

## The Graduate School at Princeton

*A statement by President Christopher L. Eisgruber and Provost David S. Lee*

July 7, 2016

The Task Force on the Future of the Graduate School has produced an important and thoughtful report containing strong recommendations to enhance Princeton's graduate programs and advance the University's teaching and research mission. We are grateful to the members of the task force for their careful self-study and thoughtful prioritization of recommendations. In this statement, we respond to the report, outline some steps the University will take in response to it, and identify areas that will need further consideration.

### **The Graduate School's role in Princeton's mission**

The task force rightly stated that the University's graduate programs are "intrinsic to the fundamental mission of the University." The centrality of the Graduate School to Princeton's teaching and research mission has been reaffirmed throughout the University's strategic planning process. The strategic framework adopted by the Board of Trustees on January 30, 2016, made that point emphatically:

*Graduate education is indispensable to Princeton's core teaching and research mission. Graduate students contribute to that mission in multiple ways. They are essential collaborators in faculty research projects (especially in the natural sciences, engineering, and some social sciences); they teach undergraduates in precepts and laboratories; and they play an increasingly large role in the residential life of the University. Most significantly, however, graduate students are important to the University because of their potential to be future leaders both within the academy, where Princeton's Graduate School is one of the world's premier sources of scholarly talent, and outside it. (Princeton University Strategic Framework, p. 12)*

The framework also revised the University's mission statement so that it now calls out Princeton's distinctive commitment to doctoral education alongside the University's special commitment to undergraduate education:

*Princeton University advances learning through scholarship, research, and teaching of unsurpassed quality, with an emphasis on undergraduate and doctoral education that is distinctive among the world's great universities, and with a pervasive commitment to serve the nation and the world.*

The strategic framework and the revised mission statement thus reinforce the task force's own observations about the need to sustain the quality of the University's graduate programs. Princeton starts from a strong foundation. As the task force correctly observed, the University's graduate programs are world class, and its departments compete effectively with the best institutions from around the globe.

Princeton must, however, aim to do even better. To execute its mission and achieve fully the excellence to which it aspires, Princeton must attract and support outstanding talent available from every group in our society. The Department of Molecular Biology and the Lewis-Sigler Institute for Integrative Genomics have done outstanding work in this regard, providing a model for how departments can simultaneously enhance the diversity and quality of their graduate programs. The University is now designing a high-profile pipeline program to increase the number of doctoral candidates from underrepresented groups. Departments from throughout the University will need to diversify their graduate cohorts by embracing the new pipeline program or seizing other opportunities like those successfully pursued by our biologists.

### **Sustaining and enhancing the excellence of the Graduate School**

The task force identified five strategic priorities to help advance Princeton's excellence as a research university. We consider each of them in turn. In light of the importance of graduate education to Princeton's mission, it is not surprising that other campus task forces, including those on the humanities, the natural sciences, engineering, and sponsored research, made recommendations consistent with those emerging from the Task Force on the Future of the Graduate School.

The task force's recommendations are:

1. *Enable growth in the number of graduate students in response to growth in faculty and to needs in specific scholarly disciplines.*

As the task force observed, Princeton's Graduate School is significantly smaller than graduate schools at peer institutions for two reasons. First, Princeton's mission includes a distinctive emphasis on doctoral education. Princeton has chosen not to create large professional schools. The vast majority of the University's graduate students are therefore doctoral candidates, and we offer only a small number of master's degree programs. Second, Princeton has fewer doctoral students per faculty member than do most of our peers.

The comparatively smaller size of Princeton's Graduate School reflects the University's emphasis on quality over quantity and its aspiration to maintain a human scale for its scholarly community even as fields of knowledge expand. While respecting the distinctive character and values of Princeton's graduate programs, the task force urged the University to allow graduate enrollments to grow along with the size of the faculty and in response to other specific programmatic needs.

Questions about enrollment growth are subject to review by the Board of Trustees. While deliberating about the University's strategic framework, the board received updates about the recommendations emerging from the task force studying the future of the Graduate School. The board dedicated "special attention" to the size of the Graduate School, and it acknowledged the force of the considerations brought forward by the task force. Its conclusions are outlined in the framework document:

*“...the University should expect to maintain graduate cohorts smaller (on a per faculty member basis) than at other universities, but that Princeton should expect incremental growth in the size of the graduate student body from two sources. First, the University will often need to add graduate students as it adds faculty members and expands into new areas of scholarship and research. This imperative will be especially strong in fields where graduate students are research collaborators. It will also exist in other fields, though the exact relationship may depend upon the strength of job markets, the availability of post-doctoral fellows, and other considerations. Second, the University may have to respond in some cases to specific competitive pressures affecting the number of graduate students per faculty member. The board reaffirmed that Princeton should make these adjustments selectively and strategically, and should not try to match ratios at peer institutions.”*  
(Princeton University Strategic Framework, p. 13)

2. *Address funding pressures across divisions. Specifically, for the sciences and engineering, respond to declines in sponsored research, and in the humanities and social sciences, respond to time-to-degree and placement pressures through creative sixth-year initiatives.*

Multiple campus task forces identified pressures on the funding of graduate students. These pressures are felt across all the divisions, yet for different reasons. As the Task Force on the Future of the Graduate School recognized, declining federal funding streams to support sponsored research place significant pressures on graduate students in the natural sciences and engineering. These pressures were also highlighted by the task forces on sponsored research, the natural sciences, and the School of Engineering and Applied Science, all of which developed complementary recommendations to enhance support for graduate students in response to pressures on sponsored research funding and the need to ensure that Princeton’s graduate students can train for careers in the fields that matter most to the academy and to the world.

The challenges faced by graduate students in the humanities and social sciences are different. In these fields, Princeton provides students with five years of funding that are not contingent on sponsored research grants. The five-year term has reflected both resource constraints and a desire to encourage students to complete their work as rapidly as possible. Unduly protracted doctoral programs are too common in higher education; they harm students and waste resources. Princeton rightly prides itself on having shorter time-to-degree averages than its peers. As the task force pointed out, however, even the best and most diligent students sometimes require more than five years to complete their training. Evolutions in the disciplines, which become ever more demanding in their complexity, are making this phenomenon more common. The concerns of the Task Force on the Future of the Graduate School are echoed in the report of the Task Force on the Future of the Humanities.

The Task Force on the Future of the Graduate School recognized that any extensions of funding in the humanities and social sciences must be consistent with Princeton's long-standing commitment to avoid unnecessary extensions to the length of its degree programs. Inefficient doctoral programs benefit neither students nor the University. The task force accordingly recommended that sixth-year funding be awarded only to students who are on track to complete their dissertations, and that it should be structured in a way that incentivizes timely degree completion and provides students with teaching, research, and professional development opportunities to enhance placement outcomes.

As was the case with its analysis of graduate school size, the task force's discussion of graduate school funding influenced the Board of Trustees as it drafted the University's strategic framework. The framework states that "Princeton must ... ensure that it offers stipends and other support that allow it to attract the best graduate students, and it must likewise ensure that those students have what they need to pursue their studies and other projects successfully after arriving at Princeton." In light of this conclusion and the recommendations in the task force report, we regard improvements to graduate student support as a high priority for the University.

The deans for research and the Graduate School have recommended, and we have endorsed, significant action to enhance graduate student support at Princeton. This spring, we made a commitment to allocate more than \$6 million annually to alleviate pressures on sponsored research funding in the natural sciences and engineering and to provide new support for sixth-year students in the humanities and social sciences who are making appropriate progress toward degrees (work to implement these initiatives has already begun, and we expect the first round of funding will be disbursed in 2017-18). These actions will use funds made available by the recent change to the University's spending policy and reserved for strategic priorities identified in the framework plan. They reflect judgments reached during the strategic planning process about the exceptional importance of the University's graduate programs to its future.

The new annual allocation addresses the most urgent funding priorities identified in the task force report. Ideally, the University will in the future be able to add to this support and thereby further leverage the external grants that are so essential to the vigor of our research enterprise. The most powerful and beneficial changes will depend upon philanthropy, such as the visionary gift of Professor of Chemistry Emeritus Edward Taylor, whose exceptionally generous donation to Princeton created fellowships for third-year students in chemistry. We will continue to seek gifts to support Princeton's graduate programs.

3. *Leverage our small size and residential community to provide all graduate students with an outstanding student experience.*

Princeton's engaged and intimate scholarly community is an important feature of its graduate-level educational programs. We appreciate the task force's attention to this element of graduate student experience. We agree with the task force that Princeton must seek to provide students in the social sciences and humanities with spaces associated with

their departments in which they can come together to work, collaborate, and exchange ideas. While students in the natural sciences and engineering often share office or lab space as part of a research group, students in the humanities and social sciences are frequently engaged in more individual scholarly pursuits. We are already working with the University's humanities and social science departments to identify suitable spaces, either in the departments or in associated libraries, that respond to this need.

The report mentions the possibility of a shared graduate student social space on campus that would supplement existing spaces such as the D-Bar and the Commons at the Lakeside graduate apartments. We have asked the University's campus planning team to keep this idea in mind and to identify locations that might be suitable for a future project. We are also investigating whether it would be prudent to create a "pilot project" to determine whether such a space would be viable and well used.

We are sensitive to the issues raised by the task force about graduate student housing. Housing in the Princeton area is often scarce or expensive, and proximity to campus enhances the scholarly experience of our students. The University administration will continue to explore relevant options for housing Princeton's graduate students as part of the ongoing campus planning process. Of course, the feasibility of providing additional housing depends on many factors, not least of which is its cost. The recently completed Lakeside apartment complex required more than \$50 million of University investment net of anticipated rental revenues (and not counting land value). Such investments trade off against other opportunities, including opportunities directly relevant to the University's graduate programs.

4. *Create a supportive climate and provide resources and professional development opportunities to enhance placement outcomes, both within and outside of the academy, for all graduate students.*

The University must provide graduate students with the support and resources they need to become future leaders both within and outside the academy. Dean of the Graduate School Emeritus William Russel made it an important priority to provide graduate students with enhanced professional development and placement support, and Dean Kulkarni has enthusiastically embraced this priority and worked to advance it. Some academic departments have developed innovative programs to provide students with valuable experiences and skills needed for placement success. In addition, Executive Director of Career Services Pulin Sanghvi has led important efforts to improve career development opportunities for graduate students.

We applaud these efforts, and we have asked Dean Kulkarni to continue building upon them. Any associated funding or staffing needs will be considered within the University's standard resource allocation processes.

5. *Continue to enhance the world-class academic experience.*

We agree with the task force that the University must ensure the continued excellence of its teaching and research programs, and that the Graduate School is critical to Princeton's ability to maintain its world-class excellence across all fields.

The task force report mentioned two specific initiatives that might serve to enhance the academic programs and experiences of graduate students. These proposals fall within the jurisdiction of the faculty and the academic departments to make curricular decisions, and we defer to them on these matters.

**Conclusion**

We are grateful to the members of the Task Force on the Future of the Graduate School for their report, which presents a compelling suite of recommendations to sustain and enhance the excellence of the University's graduate programs in the coming years.