EXCELLENCE, COMPETITIVENESS, AND STUDENT SUPPORT: The Looming Crisis

UCLA’s ability to compete for the best graduate students is declining steadily, and student enrollments are also decreasing. At UCLA and elsewhere, California isn’t educating enough scholars with advanced degrees to serve its future needs.

California’s economy is dependent on discovery, but California has been underinvesting in graduate education, the key training ground for the people who create the discoveries.

Graduate education at UCLA is facing a crisis that could jeopardize its stature as a preeminent research university. The crisis has two related facets: declining competitiveness in offers of financial support for graduate students and static or shrinking enrollments.

Graduate students—the best and the brightest we can bring to our campus—are required for the university to flourish. In academic apprentice roles, graduate students are major contributors to both research and undergraduate education. Further, the quality of graduate students and their activities and contributions are an important factor in sustaining the productivity and overall excellence of our faculty. As the future professors and professionals who will extend the boundaries of knowledge, they are essential to UCLA’s mission and academic reputation.

Recent reports provide compelling evidence that many of our doctoral degree programs at UCLA are becoming increasingly unsuccessful in competing for the most highly recruited applicants. Evidence about enrollments is also disturbing. In the following, we outline the troubling facts.

COMPETITIVE FINANCIAL SUPPORT

There is little doubt that UCLA has experienced a decline in our ability to compete for the best graduate students, and that this is largely a result of inadequate financial support resources.
EXCELLENCE AT RISK

Over the past ten years, the costs of graduate student support have been shifted increasingly to the faculty and the students. This burden has been compounded by general fee and tuition increases, and by cost of living increases. The available resources for university fellowships have not increased sufficiently to allow needed increases in the value of the individual fellowship. As a consequence, fewer awards can be offered annually. This state of affairs places the university in an increasingly unfavorable competitive position.

Table 2: Academic Doctoral $23,102 UC Berkeley

UC San Diego per capita net stipend offered to admitted doctoral students ranks eighth among the nine UC campuses (see Table 1). If adjusted for cost of living differences for each campus, we are even further disadvantaged and rank last.

Applicants are choosing non-UC institutions over UCLA because of economic considerations.1

In a recent survey, UCOP asked students who were admitted to both a UC and a non-UC campus which they had chosen, why, and how important financial support issues were in this decision. Included in this sample were 1,084 applicants to 29 doctoral programs at UCLA. On average, the net first-year stipend offered by competing institutions was $2,288 more than UCLA provided; adjusted for cost of living, the difference was $4,790. In addition, 72% of students were offered multi-year packages by competing institutions. Only 59% received multi-year offers at UCLA. Students who chose not to attend UCLA were heavily swayed by these financial contrasts.

PhD programs at UCLA report that they are losing their best applicants because of noncompetitive student support.2

In a Graduate Division survey conducted in the spring of 2000, two thirds of department chairs and graduate advisers in 41 graduate programs reported a growing lack of success in recruiting the most highly qualified applicants. More than 83% said financial support packages offered by major competitors are significantly better. About 90% said the cost of nonresident tuition at UCLA is a significant factor when students go elsewhere. Nearly 40% of departments are experiencing reduced graduate enrollments because they lack adequate resources for student support.

UCLA fell nearly $25 million behind UC Berkeley in the amount of merit-based funding provided to graduate students in 2000-2001.3

Although it has about 1,500 fewer graduate students than UCLA, Berkeley awarded $8 million more in fellowship funds, $16.7 million more in funding for graduate student researchers, and $1.4 million more in funding for teaching assistants for a total of UCB, $131.2 million vs. UCLA, $106.4 million in these categories.

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Table 2: UC GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL PER-CAPITA MERIT-BASED SUPPORT* BY CAMPUS RANK ORDER, 2001-2002

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<tr>
<th>Academic Doctoral</th>
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<td>UC San Francisco</td>
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*Merit-based support includes fellowships, grants, teaching and research assistantships.

www.ucop.edu/sac/sds/reports_and_data/support/support0102.htm

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The Graduate Division seeks to promote excellence in graduate education by addressing campuswide goals. Its capacity for fund management optimizes the availability of a variety of restricted fund sources for effective campuswide distribution.
Figure 2.
DECLINE IN GRADUATE ENROLLMENT, 1970 TO 2002

Figure 3.
CALIFORNIA JOB GROWTH, 1983-1998

As can be seen in Table 2, UCLA per capita merit-based support for academic doctoral, master’s, and professional degree students ranks between seventh and ninth place in the UC system. It is also important to note that UCLA’s ability to compete is following a trajectory of decline. For example, the University Student Aid Program (USAP) is one major source of funding for the fellowship and block grant programs administered by the Graduate Division. From 1997-1998 to 1999-2000, the Division received an average of $9.1 million each year from this source. Between 2000-2001 and 2002-2003, these funds were reduced to an average of $8.5 million a year.

Furthermore, some UC campuses (e.g., Berkeley, San Diego, Davis) have benefited from long-term commitments to increase their fellowship funds from campus discretionary resources. Many of our competitor institutions have also been much more successful than UCLA in establishing development campaigns that raise funds specifically for graduate student support.

GRADUATE ENROLLMENTS

The number of graduate students, as well as their distribution among disciplines, is a critical indicator of whether a major research university is accomplishing its mission and achieving a healthy academic environment. An appropriate proportion of graduate students to undergraduates, of doctoral to master’s students, of graduate students to faculty—all of these contribute to creating an ecology in which excellence in graduate education is valued and supported.

Indications that graduate enrollment trends at UCLA are less than optimal include:

- Over the past 30 years, General Campus graduate enrollments have steadily declined, both in absolute numbers (from 8,227 to 7,707) and as a percentage of total enrollments (see Figure 2).\(^4\)
• In the early 1970s, graduate students were 18% of total enrollments in the College of Letters and Science. Currently, graduate enrollments are less than 12%.
• Some doctoral degree programs have deliberately reduced enrollments in an effort to provide better financial support to fewer students. In some cases, this has impacted their curriculum (i.e., reduced range of graduate seminars) and resulted in a shortage of students available to serve as teaching and research assistants.

THE OUTLOOK FOR GRADUATE EDUCATION

This would be distressing news, even in a context where one might hope that we are experiencing a short-term problem and that an improved economy will help reverse any deleterious impacts. However, the extent of the crisis goes well beyond UCLA and the state’s present financial plight.

In 2001, the University of California's Commission on the Growth and Support of Graduate Education declared that the university was failing to provide enough graduate students to ensure the state’s leadership in science, technology, and culture and to keep pace with projected growth in undergraduate enrollments. Recognizing that any increase in graduate enrollments would necessitate commensurate growth in student support, the Commission called for $215 million per year in additional funds by 2010, to support an increase of 11,000 enrollments. Particular attention was paid to the need to provide financial packages that would attract the best prospective scholars to UC campuses.

The state’s economy was already faltering when that report was issued, and it has declined sharply in the ensuing years. As a result, instead of growing, graduate enrollments have made limited gains. Worst of all, at a time when the amount of student support should be growing dramatically, the gap between UCLA’s fellowship awards and those of its competitor institutions continues to widen.

A status report on the funding situation and related issues is presented below. We also briefly review the Commission’s goals for student support and their recommendations for university action. These recommendations establish benchmarks that are useful in assessing where we are at UCLA and what actions might be taken to mobilize the campus and accelerate our progress. Finally, we suggest ways that UCLA can move forward toward sustaining the quality and growth in graduate education that the state’s future demands.

THE GRADUATE DIVISION AND STUDENT SUPPORT

At UCLA, several kinds of funds are available for student support funding (i.e., fellowships as well as TA and GSR appointments). Most of this money is awarded directly by schools, divisions, or departments, but about 18% (see Figure 4) of UCLA’s total merit-based funds is administered centrally by the Graduate Division. What follows is a brief overview.

• Faculty, particularly in the sciences, often hire their graduate students to work as research assistants on grants.
• Some faculty obtain training grants, extramural money made available specifically for the education and professional preparation of graduate students; there is often a matching funds requirement, which the Graduate Division has been contributing.
• Funds for teaching assistantships are allotted by the deans to the departments in their purview.

REPORT OF THE PRESIDENTIAL HUMANITIES COMMISSION

“At the heart of the University’s mission in a democratic society is its role in creating an informed, literate, and humane citizenry and preparing leaders to move us forward in politics, science, business, and the arts. Graduate schools and the faculty who teach there carry a special responsibility in this area.

www.ucop.edu/research/news/uchc.html

Compared to other big states, California is falling behind in educating the college professors, cultural leaders, and scientific and technological innovators our future success demands.

MAKING DISCOVERY WORK

“A humane and just society that is able to move forward solving problems must have a citizenry that knows how to think.... And graduate education at the University of California, the nation’s premier public university, provides one of our best and most cost effective methods of producing the educated citizens today’s world demands. (p. 2)

California and the world now function in an economy that demands a highly educated workforce with the ability to innovate, perform research, and solve problems. (p.13)

Making Discovery Work: Graduate Education at the University of California, University of California Office of the President, 1999.
www.ucop.edu/ucophome/commserv/graded.pdf

Graduate Focus 5
Schools, divisions, and departments may have gifts and endowments that generate fellowship awards.

A wider range of fellowships, some of them covering multiple years, is available through the Graduate Division, along with travel grants and other kinds of support.

"Fellowship Support Managed by the Graduate Division" (pg 69)

Figure 4: 2001-2002 MERIT-BASED SUPPORT BY SOURCE

Responding to the recommendations from the Regents’ Commission, the Graduate Division is working hard to attract new students in this difficult funding climate, but institutional barriers to student support remain.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONAL GOALS AND BEST PRACTICES

Providing preferential funding for doctoral students.

As it awards block grant funding to departments, the Graduate Division uses degree objective and time to degree as principal criteria. Departments receive significantly more money for doctoral students: twice the amount for students in academic master’s programs and six times the amount provided for students in professional master’s programs. Most Special Fellowships are also restricted to doctoral students.

Promoting diversity.

The Graduate Division has primary responsibility for the graduate diversity goals articulated in campus and UC planning initiatives. Over the last twelve to fifteen years,
fellowship funding has been obtained from various sources specifically for this purpose, a current total of about $4.5 million. In compliance with Proposition 209, socioeconomic and educational disadvantage are the criteria rather than ethnicity, race, or gender.

**Encouraging faculty mentoring.**

The Graduate Research Mentorship Program is designed to provide a year-long stipend to help students acquire sophisticated research skills by apprenticing more closely with faculty. Applicants must designate a faculty mentor as part of their proposal, and both mentors and students are required to submit quarterly reports. Brief support with the same rationale and requirements is provided through the Graduate Summer Research Mentorship Program. Participants in the latter program are expected to have a draft of a paper ready for submission to a journal or for conference presentation at the end of the summer, thus promoting their professional preparation.

**Reducing time to degree.**

Dissertation year fellowships are available to students who are in their final year of graduate school and plan to start teaching and research appointments immediately after the fellowship year ends. Students must have advanced to candidacy by the time they are nominated, and they must file dissertations within twelve months of the fellowship’s inception. Mid-year progress reports support the accomplishment of this goal.

Time to degree is also a factor in decisions about block grant funding; departments receive funds only for students who are making timely progress.

**LEVERAGING AVAILABLE RESOURCES**

Through its fund-management strategies, the Graduate Division makes optimal use of funds available for fellowships and enables significant economies in time and effort for departments that seek funding for promising students.

Awards made by faculty within departments and/or campuswide faculty selection committees ensure that funds are directed to individuals who have demonstrated outstanding potential and performance.

Most fellowship sources available for distribution by the Graduate Division come with significant restrictions. Sometimes, the restrictions are relatively broad. University Student Aid Program (USAP) funds, for example, are restricted to students with documented financial need. A variety of diversity-promoting sources target students from backgrounds of socioeconomic and educational disadvantage.

In other cases, the restrictions are quite narrow. For example, a couple of fellowships are available only to students studying Armenian subject matter or focusing on research related to biomedical issues. Others are restricted to students with disabilities or life-threatening illnesses. Eligible students may come from a variety of different campus disciplines and departments.

Instead of trying to match students they hope to fund against these types of restrictive criteria, departments need only submit merit-based nominations for students to the Graduate Division. The Graduate Division provides the requested fellowship funds and then undertakes the task of matching students to available fellowship resources, so that the appropriate accounts are debited. This type of fund-management strategy, in which restricted and unrestricted funds are leveraged to meet programmatic goals, would be difficult to sustain in a decentralized environment.

While a large variety of funds are available to support graduate students, many of them under the control of deans and departments, the fellowship resources managed
by the Graduate Division are used to support the long-term, campuswide goals of maintaining excellence in graduate education. Through its selection strategies, the Graduate Division rewards not only the best of UCLA’s graduate students but also the best of its graduate programs. While the money goes to the support of individual students, awards also further institutional goals, such as student diversity and timely progress toward degree, and encourages best practices, such as faculty mentoring and early engagement in research.

In a context of scarce resources, the Graduate Division has devised methods of fund management that maximize the usefulness of every available dollar and ensure that no fellowship goes unawarded for lack of an appropriate candidate. This process liberates academic departments from the burden of matching deserving students with highly restricted fellowship criteria. The departments nominates students on the basis of academic merit—the Graduate Division matches awardees with appropriate funding sources.

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**INNOVATION AND PROSPERITY AT RISK: THE REGENTS’ COMMISSION’S GOALS**

California is one of only five states that experienced a decline in the number of graduate students over the decade 1986 to 1996. During that period, California awarded doctoral degrees to about 15 per 100,000 people, compared to Massachusetts’ 32 per 100,000. At large public research universities in other states, graduate students account for a quarter or more of overall enrollment. In the UC system, only 17% of the student body is graduate students. In the thirty years from 1970 to 2000, graduate enrollments at UC increased by 7%, compared with 100% growth in undergraduate enrollments. Over the last decade, California ranks last among the fifteen largest states in percentage growth in graduate enrollments.

The Commission estimates that California will need 40,000 new faculty by 2010. Moreover, it is people with master’s and doctoral degrees who will drive the scientific and technological progress that have put California in the national forefront for many years.

To remedy this shortfall in replenishing the state’s most educated ranks, the Commission offers a plan, the keystone of which is increased funds for student support. Much of the Commission’s strategy for increasing student support relies on increases in federal and state funding or changes in regulations. However, the Commission also “considered at length what the University can do itself, within existing resources, to accomplish the graduate growth and concomitant student support” (p. 3). Its recommendations follow, along with an assessment of how well UCLA measures up in these areas.

**Make graduate education a higher internal financial priority in allocation decisions, and redeploy existing financial support dollars in ways that facilitate competitiveness.**

As it stands, funding for graduate education at UCLA has not received priority commensurate with its importance, placing us in a position clearly inferior to our competitor institutions.

Because planning for excellence in graduate education has not been fully integrated into academic planning and resource allocation, in times of budget reductions graduate education is especially vulnerable to the further erosion of its essential support resources.

An example is the use of USAP funds. This funding has historically been reserved exclusively for graduate student fellowships. However, this year, UCOP has permitted
campus chancellors to redirect some or all of these funds to pay for increases in teaching assistantships—in other words, to support the instruction of undergraduates. At some campuses, chancellors are redirecting USAP funds in this manner, then restoring a comparable sum—or even more—for graduate student support. At UCLA, it is anticipated that $2.9 million will be redirected, with no compensating contributions.

Again using UC Berkeley as a benchmark, UCLA’s Graduate Division is thinly staffed to meet the needs of a large and diverse graduate student body and cadre of post-doctoral scholars. The Graduate Division at Berkeley has 55.5 FTEs to accomplish its mission. With 1,500 more students, UCLA’s Graduate Division makes do with 40.5 FTEs. Today, our 13,000 graduate students, postdoctoral scholars, and departmental staff and faculty must take their inquiries and transaction requests to offices staffed by only five or six people. The absence of even a single person can have significant consequences when so few are providing services for so many. Workload in the Graduate Division is also highly impacted by staff reductions at the department level due to retrenchment. In sum, the graduate student-staff ratio in the Berkeley Division is 170:1 while at UCLA that ratio is 272:1.6

Ensure that graduate student housing is a priority on every campus, especially for first-year students.

Weyburn Terrace Housing at the west end of campus is nearing completion. The Graduate Division has worked with a campuswide committee in the planning of that project and the development of policies to help ensure that this new resource will be used to enhance competitiveness.

Make the University of California’s campuses the ten best campus environments in the nation by:

- ensuring that admissions practices foster recruitment
- improving mentoring
- fostering students’ development as scholars and teachers by consciously designing new opportunities for professional practice
- creating community spaces where graduate students can meet and study
- expanding career planning, placement, and other student services

Admissions: The Graduate Division works closely with departmental faculty and staff on a range of outreach and recruitment activities. Improvements to the Graduate Division website have enhanced this important source of information for prospective applicants.

Mentoring: The Graduate Research Mentorship program and its related summer project provide direct incentives in this area. Also, some QGE funds support departmental programs in this area.

Professional development: A number of Graduate Division fellowships provide additional incentives for students who complete conference papers or journal articles. The Graduate Division has initiated a series of workshops to help students learn how to write grant proposals, journal articles, and conference papers. Again, the QGE program supports departmental efforts in this area.

Career planning: The UCLA Career Center has recently established a program, staffed by a specialized counselor, to help graduate students apply for and attain a variety of jobs in and out of academia. This program was the subject of a Graduate Quarterly article in Spring 2003. In addition, the Graduate Division has sponsored workshops on obtaining academic positions.

From the highest-level administrators to the newest students in our graduate community, everyone can help graduate education at UCLA to recover from this crisis and flourish again.
Develop benchmarks to monitor success in graduate education.

As part of the 1997 Systemic Initiative for Strategic Planning for Graduate Education at UCLA, the Graduate Division defined eight areas to assess the quality of graduate education (see sidebar, page 9). Since 2000, institutional data related to these measures have been included in the eight-year review of graduate programs. Departments seeking QGE grants are asked to show how their proposed activities will address one or more of these criteria.

**FACING THE CRISIS: A PLAN OF ACTION**

While doomsday prophecies serve little constructive purpose, it is nevertheless important to again emphasize that the present situation places more than individual academic careers at risk. Graduate students are at the core of the ongoing enterprise at major universities like UCLA. As both students and teachers, they learn from senior faculty at the same time that many are teaching and mentoring undergraduates, participating in work that is an essential mechanism of a great university’s instructional mission. Through their research, graduate students carry forward the goals of celebrated scholars and enlarge the boundaries of knowledge in virtually every discipline. They help today’s university thrive; they become the universities of the future. The Commission has spoken quite eloquently on the consequences of a faltering graduate education enterprise for California’s economic, educational, and cultural well-being.

While we can hope that the present budget crisis is temporary, this paper has outlined structural issues that will continue to keep UCLA’s graduate education at a level that is inconsistent with our history of excellence and our aspirations. As all sectors of the campus will feel the impact of a decline in graduate education, they should all share in making plans to avert that outcome. Proactive efforts to enhance graduate education should include the following:

**Increase available funds.**

Using UC Berkeley fellowship expenditures as a benchmark, the Graduate Division estimates that an investment of $2 million to $2.5 million each year between now and 2010 will be required just to the repair the damage to our competitiveness resulting from decreasing student support. To meet the Commission’s goals of expanding graduate enrollment, more will be required. Graduate education must have a high priority when decisions are made about discretionary funds.

Campus development campaigns must also focus new efforts on establishing fellowship endowments and current use fundraising. A major development campaign which assigns development officers specifically to this task is essential.

**Encourage faculty to obtain training grants.**

The number of extramural training grants obtained by UCLA faculty has increased significantly in recent years, and many of these are interdisciplinary and thus include students from a number of departments. As one measure of increased success, the amount of matching funds required has increased four-fold, from about $250,000 to about $1 million, in the last six years.

The Graduate Division has been an active collaborator in this process, urging increased applications, providing support services and any needed institutional data, writing on behalf of the applicants, and committing the required matching funds. Agency evaluations indicate that UCLA proposals have received the maximum points awarded for institutional support.
A major issue arises out of this success. As more training grants are awarded to UCLA, the need for matching funds increases, and the capacity of the Graduate Division to meet this demand without additional resources on its own is being challenged.

Help students apply for extramural grants.

As campus funds for their support decrease, graduate students must be encouraged and supported in their efforts to seek extramural funding. Toward this end, the Graduate Division:

- maintains on online database of major extramural fellowships
- operates an e-mail list with timely information on opportunities
- provides faculty consultants to advise on proposals
- offers workshops on specific extramural programs

The Graduate Division also offers financial incentives to graduate students who obtain multi-year extramural fellowships. Successful applicants may choose between a supplement to the extramural stipend for every year of its duration or an additional year of funding equivalent to the stipend of a Chancellor’s Fellowship.

Some departments have been highly successful in increasing student support from extramural fellowship sources. The Department of Psychology, for example, has become a model of how to harness the energy of graduate students to help close funding gaps. Graduate students receive a $1,000 summer stipend on the condition that they prepare and submit an application for an extramural fellowship or grant. The Graduate Division links departments who have achieved these goals with others who are interested in developing similar initiatives.

CONCLUSION

The crisis is urgent. We cannot afford to delay.

Claudia Mitchell-Kernan
Vice Chancellor Graduate Studies
Dean, Graduate Division
Figure 5. EDUCATION MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Unemployment falls

Income rises with education

<HS  H.S. Grad  A.A.  Bachelor
$21,008  $29,224  $35,776  $51,740  $60,840  $78,509

2000 U.S. Average Earnings
2000 U.S. Average Unemployment


www.ucop.edu/services/innovation.pdf