of the time as one of the most important negatives. "No space, literally!" "No offices for graduate students, too many students crammed into small offices".

Lack of functioning administrative support was also a frequently mentioned problem. Over 40% of those with rankings in individual categories felt that this was a top priority. Even those that provided overall ranking of the top 5 deficiencies scored lack of administrative support >25% and nearly 10% as a top priority. The underlying causes were reported to be two-fold: First, insufficient funds to provide adequate hours or quality of administrators and second, inability to support graduate group chairs because of organizational problems. This is illustrated with comments such as: "Administrative support is ok. Except for budget limits!" "Too low salary for graduate administrators- train good one's which then leave for better paying jobs". "I need to either have control of my staff support and the dollars or assign that function to an "impartial entity" such as happens with GG under the CBS umbrella. I detest this system of giving the responsibility of chair to one person and all the support and dollars to a dept of which I am not a member".

**Tuition buy-down** Only one of the 66 survey respondents added a challenge not identified in the provided list. This challenge concerned the "25% buy down" of tuition costs recently announced by the Provost for graduate students employed as "graduate student researchers (GSRs)" on research grants. (Note that the list of challenges provided in the survey was generated before instigation of that "buy down" policy.) The concern was that this general "buy down" would undermine the graduate programs ability to decide which students would receive support via block grant allocations. This was not noted as a challenge by any other graduate program. Thus, overall the list of 19 challenges identified by APD in 2005/6 seemed to be comprehensive in capturing the current main problems and challenges faced by graduate programs at UC Davis. Whether the partial tuition cost buy down will become a challenge should be monitored.

## Conclusions

It is somewhat disheartening to read the comment delivered by one of the graduate program chairs: "Graduate education not a UC Davis priority". It reveals, however, the most fundamental challenge to graduate education at UC Davis: a lack of emphasis on graduate education when it comes to strategic planning and resource allocation decisions. Unless enhancement of graduate education is incorporated as a crucial strategic planning goal for faculty hiring and teaching allocations at all decision levels, challenges to graduate education cannot be comprehensively addressed. The emphasis on maintaining or even increasing the ratio of student contact hours per faculty is counter to the needs of graduate education.

This year APD will use the results of the survey to develop a framework for further discussions. Our aim will be to provide Graduate Council and the Dean of Graduate Studies with a list of suggestions for overcoming the major challenges to graduate education. The goal is for these frameworks to be used by ad-hoc committees or task forces as a starting point to develop new policies or guidelines that will help to improve the quality of graduate education at UC Davis by overcoming the identified obstacles and challenges.

The strong response rate and the extensive comments provided in this survey attest to the commitment of UC Davis faculty to provide the best environment for graduate education on this campus. Helping to provide support for both departmental and non-departmental based graduate programs is a crucial goal for the long-term success of UC Davis as an academic institution of excellence.