Graduate education: A process towards policy initiatives

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ABSTRACT

How do you deliver dynamic distinctive graduate programs? To begin to answer this question, our university conducted an initial study using concepts derived from the change process of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). Data from roundtable discussions with graduate faculty, staff and administrators were qualitatively analyzed using two qualitative approaches: manual coding and coding via the computer software program NVivo. Analysis of the seven roundtable questions posed revealed four main categories for graduate programs to address, with several subcategories under each: 1) Reputation; 2) Programs; 3) Research/Scholarship; and 4) Resources. A surprise finding that threaded all categories but was not labeled as such was assessment. The importance of the findings mirrors the literature regarding appreciative inquiry and the value of graduate education. This study formed the basis of subsequent roundtables that informed *policy decisions* and supported the university's strategic plan.

Keywords: graduate education, qualitative research, appreciative inquiry, policy

INTRODUCTION

Graduate education's influence on economic growth and job skills is increasingly significant. Society has moved to a more knowledge-based economy, one that emphasizes critical thought and idea generation skills more than the ability to produce things (Council of Graduate Schools & Educational Testing Service [CGS & ETS], 2010). The number of jobs requiring a graduate degree is expected to increase to around 2.5 million by 2018, with those requiring a master's education estimated to be 18%, and those requiring a doctorate to be around 17% (CGS & ETS, 2010)).

Graduate students comprise three percent of the total number of students enrolled across the nation, at every level. In its report, the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) and Educational Testing Service (ETS) assert that graduate education, which includes master's and doctoral programs, is "a strategic national asset" and our ability as a nation to compete globally rests on whether the United States (U.S.) can produce the number of individuals with graduate degrees at a significant level (2010, letter). Individuals with graduate degrees possess a greater store of knowledge and are able to critically think in a way that contributes to solving large problems and making changes. Graduate education stimulates innovation (CGS & ETS , 2010). "Graduate education programs in particular are essential to the preparation of those who will innovate and lead in the global economy" (Council of Graduate Schools & Educational Testing Service, 2010, p. 41).

Although data are scarce regarding employers' expectations of a graduate-level employee, employers are looking for workers who display both knowledge-based and personal-based skills, technical and soft skills, and a professional viewpoint toward work (Council of Graduate Schools & Educational Testing Service, 2010).

Because graduate education is increasingly important, the quality of graduate programs becomes equally valuable. Our university set out to determine how best to prepare our students to compete in a global knowledge-based environment that would inform future policy development.

This article explains the study and process used, the findings, and how they relate to the literature. Our intent is that readers will use our research findings to further enhance their own graduate programs.

BACKGROUND

Our university is a mid-size private institution, located in the upper Midwest region of the United States. A newly updated strategic plan became the impetus and guiding direction for this internal pursuit. The strategic plan identifies four distinctive learning experiences for all students: intellectual engagement, ethical grounding, social responsibility, and global awareness. The goal of this strategic direction is to advance distinctive learning experiences that will distinguish the university and optimize the success of its students. A new Office of Graduate Studies was created to address the growing value of graduate education. One of the initial goals was determining a baseline and plan of action.

Instead of using a top-down model, the university chose a bottom-up approach to change that would establish the groundwork for future policy decisions regarding graduate education. This approach reflected the philosophy of the positive change process of Appreciative Inquiry (AI).

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) developed from the original work of Dr. David Cooperider at Case Western Reserve University as a positive change process for organizations. Appreciative Inquiry is an optimistic approach that focuses on "what gives life to human systems when they function at their best" (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010, p.27). It views change in organizations as relational, turning "command-and-control cultures into communities of discovery and cooperation" (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010, p. 29).

AI values the unique set of skills and contributions provided by individuals and groups. It focuses on the positive vision of what could be and helps to actualize this vision with passion and innovation. AI zeroes in on the organization's "most positive potential---its positive core" using the "collective wisdom" of the people within the organization (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010, p.30). The focus for change, considered the initial step, must be positive and strategically important to the organization.

Dr. Cooperider's AI process consists of four steps, known as cycles (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010):

1. Discovery—a joint endeavor to figure out a common vision that reflects what the individuals in the organization believe is the best of what the organization can become.
2. Dream—an enlivening exploration of future possibilities and what ifs.
3. Design—sets in motion the practical plan for "the ideal organization, or 'what should be'….statements that list the organization qualities they most desire" (p. 32).
4. Destiny—creating and sustaining the path forward by encouraging continuous learning, innovation and commitment by both individuals and leaders at the organization level.

AI can be applied to change in three ways: as a "change agenda," as a "form of engagement," and as an "inquiry strategy" (Figure 3, p. 41).Researchers used both the inquiry strategy and the form of engagement approaches as the whole system dialogue. This study addressed the first two steps of AI (Discovery and Dream).

STUDY METHODOLOGY (DISCOVERY AND DREAM)

A task force was created to lead efforts to investigate and better understand the graduate programs being offered. As a first step, the task force sought input from university faculty, staff, and administrators (Discovery) by asking a central question (Dream): What does a quality graduate education at this university look like? Put another way, what is the best way to deliver dynamic and distinctive graduate programs? The study received approval from the university's Institutional Review Board.

Faculty, administration, and staff were invited to participate in three roundtable sessions to discuss and consider what a quality graduate education should look like at the university. Seven questions were discussed over the three roundtable sessions:

1. What creative solutions or ideas can be develop at the university to assure the affordability of graduate education?
2. What criteria exemplify a quality graduate program?
3. What would make a graduate program a premier innovative program at the university?
4. How does the university promote and market distinctive graduate programs?
5. How should the university recognize quality achievements in graduate education?

6. How should the university support quality achievements in graduate education?
7. If the university could change one element to achieve a dynamic curriculum that drives quality achievements in graduate education, what would it be?

Roundtable Sessions

Invitations to participate and reminders were sent through campus email. Of the potential 200 faculty and staff members invited, 34 attended Session I, 39 attended Session II, and 31 attended Session III. Participants represented all of the colleges in the university as well as staff from offices focused on student services. The makeup of the attendees averaged 59% faculty, 24% administration, and 17% staff.

For each session, co-chairs planned the table discussions and facilitated the summary of the roundtable discussions. A table facilitator was assigned to each table and guided the timed discussions for each of the questions. A recorder was designated at each table to capture the essence of the discussion and ideas generated. Twenty to twenty-five minutes were reserved at the end of each session to share each table's information with the entire group, discussing and clarifying ideas as needed. During the discussion portion, notes were recorded on flipchart paper. The recorded notes from each table and flipcharts of the recap discussion were collected and these narrative responses were converted into spreadsheets. The spreadsheets were provided to the Graduate Dean and the Forum on Graduate Education task force members.

ANALYSIS

A decision was made to analyze the narrative session data using two qualitative approaches: manual coding and a qualitative coding computer software program (NVivo 9). One of the researchers used NVivo and three used manual coding processes. All four researchers completed the initial coding separately.

NVivo Process

NVivo (Richards, 1999), one of the two methods of coding utilized, is a software program that is designed to hold live research data, field notes, , and impressions from the researcher, linking them as the researcher moves through the project. . This process allows for rethinking, re-contextualizing, recoding, or coding-on new categories. NVivo has the ability to examine common terms being used or words that occur most often by running a Word Frequency Query. A Word Frequency Query analyzes the words or phrases from the sources and nodes. It provides the researcher the ability to find specific words that occur most frequently either quantifiably, or in a word cloud, tree map or cluster analysis design (Atkinson Tovar, 2002). The Word Frequency Query analysis revealed an unexpected result which will be discussed in the Findings.

Manual Coding

The authors who coded manually read through the information several times and identified keywords and phrases, which were then categorized and reduced through mapping into similar concepts. This technique mirrors those found in qualitative analysis sources (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Analysis Process

Using both processes, the researchers met to collate and review findings, clarify issues, and address concerns. The responses to each question from all of the roundtable sessions were reviewed multiple times, coded into multiple categories, and then recoded into identifying themes and patterns. The process took place in three phases:
- Phase I—Triangulated categories identified
- Phase II—Categories condensed and re-categorized
- Phase III— Analysis finalized and report created.

The process incorporated member checking and continued iteration to triangulate the data. The iterative and collaborative approach to analysis helped reduce the number of categories from 12 to 4. In comparing and contrasting the two approaches to data analysis, the researchers believe the traditional manual process is complementary to the NVivo process. However the Word Frequency Query revealed an unexpected data result with regard to one finding: assessment.

FINDINGS

Interim analysis initially identified the following categories: *funding, resources, value of education, delivery models, graduate assistants, building relationships, record keeping, growing enrollment, marketing, alumni, reputation of the faculty,* and *reputation of the university*. Final analysis condensed the data into four main categories:
1. Reputation
2. Programs
3. Research/Scholarship
4. Resources

These four categories included subcategories. Some themes threaded throughout all categories (e.g., faculty, assessment). Recommendations emerged that could inform future policy and strategic planning decisions.

Reputation

A program's reputation, and its ability to be recognized as providing a quality education, relies on a high-quality faculty and the connections and experiences it offers to students, This, in turn, produces high-quality outcomes and scholarship. The category of reputation includes information on the value of education, accreditation, publications, and marketing, along with networking and partnerships. Additional detail on each of these components is offered below.

Value of education

Learning real skills that students could apply in their fields was identified as an important component of a quality graduate program. Learning experiences that engage students with faculty as well as graduate program partnerships with other universities and service-learning opportunities were also mentioned as indicators of an excellent graduate education. Alumni were important as successful leaders in their fields, role models, and mentors. The cost of education was mentioned as connected to an institution's reputation. Tuition discounts for particular

groups such as cohorts and alumni, were monitored or adjusted depending on trends in business, industry, demands for higher education, or as a competitive advantage over other universities. Textbook affordability and innovative purchase options were also discussed as aspects that contributed to the institution's value and reputation.

Accreditation

Graduate programs that met or exceeded state, national, and professional accreditation standards represented another mark of an institution with a great reputation. Program curricula should reflect such standards and prepare students for successful accomplishment of professional certifications in their chosen field.

Publications

The prominence of academic and professional publications, from both students and faculty, was considered to be an indication of graduate programs with a high reputation. Suggestions for creating and maintaining a scholarly community threaded across a few of the categories.

Marketing

An institution's reputation requires marketing its quality and value. To enhance marketing efforts, participants made several suggestions about:
- where to market, e.g., organizations/community, institutional affiliation markets, social media, and campus-wide regional and professional conferences
- what to market, e.g., student and alumni achievements, recognitions, and rewards, percentage of students pursuing terminal degrees beyond the program, stellar program attributes, alumni relationships, how a program compares to other programs (including online), the number of students receiving outside funding, and program research and presentations
- how to market, e.g., newsletters, developing our own magazine, using social media, market talking points for faculty to use, layering market strategies, and having individual graduate programs market themselves.

Suggested marketing ideas also included utilizing networking relationships and partnerships such as (a) bringing in speakers, (b) corporation/donor-named research projects or competitions, (c) using social media to showcase university expertise and highlight benefits for organizations considering sending employees to graduate programs, and (d) program sponsorships at events.

Networking and partnerships

A graduate program's reputation also hinges on the types and strengths of its networking capabilities and partnerships. Strong programs and institutions value and use networking and partnerships outside the institution. Participants' comments emphasized the importance of establishing relationships, hosting and sponsoring university events as well as sponsoring outside events, making connections, and being involved with the community. Networking/partnerships

mentioned by participants included: (a) community, professional and business organizations, (b) potential employers, (c) other colleges and universities, and (d) alumni.

Networking and partnerships cultivate relationships that promote quality experiences and appropriate job placements for students. Recommendations for student involvement within these connections and external relationships included having students who are working in organizations come to campus for summer programs, seeking community-service projects, extending graduate programs outside the university for the purposes of learning, leadership, participation and networking, and encouraging organizations sponsor research projects.

Assessing a program's reputation and strength of its networking might be reflected in:
- appropriate job placement of students
- connection with alumni
- community engagement
- how much learning takes place in the profession itself, specifically leadership experiences
- the program's use of and involvement with advisory boards and benefactors
- scholarship, research, and other project opportunities sponsored by outside organizations.

Additional assessment of the strength of these relationships include tracking student employability after graduation, soliciting employer/stakeholder feedback on what they look for in employees, and comparing the university programs' graduates with graduates of other programs; for instance, how well the program graduates meet employer needs, and the level of community engagement.

Faculty expertise and availability to the community and organizations for projects and research, such as organization-sponsored student or faculty-assisted projects, contribute to a program's reputation. One comment specifically recommended that faculty load be revised or reassigned to promote involvement in managing such projects, and the income from projects be considered as a "buy-out" of faculty time. Programs should include a budget line item that would cover hosting speakers, honors receptions, and sponsorship of events.

Programs

Programs that offer accreditation and certification options should be promoted. Anecdotally, even though *faculty* did not emerge as one of the four main categories, their involvement, commitment, and dedication to the university, programs, and students were evident throughout all four categories. One program issue mentioned, which did not fit into a program subcategory, was that graduate students are isolated and need a sense of community. It would be important, therefore, to create programs that incorporate this concept as another aspect of a quality graduate program. The category of programs included information on curriculum, course and program delivery models, interdisciplinary degrees, international study, and program review.

Curriculum

Faculty engagement to explore curriculum through interdisciplinary programs, community partners, and research outlined the desire to define learning outcomes through various methods. Nontraditional approaches to curriculum development were noted, which incorporate rigor, well-defined goals, rubrics, practicum opportunities, internships and community workplace service learning, portfolio evidence of work completed, capstone, and

scholarship. Skills to include in curriculums include leadership, communications, writing, and observational competencies to broaden students' global views. Additional ideas regarding curriculum development mentioned using successful programs as marketing strategies to attract quality graduate students and developing certifications or exams that can guarantee placement after graduation. Emphasis on attractive programs with specific professional talents based on the future of the practice will demonstrate programs that seek to meet and identify students' needs regarding their professional career choices.

Graduate program curriculums should look to develop the whole person. in addition to focusing on academic achievement. Strong research and practice skills foster a climate of quality graduate education. A balance of competencies between fulltime faculty (the academic researcher) and the adjunct practitioner can synergize the expertise of a particular subject area.

Delivery models

To support and enhance the development of cutting edge graduate curricula, delivery models need to offer flexible scheduling, accelerated courses, online options, methods to shorten course length, and tuition rate adjustment for day/evening/weekend options in order to encourage students to complete programs in a timely manner. Fast-track options (e.g., 4+1 programs) were mentioned as an option to encourage undergraduate students to enter the university's graduate programs. Expanding fast-track options would enhance both levels of degree programs by combining disciplinary needs as well as a continuing association with the university community. Enhancing delivery models are thought to attract strong applicants. Competency testing, prior learning assessments (PLAs), and the development of niche programs rather than more traditional programs are thought to meet the current needs of professional communities.

To achieve success, the university's graduate programs need to develop a stronger student-graduate faculty advisor system. Faculty and students should be required to meet in person to provide the personal attention and interest in the student's successful completion and career goals. Online options appear to be of interest to busy adult graduate students, so it is important for the university to incorporate the best feedback from human resources departments in the corporate world with regard to completely online degrees or partial online/blended options, as well as how many courses would seem appropriate within a specific degree program.

Interdisciplinary degrees

Movement toward developing more interdisciplinary degree programs needs to be encouraged and supported. This includes developing skills across programs and colleges.

International studies

Program design and development needs to consider global partnerships. Recruiting international students by networking with alumni and community partners may be enhanced with graduate assistant opportunities and graduate residency offerings.

Program review

Throughout the Curriculum subcategory, program review emerged as a central thread. Faculty with terminal degrees and adjunct faculty are critical for the success of any graduate program. Involving adjunct faculty in program review can enhance their commitment and dedication to the university's mission, thus minimizing the disconnect between adjunct faculty and the program outcomes. Consideration should be given to establishing quality growth development, which begins with consistencies in the admission process, tuition rates, comprehensive examinations, and capstones. Defined outcomes and outside evaluations from community partnerships can assist with measurable data and increase program quality. The need for new programs or program revisions should connect to the professional community with a systematic preparation approach that includes conducting a market analysis study to assure there is a need and optimizing the use of adjuncts who are current in their practice. An interesting suggestion made was to tie in the distinctiveness of the university's mission and focus with the student "mindfulness" of it into surveys during their program and post-graduation.

One aspect of program review suggested was to ask current students about their needs, concerns, and ideas. Creating a climate for scholarship, being proactive, and taking risks toward current trends can help create togetherness. This can be accomplished by benchmarking and raising the bar of accomplishment.

Students often see things differently, so measuring how they look at their professional responsibilities may enhance positive student growth within the program and increase graduation rates. Exit interview results and tracking student graduates can provide valuable information. Data collection on graduation transition rates for getting jobs after graduation, students who are accepted into Ph.D. programs, what employers are looking for in graduate students, what satisfied graduate students during the program, and highlighting successful careers may assist graduate programs in achieving distinction. This information could assist with determining which programs are effective and which should be eliminated.

Research/Scholarship

Quality graduate programs promote research and innovation. They provide the means for faculty and students to conduct research activities. The sought-after graduate skills require students to have a strong understanding of research methods in order to add knowledge to their field of study and address the inequities and injustices of the human condition, which are grounded in the university's mission and values. Distinctive programs also create standards for reading, evaluating, and producing research projects. Responses fell into two subcategories: 1) faculty/student opportunities; and 2) faculty/student support.

Faculty/student opportunities

Within the university, research opportunities to consider for both faculty members and graduate students should include:
- <u>Funding</u>—to allow research to be conducted and permit attendance and presentations at professional conferences.
- <u>Participation in university-wide scholarship presentations, professional conferences and other scholarly activities</u>—expand the annual university-wide event that provides

a venue for both students and faculty to display their scholarly activities (particularly the poster sessions), provide additional opportunities for research to be exhibited, consider ways for research to be tied to capstone projects, and provide opportunities for active student involvement in projects or studies that are potentially publishable.

- Assistantships—increase more opportunities for research assistants, graduate assistants, and teaching assistants. Implement a structure to add these positions to programs that do not currently have them. Develop a mentoring program for these assistants. Evaluate the effectiveness of the research assistant program as a way to attract more graduate students to the university.
- Culture—create a graduate culture that focuses more on research and innovation. Expand the dissertation defense process to encompass a broader faculty and student audience. Faculty should connect with other researchers on a personal level to enhance the spirit of association collegiality.
- Programs—establish real, rich, and rigorous opportunities to experience research within the curriculum. Ensure that students can use and apply statistics as well as complete data analysis to inform thinking. Consider adding an advanced statistics course for graduate studies. Include research projects throughout programs so students can tie them to capstone projects.
- Skills and Tools—Faculty should have research skills and practice expertise. Students should be able to use statistics and data analysis to inform thinking, which can be applied in the workforce.

Faculty/student support

Support is essential for effective and successful research efforts by both faculty and graduate students. The categories are similar to those listed in the Faculty/Student Opportunities section:

- Funding—Provide means for research to be conducted, allow faculty and students to attend and present at professional conferences, pay for professional dues, establish an externally supported fund to promote graduate student professionalism, and seek grants.
- University Scholarship Presentation Events/Professional Conferences / Publications—Expand the annual university-wide scholarship event. Roundtable participants suggested providing information/criteria on how winners at the annual university scholarship event are selected, if there is training for judges, and an explanation of the vetting process. They also stated that the annual university-wide scholarship event program book is an excellent resource.
- Assistantships—Expand the number of graduate assistantships available to permit faculty time for their own scholarly work, which is considered critical to the role of graduate faculty. Structure research work to involve graduate students.
- Programs—Add service learning internships that support research opportunities. Include statistical support for work on projects. Adjust the faculty load to permit faculty to conduct research.
- Skills and Tools—Quality graduate programs are known for scholarly participation. Software and support must be made available to everyone working on research projects.

Resources

Quality graduate programs require a system that specifically supports and maintains them at a superlative level of operation. Comments fell into three subcategories: 1) infrastructure; 2) alumni; and 3) funding.

Infrastructure

Within the university system, services that support graduate programs include high-quality and solid:

- academic resources, such as educational activities, technology, physical space, and facilities sufficient for student classes that also provide a venue large enough to provide and host public events
- library resources, information technology (IT) resources and support specifically, online support, data personalization along the lines of Amazon and Yahoo models, and good data systems that are able to collect, track, and analyze program assessment information (e.g., student progress, course evaluations, program outcomes, alumni surveys, and other program-level assessment data). Also needed are IT software capabilities that convert the information into a useful format for program and university decision makers
- financial support for students–affordability and the ability to benchmark tuition from other institutions for comparison
- career advancement--services specific to graduate student needs that enhance networking and training/professional development
- systems to support graduate student governance and supply graduate housing, as well as creating a "path" for students to outside resources, e.g., community, organizations, professional affiliations, and employers.

Support for faculty, including adjunct faculty, was identified as important. A premier graduate program is supported by recruiting a sufficient quantity of high-quality faculty who hold the appropriate terminal degrees. Faculty should feel honored, valued, and supported, with system resources to support retention. Providing time for faculty to engage fully with students on scholarly projects was suggested. Also mentioned was the ability of a graduate program support system to consider and address the impact of faculty in the classroom (short-term outcome) and the student skills and knowledge development necessary to sustain them in their professional careers (long-term outcome). Other suggestions included providing graduate faculty mentoring and training and establishing a professional learning community for faculty.

Specific issues with regard to program and faculty infrastructure support addressed the need for a lead faculty model, consolidating core services for graduate programs under a College of Graduate Studies, increased cooperation and collaboration between all colleges of the university, and addressing and resolving the "internal battles" that harm both students and the programs and university reputations. Graduate programs should also be developed, or geared, to enhance and support networking and contain strategies that are career-enhancing for faculty and students. Sufficient support for faculty and graduate assistant research should also be present, as mentioned in previous categories.

There were several comments regarding the importance of a high level of support for adjunct faculty. Suggestions addressed the provision of an "effective" orientation (that

specifically includes information on the syllabus and curriculum plan), the creation of programs that develop and integrate adjunct faculty into the university's culture, and the importance of being mindful that adjunct faculty may not be committed at the same intensity and level of passion as part-time and full-time faculty.

High-quality graduate programs have mechanisms that support graduate assistants (GAs) who assist in faculty research activities and their own research activities, and a process that matches them with the appropriate mentors and supervisors.

Alumni

The value and significance of alumni to a quality premier graduate program cannot be emphasized enough. Alumni, another thread, were viewed as a critically important resource in several categories. Their involvement in projects, mentoring, their connections, funding scholarships and fundraising efforts, and their marketing and outreach to others constituted a large potential opportunity for networking.

Alumni are also an important resource for assessing a program's value and quality through a systematic process that involves keeping track of alumni, asking them to evaluate how their graduate education made them stand out from their peers and how they differ in the workforce from graduates of other institutions, and supporting and enhancing the contributions of the alumni board with regard to graduate education.

Funding

Funding needs to be sufficient to support the infrastructure required to develop and maintain quality premier graduate programs, specifically, funding for the library, technology, human resources, the writing center, and grant support. Funding must be directed to graduate education programs and the specific needs of graduate students. Findings included:

- developing scholarships and fellowships funded by businesses, employers, and foundations
- developing a financial resource system focused on graduate students using administrative staff who help graduate students find loans, grants, and scholarships (such as aid counselors with expertise in graduate education)
- providing web support that links graduate students to helpful resources
- increasing the number of scholarships offered within the university (a co-op model to provide funding with experiential opportunities was mentioned).

Expanding support for grant funding was also important. Increasing the capabilities of the grants office to look for new funding sources that are specific to graduate education and increasing the staff to support the large (approximately 2000) number of graduate students at the university were described. The grants office should also look for government funding that is targeted to specific fields or programs in graduate education, such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) and aviation.

Quality graduate programs value and utilize graduate assistantships and fellowships. Recommendations included:

- increasing the number of these positions
- creating flexible options with regard to how graduate students assistants schedule their time (virtual rather than time-based, as it is now)

- including assistantship positions when creating new programs
- increasing the funding for assistantships and fellowships.

A suggestion was made to focus compensation efforts on tuition-reduction options. Additionally, increasing the number of assistantship positions would provide faculty opportunities to expand into roles that enhance program education (such as labs, tutoring, research assistants).

Funding and support to decrease faculty workload and burnout were important. For the university, with its religious heritage and mission, faculty tends to prioritize and align their responsibilities with the mission, which can lend itself to faculty overcommitting themselves. For a number of regular faculty, reducing their sense of responsibility and obligation to take on overload assignments ultimately decreases their time for scholarly pursuits that enhance their teaching and work as graduate faculty. An idea proposed to decrease burnout was for faculty to share the committee workload across all programs and colleges. Reducing faculty load to allow time to engage in scholarly activities and optimizing the use of adjuncts were also suggested.

ADDITIONAL FINIDINGS

An unexpected and interesting finding was revealed after the researcher utilizing NVivo conducted a Text Search Query and a Word Frequency Query to determine the most common words and phrases used by the participants. The word "assessment" was not found in any of the data after conducting both inquiries. The analysis raises an interesting question on why participants seemed to avoid using the actual word "assessment," yet included comments related to assessing, evaluating, and using data to identify premier graduate programs. This may be a topic for future inquiry.

Also threaded throughout the findings were the value and importance of faculty (both full-time and adjunct), graduate assistants, and alumni to premier graduate programs. These findings, scattered throughout the categories, will prove useful as the university continues to develop the infrastructure for assessing student learning outcomes (SLOs), developing and revising policies, and redesigning marketing strategies.

DISCUSSION AND SIGNIFICANCE

The value of graduate education requires administrators and faculty of higher learning institutions to examine whether their programs are meeting the needs of their current and future graduate students. Anecdotal information from our graduate admissions indicates students routinely investigate whether the graduate program(s) they are pursing will have a positive return on their investment. Questions they often ask admissions are: Will my graduate degree be valued in the market place? What makes your university and programs different from other universities? Such concerns need to be addressed thoroughly so students can make sound decisions based on reputation, programs, research/scholarship and resources associated with the university, with the ultimate goal of supporting student access, persistence, and success (Kranzow, 2011).

Process of Change

The literature supports the value of graduate education. According to a report published by the Urban Institute (cited in Braum, 2014), people who obtain an undergraduate college

degree do better in the labor market. Additionally, higher levels of education translate into higher levels of wage-earning potential, even at the current prices of a post-secondary/graduate education. Even though articles in the media highlight struggles of graduates in finding employment, it should not negate the long-term investment in higher education. Not all people who earn a college degree will find their investment pays off, nor is it guaranteed; however, evidence demonstrates earning potential has grown most in recent years for those with advanced degrees (Braum, 2014).

Change requires the ongoing assessment of current and potential future problems. Most change models used in academic settings are problem-centered, which are based on discovering what can be improved upon in attempting to address those problems (English, 2003).   If a graduate program focuses on the negatives, e.g., what it does not have, then change and improvement are more difficult (English, 2003).   Utilizing an alternative change process such as appreciative inquiry "takes attention away from problems and deficits and redirects attention to the best of what is" (Lander, 2000 p. 136). Therefore, rather than seeing our research category findings—reputation, programs, research scholarship and resources--as problems to be solved, the researchers used the inquiry strategy and engagement approaches of AI to think, see, and act toward the implementation in guiding policy formation of our graduate programs. Using Appreciative Inquiry offered an opportunity to examine what they were doing right. The roundtable discussions offered faculty, staff and administrators an environment to promote creativity and proactivity in discovering what a distinctive quality graduate education would look like at our institution.

There are many aspects that might contribute to the reputation of a university and its graduate programs. Adopting an appreciative inquiry approach to graduate education supports change for all programs, aligning them with the future goals of students, future employers, and the university. Educators need to focus on the "broad" value of education without teasing out individual aspects of every graduate program (Hammon, 1998). The recommendations that emerged from our findings, which include aspects of accreditation, student engagement, enhancing scholarship and continuing excellence in teaching and service are germane to all graduate programs across the university, and potentially other universities as well.

Value-added education

Accreditation

Accreditation enhances the reputation of an institution, ensuring students that the university and programs have been judged by a set of standards in key areas: faculty, student support services, finance and facilities, curricula and student learning outcomes (Walker, 2008). The significance of an accredited university is that it provides students with the faith that they will receive a quality education, support with federal financial aid, and that their degree is valued (CHEA, 2010).

Accreditation is one measure of valued education; the other is the mission and values of the university. Mission and value statements provide the framework of the university without necessarily providing the road map to achieve the mission and maintain the values set forth. Our findings suggest that the university community expects all members—faculty,student, staff and administrators—to examine and express their own values, listen respectfully and respond to the

opinions of others, and engage in community service. Integrating the mission qualities in graduate programs contributes to a valued-added education..

Curriculum

Accountability and application to real world problems are sought through value-based curriculum development. "A value based curriculum is one in which values are infused in courses through content, discussion and assessment. The definition is based on research defining character education, values education, virtues and universal moral principles" (Walker, 2008 p. 2).

A coordinated effort in value-based curriculum development requires thorough reinforcement throughout the student's education, since it is not always clear how concepts from other disciplines are relevant to the students' social justice and their future lives (Witkowsky, 2011). Students need to be engaged in their educational process, enabling them to reflect on a greater sense of justice and scholarship, which can occur in a variety of settings. Scholarship measures the student's ability to think, communicate, learn, and be published (Bowden, 2012).

Faculty

Excellence in teaching, service, and scholarship defines quality educators. "The university of the future prepares students for jobs that don't yet exist, to solve problems that aren't yet known, using technologies that have not yet been invented" (Witkowsky, 2011, p. 39). Faculty share in this desired outcome to develop productive citizens who represent a skilled, knowledgeable workforce, mirroring the report by CGS & ETS (2010). Frank Rhodes, Emeritus President of Cornell University (1998), wrote about the need for teachers to be great scholars, reward them for their creativity in teaching."We need to identify, support, and reward those who teach superbly. There is no antithesis between teaching and research. Great teachers can, in fact, be a form of synthesis and scholarship" (p. 11). Faculty should be encouraged to practice a balanced approach of community engagement scholarship as well as traditional research scholarship (Sobrero & Jayaratne, 2014).

Partnerships

To enhance partnerships and professional development within the community, graduate programs should be committed to building partnerships through service learning and teaching. Hudson Baker (2011) states that, "Service learning is built on the foundation of inquiry, continous learning, and discovery, which has been identified as the scholarhship of teaching and learning" (pp. 113-114). Earlier work by Eyler and Giles (1999) supports Hudson Baker's claim. Faculty are the central component in the process of experiential learning and identifing learning outcomes, with a focus on connecting the academic curriculum of a specific degree program to a service learning project. Through this process, graduate students develop a deeper understanding of relationship building and civic and social engagement between a partnership agency/organization using reflection, analysis, discussion and oral presentations. Service learning can provide the opportunity for graduate students to build relationships with community members, affording them valuable experiences and resources (Hudson Baker, 2011).

Learning environment

According to Lewison and Hawes (2007), it is important to consider specific populations of students when considering plans to retain and develop graduate student programs. For many students, it is about the "environment where they feel they can participate in higher education in ways that honor their life choices and existing commitments" (Kranzow, 2011, p. 23). Considerations on class size, grade point average, standardized test scores requirements, financial aid/stipends and course schedules will be assessed by potential students (Spellman, 2007). Furthermore, expanding recuitment to include diversity will enhance discourse and prepare graduates for a more global economy (Kranzow, 2011).

Policy implications

Major cornerstones of U.S. graduation education include having a pool of distinguished and well-known faculty, topnotch research facilities, and the resources supporting research and learning (libraries, laboratories, special equipment, etc.) (CGS & ETS, 2010). The CGS and ETS report on the future of graduate education recommends ideas that address removing barriers to completion of graduate degrees such as mentoring, research opportunities, increased alumni interaction, tuition support and stipends, preparing faculty for recruiting and mentoring, and academic service partnerships to finance such endeavors. Findings from our study are congruent with those of the CGS and ETS report.

Our data results reveal what our institution is doing well, along with positive recommendations about future policy considerations for graduate education. In summary, the literature supports our approach in seeking proactive responses from respondents who work in graduate education. The literature also supports many of the findings from our study. However, there is a lack of literature specifically addressing graduate education and what distinguishes one program over another. More information needs to be published with regard to graduate education, its value, and ideal models of quality graduate education.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

There are a number of ideas and suggestions in this report that can be used to create, develop, and redesign a premier quality graduate program. Institutional change needs to be endorsed and supported by the top administrators and communicated to university community. A strategic plan establishes institutional goals. It is up to the university community as a whole to to redefine the steps to emerging positive opportunities and design policies that address them. The roundtable discussions started this positive change process. Now it is a matter of instituting the ideas and recommendations created from this shared vision to establish policies and procedures that reflect the vision, enhance our existing graduate programs, and create outstanding distinctive graduate programs.

The next steps for the university have begun to address the who, what, where, and when for decision making and strategic planning, as well as deciding how prominent graduate education will be in the future of the university. The discovery and policy implementation process continues. Roundtable focus groups beyond this study continue each year, expanding upon the initial findings of the study, continuing the discovery process to include graduate students this year.

Policy changes from the University Graduate Affairs Committee incorporated this study's findings as well as those of subsequent graduate forum roundtables. Policy decisions thus far include:

- developing a Student Academic Conference Support Program
- establishing a research grant program
- creating Research Assistant opportunities for graduate students included in grant proposals
- approving Thesis Guidelines (Dissertation Guidelines are under current review)
- ensuring that all graduate programs have program-level student learning outcomes (PSLOs) that are linked with external standards and aligned with university-wide graduate student learning outcomes (GSLOs)
- approving a common definition, minimum standards, and institutional policies/procedures of a Master's Level Capstone Experience and Master's Thesis.

CONCLUSION

Graduate education has national and international importance. It is considered "a strategic national asset" (CGS & ETS, 2010). Graduate-level workers possess innovative and higher-order thinking skills needed in the current new knowledge-based economy (CGS & ETS, 2010).

The CGS and ETS report (2010) makes the following policy recommendations for moving toward the long-term strategy of strengthening and enhancing graduate education in the U.S:

1. Improve completion rates
2. Clarify career pathways
3. Prepare future faculty
4. Prepare future professionals
5. Establish and expand programs to identify talented undergraduate students. (p. 44)

Our university began its inquiry into distinctive quality graduate education with roundtable sessions in order to incorporate input from faculty, administration, and staff. Findings identified four main categories of premier quality graduate programs: reputation, programs, research/scholarship, and resources. These findings influenced the subsequent policies developed as the graduation programs across the universities evolve. They also address the concerns from the CGS and ETS report on the future of graduate education. Our journey aligns with the strategic plan of advancing student learning experiences, integrating intellectual engagement, ethical grounding, social responsibility, and global awareness. The discovery process continues. Readers may find the information useful in applying it to their own institution as a model of inquiry in graduate education design across inter-professional disciplines of study. Using the AI process to grow and change will incorporate and include the uniqueness of your institution in discovering, designing, and delivering the best outcomes.

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