

Guidelines for the Review of Graduate Programs

Preface/Introduction:

Over the past two decades, the number and types of graduate programs have increased dramatically. In particular, the development of clinical master's and doctoral programs, often initiated by changes within the professions, has changed the landscape of higher education. More institutions, including former liberal arts colleges and state universities, have expanded their charters to offer both master's and doctoral programs. Over time, a lack of clarity about the purpose, desired learning outcomes, graduate competencies, curricula, admissions and graduation requirements for graduate programs has increased. New forms of instructional delivery and the use of technology have increased the complexity and variability among programs.

The purpose of these guidelines is to complement and inform the WSCUC Standards of Accreditation, providing more specific guidance about the planning, development, and evaluation of those programs. These guidelines are minimal baseline standards for quality and do not necessarily reflect robust or ideal characteristics of graduate programs. The target audiences for these guidelines are WSCUC Substantive and Structural Change panels reviewing new graduate degree programs.

Program Description (CFRs 2.1, 2.2b):

Graduate curricula are in line with those criteria that clearly distinguish graduate from undergraduate programs. In addition to providing information at higher and deeper levels, curricula focus on the capacity-building required for students to critically and creatively analyze and synthesize information, to independently develop, research, and test hypotheses related to existing or the creation of new knowledge, and to develop, present, and defend cogent and nuanced arguments and positions at a professional level based on research and independent thought. If upper-division and master's-level graduate courses are cross-listed, higher standards of performance are expected for the graduate students enrolled in the course.

Graduate education encompasses academic offerings above the baccalaureate level and includes master's, post-master's certificate, and doctoral programs. Master's degrees, post-master's certificates, and doctoral degrees may be research-oriented or professional or practice-oriented.

An institution's graduate programs require scholarly and professional activities designed to advance the student substantially beyond the educational accomplishments of a baccalaureate degree program in terms of breadth and depth of knowledge of the field, familiarity with primary sources of information and current trends and publications, the ability to critically and creatively analyze and synthesize that information, and to independently develop, research, and test hypotheses related to existing or the creation of new knowledge. Scholarly and professional activities also further develop the students' ability to develop, present, and defend cogent and

nuanced arguments and positions at a professional level based on research and independent thought.

Research-oriented doctoral programs provide students with substantial mastery of subject matter, theory, literature, and methodology of a field of study. They include development of research skills leading to the attainment of independent research capacity. Disciplinary master's programs have many of the same objectives, but require a less sophisticated level of mastery of the chosen field of study than does the research doctorate.

Professional or practice-oriented graduate programs are designed to prepare students for professional practice involving the application or transmission of existing knowledge or the development of new applications of knowledge within their field. Such programs enable the student to gain a broad conceptual mastery of the field of professional practice through an understanding of its subject matter, literature, theory, and methods. Instruction in relevant research methodology is provided, directed toward the appropriate application as a regular part of professional practice. Programs include the sequential development of professional skills that will result in competent practitioners. Where there is a hierarchy of degrees within an area of professional study, programs differ by level as reflected in the expected sophistication, knowledge, and capacity for leadership within the profession.

Graduate Culture (CFRs 2.2b, 2.8, 2.9):

Graduate culture reflects and fosters the vibrancy of an intellectual community. Faculty and students actively engage not only with the essential content knowledge of their discipline or profession, but with the values, skills, attitudes, the “habits of mind” of graduate life. The power of the intellectual community is evidenced in the ways students assume and exercise creativity and independent thought, and includes high expectations for student scholarship, evidence-based practice, and/or independent research, and engagement with faculty.

There are different ways of knowing in specific fields and different ways that people collaborate, depending upon the field or profession. Whatever the distinctive characteristics of the field, the culture of graduate and professional programs includes collaboration between students, between students and faculty and between students and professionals in the field. Programs are expected to be able to demonstrate how students advance their knowledge and develop professional skills and values.

There are a variety of ways to complement the formative aspects of graduate culture. Library and technology support help sustain research appropriate to the degree level. Graduate culture often encompasses out-of-class learning that may include mentoring, campus speakers, colloquia, practicum experiences, conference participation, and the opportunity to share scholarship in publications or public forums.

Graduate culture is a critical component of on-ground, hybrid and fully online programs. Graduate programs are expected to consider the role that technology plays in creating and sustaining intellectual community. How does interaction, community building, and knowledge sharing happen or happen differently in online settings?

Schedule/Format Requirements (CFRs 1.6, 2.2, 2.5, 2.10):

Graduate programs differ from undergraduate programs in both retention and graduation rates. The National Center for Educational Statistics measures time-to-degree for undergraduate programs, but not for graduate-level work. Some of the reasons for the differences between undergraduate and graduate retention and graduation are the increased level of difficulty of graduate programs, the additional responsibilities for work and family that many graduate students may have, the need for greater self-direction and self-motivation in charting a path to degree, and the requirement for deeper and more refined research skills. For many programs, the need for greater creativity and perseverance in determining and pursuing a research topic and in carrying out a sustained effort to write a thesis or dissertation may test a student's abilities in a way that undergraduate study could or did not, and it may take time for students to develop the capacities required—or decide to leave the program.

Students in master's programs that require the completion of a designated number of credits (often 30-36 but possibly more depending on the field and institution) may be able, depending on full- or part-time study and outside responsibilities, to complete their degrees in as little as one year, or they may need to take considerably longer. Some institutions encourage timely completion by setting a maximum time permitted for enrollment.

Time-to-degree (after undergraduate study) in doctoral programs—both research and applied—varies greatly depending on the field of study and research or clinical requirements; a 2006 study of time-to-degree of U.S. research doctorates found the median total time from baccalaureate to doctorate to be 10.1 years, while the median registered time was 7.5 years.ⁱ

Full-time enrollment at the graduate level is usually defined as nine credit hours per term (as opposed to 12 at the undergraduate level). To ensure timely completion, institutions ensure the availability of required and desired courses, the availability of faculty and other advising, student support such as assistance with writing, liberal access to research materials, availability of clinic hours, etc.

Admission Requirements (CFRs 2.2b, 2.12):

Admission requirements for graduate programs are designed to reflect and achieve the mission, values, and goals of the institution and to ensure that students have a reasonable opportunity of earning a degree. A baccalaureate degree is normally required for admission to a graduate program. In those cases where a baccalaureate degree is not required, a clear rationale for this

practice should be provided and evaluated. Qualifications include competency in the language of instruction at a level appropriate to the program.

Educational Effectiveness (CFRs 2.3 – 2.7):

Student success is defined as the achievement of learning outcomes, timely completion of programmatic requirements and earning the degree, and the scholarly output and other achievements of graduates. Graduate programs are expected to also collect and review data on student enrollment, persistence, and graduation rates and other measures of success. Data are disaggregated for various subpopulations of students, including gender and racial or ethnic groups and any other group that is specifically recruited or might be considered academically vulnerable. Analysis of rates is used in evaluating and refining the recruitment, curriculum, pedagogy, and student support services.

Resources/Faculty (CFRs 2.8, 2.9, 3.1):

Institutions offering graduate degrees have adequate full-time faculty with appropriate professional qualifications to the degree offered. A preponderance of faculty are expected to have academic qualifications at least one degree level higher than the program's degree level (or have appropriate post-graduate training, certification, clinical residency or specialization). The scholarly expectations of faculty exceed those expected for faculty working at the undergraduate level. Research-oriented graduate programs have a preponderance of active research scholars on their faculty. Professionally oriented programs employ faculty members who are experienced professionals, making scholarly contributions to the development of the field.

Resources/Infrastructure (CFRs 3.1 – 3.5):

Institutions offering graduate and professional programs have sufficient human and other resources available and systems in place to support graduate student learning and professional development and the advancement of knowledge. Among the elements that might be expected include policies and standards on ethics in the profession and/or the discipline and research-related policy and a system for faculty and academic oversight of graduate work. Depending on the discipline or profession, physical resources might include clinical facilities, arrangements and affiliations (memorandum of understanding, i.e. MOU) with outside facilities, classrooms and meeting space, technological resources, and support for any online equivalents. In addition, policies that ensure the quality of the clinical programs and off-campus practica are expected, along with appropriate administrative support.

Graduate programs require current and relevant library and information resources appropriate to the degree levels offered. Institutions are expected to establish standards and expectations for information literacy at the graduate level.

ⁱ Time to Degree of U.S. Research Doctorate Recipients, NSF 06-312, March 2006
<http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/infbrief/nsf06312/>