Graduate Program Review
Agricultural Education and Communications
Texas Tech University
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This report is based upon information provided in the self-study report provided by the department and the on campus interview sessions conducted on March 7, 2011. The departmental faculty (especially David Doerfert) are commended for the overall quality and scope of the self-study report. In addition, the interview sessions were well-attended and participants were eager to voice their perceptions of the graduate program.

Program Overview and Vision

The mission of the Department of Agricultural Education and Communications is to generate, integrate, create, broaden, and diffuse knowledge bases in the human dimension of the agricultural sciences and natural resources. The vision of the department is to be recognized as one of the top ten departments in the country. Based on a recent survey of distinguished departments of agricultural education, peer colleagues acknowledged the Texas Tech program ranks among the ten most distinguished programs in the U.S. Therefore the faculty in the department should specify a new vision to which they will aspire. (Note: The strategic plan for the department appears to have revised the vision to a top five ranking.) Based on the evidence presented, the graduate program is on a trajectory leading toward continuous improvement and should be commended for the gains realized over the past several years. Nevertheless, there is potential for continuous improvement which will be addressed in the recommendations offered later in this report.

Overall, I would rate the quality of the program as VERY GOOD.

Faculty Productivity

Considerable evidence was presented to document that graduate faculty in the department were of high quality and clearly dedicated to student success. Advising and teaching performance (with one noted exception which was discussed privately with the Department Chair) were highly praised by students, who were genuinely appreciative of the time and effort devoted to those functions. Many references were made in the self-study report regarding the “family”
atmosphere in the department, a culture which was further corroborated during interview sessions with faculty and graduate students. Faculty access was mentioned by several students who acknowledged that faculty maintained an open door policy and that students perceived a welcoming attitude among the faculty. Students noted that they felt as though they could approach any faculty member in the department for assistance and advice. Even so, a perceived lack of academic rigor was voiced with regard to one unnamed graduate faculty member and that situation was discussed with the department chair during the final interview session. Overall, the quality of the faculty is excellent. The energy and enthusiasm (especially among the Associate and Assistant Professors) was noteworthy and appreciated. Many of the faculty are actively involved in their respective professional organization and societies. Clearly, the reputation of the TTU graduate program has benefitted from the visibility resulting from professional service contributions.

Faculty teaching loads appeared to be higher than average compared to other CASNR departments; however, that is typical for agricultural education departments at peer institutions. In addition, research productivity measures had increased in the department relative to the prior six-year review. However, much of the increase was accounted for in poster presentations. Although poster presentations are valuable learning opportunities for graduate students, the graduate faculty should place relatively greater emphasis on peer-reviewed journal articles which are more highly valued in tier one universities.

Research program focus was also discussed by several faculty during the interview sessions. Some frustration was expressed by faculty who recognized the need to define a focused research agenda while allowing students to define their own research interests. Balancing between faculty and graduate student research interests is a common issue among agricultural education faculty at peer institutions, which has yet to be fully resolved. However, graduate faculty should be encouraged to clearly define a significant and important focus area for their research and scholarship; and use that as a platform to recruit future graduate students. Both the faculty and graduate students would benefit from a more clearly-defined research focus.

Overall, I would rate the quality of the faculty as EXCELLENT.

Quality and Quantity of Graduate Students and Graduates

The quality of a graduate program is most clearly reflected in the students enrolled in the program and the graduates produced. Current students and past graduates provide solid evidence of quality along with the potential for improvement in order to achieve the aspirational goal of becoming recognized as top five program in the country.
Current enrollment figures reveal 14 resident students in the Ed.D. program and 20 students in the Doc@Distance program in Agricultural Education. There are 14 students enrolled in the M.S. Ag Comm, 27 students in the M.S. Ag Ed, and one student in the M.Ag. program. Overall, there are 76 graduate students enrolled in graduate degree programs offered through the department, although the Doc@Distance students are shared with Texas A&M. Compared to peer institutions the number of graduate students enrolled at Texas Tech is somewhat higher than average and the number of advisees per faculty FTE is also higher, although the latter figure is somewhat inflated due to the Doc@Distance students who have a co-advisor from each of the partner institutions. The proportion of Masters and Doctoral students at TTU also appears to be more heavily weighted toward doctoral students as compared to most peer institutions where the proportion tends to be more heavily oriented toward the Masters degree program.

Assessing the quality of current graduate students needs to consider a wide variety of characteristics. Traits such as motivation, enthusiasm, collegiality, etc. are constructs that are extremely important in an overall assessment of program quality and effectiveness, even though they are difficult to measure. Nevertheless, the current graduate students enrolled in the program exhibited those desirable qualities in multiple venues throughout the campus interview sessions. In fact, one of the true highlights of my visit was the opportunity to interact with a number of the students on an individual basis between the more formal interview sessions. The students were articulate and engaging which provided a positive indication of the quality of the program and student satisfaction.

Quantitative data regarding student quality tends to focus on average GPA and GRE scores. Overall, the quantitative data revealed acceptable GRE scores and somewhat higher than expected GPA scores for students enrolled in the program. However, when examining the pool of applicants to be considered for admission in 2011 there appears to be considerable variance in the two quantitative indicators, GRE total from 1100 – 610 and GPA from 3.97 – 2.68. Although the actual enrollment may be limited due to the availability of GA support, the graduate faculty should also be selective in their admission of future graduate students, considering both quantitative, qualitative, and diversity factors.

Graduate placement is another indicator that is frequently considered in program assessment. The placement of graduate students as reported in the self-study document reveals wide variability. It appears that a limited number of doctoral graduates were placed in faculty positions in colleges and universities; however none appeared to be in tier one universities (except for one at Texas A&M). Therefore, the graduate faculty need to examine their program offerings and extracurricular experiences provided to students (especially those in the doctoral program) to better prepare Ph.D. graduates to compete for the limited number of faculty positions in tier one universities in the future. Increasing the number of graduates placed in tier
one universities will improve the potential to recruit additional high-quality graduate students into the TTU program when there is a cadre of TTU alumni on the faculty at peer institutions.

Graduate students clearly contribute to the scholarly productivity of the department based on co-authorship of journal articles, research papers, and poster presentations. The departmental culture provides a strong, supportive environment in which students are quickly acclimated to engage in collegial efforts to communicate the results of their scholarly pursuits. Most frequently, the focus appears to be on poster presentations, which is certainly a good starting point for most graduate students. However, the graduate faculty should also strive to increase the emphasis on peer reviewed journal articles to the extent possible.

Graduate Assistantship support is often a limiting factor in graduate program enrollment. Currently, the department has funding to support 13 Masters and 9 Doctoral students. This is even more impressive when considering the doctoral stipend of $24,000 per year is the highest among the ten peer institutions reported in the self-study document. There is a concern that impending budget cuts may reduce the amount of funding that can be devoted to GA support in the future.

Overall, my rating of graduate students is VERY GOOD and graduates is GOOD.

Curriculum and Programs of Study

Since the last graduate program review in 2005, there have been two major programmatic changes. The M.S. degree program in Agricultural Communications has added visibility and prestige to the program which has contributed to the growth in student enrollment. Although the addition of the M.S. Ag Comm program may have resulted in a slight decrease in enrollment in the M.S. Ag Ed program, there is sufficient synergy among the programs to believe that enrollment numbers will balance toward relative equilibrium in the future. It was quite apparent that the M.S. Ag Comm students perceived that they were better served through the addition of their degree program.

The proposed transition of the resident doctoral program from an Ed.D. to a Ph.D. has also generated much enthusiasm and support among faculty and graduate students. Both groups perceived the current Ed.D. designation to be potentially career-limiting and frequently reiterated the experience of a recent graduate who was denied a tenure-track position in Arkansas on that basis. Although there are other doctoral programs in agricultural education that offer an Ed.D., I believe that most programs administered through colleges of agriculture offer the Ph.D. degree, and would prefer their faculty to hold that credential, relative to an Ed.D. degree.
Although the TTU program has proposed a transition of the resident doctoral program to a Ph.D. degree, there is some concern about the status of the proposal. Evidently, the proposal has been under review by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board in Austin for the past two years. Although there is some indication that the proposal may be acted upon at the April 2011 meeting, the TTU Graduate School should monitor the status of the proposal to request resolution in a timely manner.

Course and program requirements for the proposed Ph.D. program are comparable to other Ph.D. programs in agricultural education at peer institutions. Recent modifications to the proposal to include coursework on qualitative research and the experience plan which should enhance the quality and scope of the learning experiences and expectations for students.

Overall, the curriculum offerings and program options were rated VERY GOOD.

Facilities and Resources

Graduate programs in agricultural education rely on a broad array of resources to enhance the quality of the program. Financial resources available to support the graduate program appear to be minimally adequate at present; even so, impending budget cuts present serious potential limitations within the graduate program. Although there are currently two support staff plus an additional half-time technology support person, the work load expectations frequently exceed capacity and potential budget cuts will only add to the potential for faculty and graduate students having to assume more responsibility for self-support.

The Agricultural Education and Communications department currently enjoys the benefits and flexibility of occupying its own building, with the exception of one office housing a CASNR Communication staff member. Two of the classrooms have been equipped with distance education technology at departmental expense and utilizing the skills of the faculty and graduate students. One classroom is equipped with moveable tables and chairs which accommodates a variety of teaching methods and audiences. Most graduate courses enroll 12-18 students, although some core courses may enroll nearly 30 students which is an upper limit for the research methods course in which students are expected to develop a research proposal. There are two computer labs maintained by the department, although those facilities are primarily for undergraduate courses.

Faculty offices appear to be very adequate in terms of both size and quality. Graduate students are located in four suites, most of which are similar in quality to peer institutions. Faculty were provided with appropriate computer resources and the graduate students acknowledged access to
computers and printers; although technology support was only available to the department on a half-time basis, and was sometimes unable to respond in emergency situations.

Graduate students and faculty were generally favorable with regard to the support provided to graduate students. Scholarship awards to support graduate student travel to professional conferences was frequently cited as evidence of student support. In addition, students voiced appreciation for the assistance provided by Dr. Doerfert in his role as Director of Graduate Studies for the department with regard to recruitment and graduate student orientation.

Although resident graduate students were generally positive with regard to departmental support, the graduate student survey data and comments referred to a perceived communication gap; although the context was not clearly delineated. Probing questions during the interview sessions did not help clarify the context of the potential issue; therefore it was concluded that the student comments may have emanated from Doc@Distance students and/or the institutional partner.

The lack of a graduate student handbook was acknowledged in the self-study report and reinforced in the interview sessions. Clearly, the growth in the TTU graduate program combined with the jointly-administered Doc@Distance program; a comprehensive graduate student handbook would be a useful reference for faculty and graduate students in the program.

In general, the resources available to support the graduate program were barely adequate to maintain the quality of program desired. Additional resources were desired to fund graduate assistant positions and to upgrade classroom facilities and graduate student offices. It was also noted that Dr. Matt Baker may be returning to the department in a faculty position which may require the department reclaiming the office space currently occupied by the CASNR Communication staff member. Several faculty also suggested that an additional staff support (especially fiscal and HR) to assist with managing grant funded projects which are increasing in number and complexity.

At the present time, I would rate the adequacy of resources to support the graduate program as GOOD (Note: this rating could decline substantially as a result of anticipated budget cuts.)

Recommendations

1. Proactively seek final approval for the transition of the resident doctoral degree from an Ed.D. to a Ph.D.

2. Develop a graduate student handbook for all graduate degree programs.

3. Become more selective in graduate student admission decisions.
4. Increase the number of peer-reviewed journal articles published, even if that coincides with fewer poster presentations as measures of scholarly productivity.

5. Seek alternatives to provide fiscal and HR support to assist faculty in managing externally funded grant projects.

6. Maintain efforts to support graduate student travel to professional conferences to enhance recruitment and program visibility.

7. Emphasize quality and excellence in all decisions regarding faculty and research; the two characteristics that distinguish graduate programs in agricultural education.

8. Establish a culture of peer review for all faculty to ensure graduate courses fully address important concepts and are well-taught.

9. Examine alternatives to engage students (especially doctoral students) to gain experience in writing grants for external funding.

10. Maintain efforts to promote the collegial (family) atmosphere and culture that currently exists in the department and continue to “market” that trait as a comparative advantage in faculty and graduate student recruitment.

11. Mentor assistant professors to outline a focused five-year plan of research and scholarship that can be used as a basis for annual performance review and graduate student recruitment.

12. Create a departmental development plan that outlines endowment priorities that could be presented to potential donors that include support for graduate programs, faculty, and research.

13. Complete planned facility renovations involved in re-locating existing computer labs and designating a conference room within the Ag Ed Building.

Respectfully submitted,

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