Department of Landscape Architecture
Graduate Program Review
2000-2006

To: Cliff Fedler, Associate Dean of the Graduate School

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A review of the graduate program of the Department of Landscape Architecture was completed in the spring of 2008. The review committee received a comprehensive departmental self-study report. This document was reviewed thoroughly by the committee. The committee met with members of the department on January 30th, 2008. In an initial meeting the committee met with the Departmental Chair, then the graduate students (seven), and finally the faculty (4 faculty members and one instructor). The meetings with each group lasted approximately an hour.

This report is based on information provided in the departmental self-study document and the departmental interviews.

Program Overview and Vision

The Department of Landscape Architecture (LA) offers the Master of Landscape (MLA) to students with undergraduate work in LA, planning & design, or non-design fields of study. Students with LA degrees require 2 years, students with planning & design degrees require 3 years, and students from other fields require extensive leveling courses before they are allowed to enter the three years of "core" classes. The goal of the program is to develop students with a long term personal commitment to the discipline, problem solving abilities, professionalism, and the development of a theoretical or applied research thesis. The stated goals of the program are to 1) maintain excellence in graduate landscape architecture education; 2) promote LA related research among faculty and students; and 3) develop leadership skills in their students. In addition to the MLA degree the Department offers a five year Bachelors of Landscape Architecture degree.

Over the past six years this graduate program has generated 10 graduates (2.0 degrees/year) which is significantly less than Auburn (15.2 degrees/year), University of Arizona (14.8 degrees/year), and the University of Georgia (14.2 degrees/year) and slightly below the University of Oklahoma (3.3 degrees/year). Students completing MLA degrees at Texas Tech University have averaged in excess of 4.2 years to complete their degrees, which appears excessive when compared to other master level degree programs.
in our University. Also over the past six years the LA Department has generated 93% (2,639 SCH/year) of their semester credit hours from the undergraduate program while only 7% of the total semester credit hours were generated by the MLA program (188 SCH/year). Similar trends were observed in data for fall enrollment in which the majority of the Departmental activity and income generation came from their undergraduate program.

The Departmental faculty survey indicated that there was at least one disgruntled faculty member who gave very negative rating to nearly every survey question. Generally, however, the faculty felt there were adequate course work, academic rigor and facilities to support graduate education. There were only four students who participated in the student survey reflecting the low enrollment in this program. However, this limited number of respondents indicated concerns on the number of faculty, the availability of courses, the lack of seminars, weak graduate advising, lack of teaching assistantships or other graduate support, the lack of Departmental research opportunities, and professional interaction with the faculty. Similar concerns were expressed when the students met with the review committee.

**Faculty Productivity**

Data presented on faculty productivity indicated a very low level of generation of referred articles, books/book chapters, and book reviews but a slightly better level of presentations/posters. It also appeared that the majority of graduate student advising was done by only two faculty members with the rest of the faculty having little if any involvement in graduate committees. It was interesting to note that faculty work load was below the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources but slightly above the University average.

The Department of Landscape Architecture is not highly competitive for research funding generating only 0.5 awards per year and only $10,221 per year of total research funding. This reflects the faculty and discipline concentration on supporting the undergraduate program in Landscape Architecture. However, peer institutions with the exception of Auburn had similar low levels of productivity in generation of research funds. During this same period of time, $32,000 ($5,333/year) of University and College funds have been invested in the Department of Landscape Architecture research efforts.

In general, the faculty commented that there are adequate facilities for them to fulfill their teaching and advising duties. Moreover, facilities are sufficient for additional near-term growth of the graduate program.

Both graduate students and faculty commented that hiring to replace two faculty members is desperately needed. However, further comments were made that it would be extremely difficult to make hires because of the industry competition in hiring suitable faculty candidates. The consensus among the faculty appeared to be that new hires should have industry (practical) experience, that an MLA rather than a Ph.D. degree was
preferred, and that the new hires must be broadly trained. The wish for broadly trained (flexible) faculty was to ensure that all teaching necessary for the undergraduate program could be adequately fulfilled. However, if the research that is conducted in the department is to be strengthened, then faculty with Ph.D.s and experience in research and target research foci are desperately needed.

Comments made by the faculty and in the department self-study document suggest that faculty productivity could be increased by multidisciplinary research. Moreover, opportunity appears to exist across campus for such interdisciplinary research. Nevertheless, there seems to be little interest/emphasis in conducting research and applied projects are favored.

If additional students are to be recruited into the program recruitment funding and financial resources for the graduate students is considered necessary. To obtain additional funding proposal writing is desperately needed. Inter- / multidisciplinary research proposals are one possibility for generating additional funding resources.

Only two faculty direct thesis research. The selection of a thesis advisor is entirely at the discretion of the graduate students. Each thesis committee requires two departmental faculty members, to which the students remarked that frequently there are too few faculty members from which to select a thesis committee. Furthermore, the students commented that research opportunities are not made obvious to them. Moreover, thesis work starts only in the second year of study and overwhelming the default thesis advisor is the faculty member that lectures the required courses in preparation for the thesis (LARC 6301 & 6302).

There was considerable concern raised by the graduate students that the faculty focused on the strong undergraduate program, rather than the graduate program.

**Quality and quantity of graduate students and graduates**

Data presented on the graduate students revealed that most of the students admitted to the graduate program had GRE scores (Verbal + Quantitative) above 800 and undergraduate GPA averages above 3.5. Student support as demonstrated by fellowships and scholarships was less than $3,000 per year for the entire program. Furthermore, there was only one Departmental theses published over the past six years.

With few exceptions, the graduate students within the TTU-MLA program have bachelor degrees from disciplines other than Landscape Architecture. Therefore, most of the graduate students appear to be changing professions, and an attraction of the TTU program is that the master’s degree is an entry-level degree into the discipline. The TTU-MLA appears to be viewed by both the faculty and graduate students as an applied / professional terminal degree. The faculty noted that the graduate students entering the MLA program with bachelor degrees from other disciplines were typically highly motivated and goal orientated students. However, the students were weak in graphic
design capabilities as they lacked prior training; moreover, they graduated with fewer credits in design than BLA graduates.

Comments were made by the faculty that the TTU program differs from other programs within the state of Texas, because the graduate students are full-time students. By contrast programs in Arlington and Austin, TX are predominantly night-courses. The faculty pointed out that there is considerable competition with the other Texas programs for recruiting graduate students.

A very striking observation that came from interviewing the current graduate students was that none of them had come to TTU to work with a specific faculty member or because of the reputation of the program. All current (interviewed) students were enrolled in the program fortuitously.

All recent graduate students are employed in Landscape Architecture firms, and had 3 to 4 job offers on graduation. Several faculty members commented on the shortage of qualified landscape architects, therefore graduating students are sought after. With the favorable job market, there is high student retention as students need to complete their degrees to become licensed professionals.

Several issues were raised concerning the thesis requirements (commented on elsewhere in this report). It seemed that the students favored and/or may benefit more from developing a portfolio and completing applied projects rather than the combined research and project thesis that is currently required.

The need for recruitment funds, TA and RA positions may benefit recruitment of students with BLA degrees. However, as the graduate students in the LA department overwhelming do not have BLA degrees most would not be able to fulfill traditional TA duties in their first two years of graduate study. Therefore, alternate sources of RA and recruitment scholarship funds are needed, if additional students are to be recruited into the program.

**Curriculum and Program of Study**

The MLA program has a requirement of a minimum of 73 credit hours for students without a previous undergraduate degree with a design emphasis. This is over twice the hours require for most Masters Degrees at Texas Tech University. In addition, the program of study is rigidly divided into a minimum of three years of study which makes creating a critical mass of graduate students necessary for formal classes to make very difficult. Consequently, the large majority of graduate classes are taught as a piggy-back on the undergraduate courses.

The faculty indicates the curriculum for the MLA degrees at TTU and other institutions has not significantly changed over the last three decades. They additionally indicated that future faculty recruitment needs to support the undergraduate degree program in
Landscape Architecture by hiring individuals with experience as a practicing landscape architect instead individual with a strong research background. One faculty member indicated that graduate students are needed in the program to take care of the “busy work” to free the faculty up for research. Another faculty member stated that the College and University needed to fund Departmental Research but indicated there would be little opportunity to generate external funds.

The mind set of both the faculty and the current students pursuing an MLA degree in the Department is that the graduate degree will have only limited value in their careers over a bachelor’s degree in the same field. Consequently, there is little motivation to include courses in other disciplines such as business, environmental science, or law which would prepare a MLA graduate for management positions after graduation. One course (LARC 6406 – Collaboration Design) was identified by several students as being not worthwhile. It was also disturbing to the students that the Master Thesis required both an application and a research component. It also appeared that Thesis topics were not identified until near the end of the graduate program.

Facilities and Resources

The additional space currently available to LA in the “old Animal Science” building appears to be adequate for the current graduate student enrollment and a modest increase. The graduate students indicated they could use additional computer equipment and earlier exposure to tool courses such as LARC 5308 – Computer-Aided Design in Landscape Design. Departmental administration, faculty and graduate students indicated that there was an urgent need to replace the two faculty positions recently vacated in the Department.

Grade Assessment and Criteria Used

I. Unsatisfactory

   I. Quality and quantity of research and scholarly activity
      Definition, understanding, and acceptance of program goals

      The department’s mission statement, and stated program goals and objectives indicated that a primary focus is research among faculty and students. However, the review committee felt that there is a definite weakness in all aspects of research within the program. For example, very little grant funding is sort; multidisciplinary research across campus is limited, etc. Lack of research funds adversely impacts recruitment of graduate students, as RA funds are unavailable.

II. Excellence of teaching
    Willingness to collaborate in interdisciplinary academic programs
A real strength of the department is the broad-based training of the faculty and their capability to be flexible in teaching all necessary undergraduate courses. However, the rigid structure of courses required at the MLA level and the necessity to piggy-back most (if not all) graduate courses is not conducive to providing graduate students with training for management positions after graduation. Moreover, the program does not include collaborative courses such as business, environmental science, or law that could strengthen the qualifications of the graduate students.

III. Quality of students
   Effectiveness of academic counseling and guidance program
   Student and faculty awareness of degree requirements
   Quality of graduates
   Post degree performance of graduates

With few exceptions, the graduate students and faculty view the MLA degree as an entry-level professional-terminal degree. Therefore, as most students entering the program have bachelor degrees in aligned disciplines they graduate with weakness relative to the department’s bachelor degree graduates. Specifically, one issue raised by the faculty was that MLA graduates have fewer credits in design than BLA graduates. Furthermore, the lack of management or legal courses in the curriculum result in the MLA students having little advanced training beyond the BLA degree.

IV. Appropriateness and completeness of offerings
   Student-faculty communication in general
   Quality of supporting programs

The MLA program contains an excessive number of credits and appears to be excessively redundant with the undergraduate program. Only two members of the Departments are active in advising students and several faculty members do not even serve on graduate committees. One student indicated the LARC 6406 Collaboration class prevented students from initiating research earlier in their program. It was obvious that the faculty had limited experience in conducting research or competing for research funding.

V. Effective organization and operation of the department and use of staff and facilities
   Ratio of degree production, considering staff and enrollment
   Faculty and student support
   Library and research support
   Adequacy of facilities and equipment

Both the students and faculty indicated that there are sufficient physical resources to support the graduate program, but it was apparent from both the student survey and interviews that the loss of two faculty members had limited their exposure in this discipline. When faculty input was asked for on refilling these two vacant positions it was apparent that support of the undergraduate curriculum was a priority over strengthening the research component critically lacking in the graduate program.
Summary and Recommendations

The Master of Landscape Architecture program as currently structured and supported is extremely weak and has an unacceptable low level of productivity. If the graduate program is to survive it must develop more independence from the undergraduate program, and include aligned courses such as business, environmental science, or law. Such courses would better prepare MLA graduates for management and leadership positions upon graduation. The Department must also recruit faculty who have expertise in research and are competitive for external research funding.

Perhaps the Department of Landscape Architecture should consider focusing their limited resources on achieving excellence in their undergraduate program to develop a nationally recognized reputation.