

Graduate Student Services:
Current Resources and Recommendations for Future Growth

Executive Summary Report
Summer 2012

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I. Introduction

“The University prides itself on being an environment of teaching and learning that fosters the development in its students of those disciplined habits of mind, body, and spirit that characterize educated, skilled, and free human beings.”¹

This excerpt from the university’s mission statement sets a lofty goal for the formation of our students, one that some may say is impractical or impossible when applied to those pursuing advanced degrees. With the grueling demands graduate study places on one’s time, energy, and intellect, aspiring to the kind of balance in which the professional, personal, and communal aspects of one’s life reach perfect equilibrium would be sheer futility. However, treating students as anything other than human beings with recognized physical, emotional and spiritual needs is equally futile. In seeking to help our graduate students achieve some sense of balance, it may be useful therefore to adopt new imagery: walking a tightrope.

Much like the artist-athlete who steps onto the high-wire, our graduate students matriculate with a narrowly focused purpose coupled with great determination and skill. They will need to maintain stability throughout their journey in order to reach their goal. And they may need a safety net if they fall. The purpose of Graduate Student Services is to support students in finding and keeping that stability and, when necessary, to be that safety net. Whether in helping to form realistic expectations through orientation and mentoring programs, or establishing reliable channels of communication for referring students in crisis, the range of services that can support student success is vast.

In August 2011, the Division of Student Affairs appointed Mimi Beck to take on the part-time role of Program Manager, Graduate Student Services in order to determine how best to pursue growth in this area. Throughout a limited ten-month tenure, her job was to create an inventory of current services, catalogue areas of strength as well as opportunity; to analyze available survey data to ascertain students’ priorities; to identify reliable sources of research, best practices, and industry standards; and to conduct benchmarking with aspirational peers to investigate programs and services with a recognized history of success.

The amount of material collected is sizeable, and is largely comprised of internal documents created over the last decade. These documents are included as appendices, and referenced as appropriate in this executive summary, which is organized into three main sections: a description of the current landscape, an introduction to standards and practices at other institutions and across the industry, and recommendations for the future.

Rooted in the firm foundation of its institutional mission, informed by its history and current landscape, and inspired by the successful innovations of others, Notre Dame is poised to make meaningful strides in the area of Graduate Student Services. The purpose of this report is to provide guidance in setting priorities for future growth, and to be a voice of advocacy for an often under-represented and misunderstood population.

¹ <http://www.nd.edu/about/mission-statement>

II. Current Landscape at Notre Dame

Before prescribing necessary changes, it is important to describe the current landscape of Graduate Student Services at Notre Dame. To get an accurate picture, we'll look at the institution's recent history in addressing the needs of graduate students, reflect on a summary of current resources, and outline particular challenges and opportunities.

A Brief History²

Under the leadership of then Vice President, Rev. Mark Poorman, C.S.C., and coinciding with the promulgation of the 2003 Strategic Plan, the Division of Student Affairs began to look at the needs of graduate students and articulate specific goals for serving this population. The creation of a taskforce and administration of the first-ever comprehensive survey on Graduate Student Life provided important base-line data for future comparisons in both the student life and academic arenas.³ For Student Affairs, the survey results highlighted strengths in the areas of the Health Center, Counseling Services, International Student Services and Activities, and the university's athletic and recreational facilities. The issues found to be most in need of further attention included communication, orientation, opportunities for spiritual enrichment, social support and networking, availability of affordable health insurance (particularly for spouses and children), and a campus culture that does not adequately welcome or recognize the contributions of graduate students.⁴ Though Fr. Poorman appointed liaisons for graduate students in each department within student affairs to follow up on the survey results, no significant or lasting changes were enacted.

In 2007 the Taskforce for Catholic Character and Post-Baccalaureate Student Life was formed, and made twelve recommendations encompassing services, facilities, orientation, communications, programming, community-building, and ministry.⁵ Other than the addition of an In-Residence chaplain at FOG, no significant or lasting changes were enacted in response to the taskforce recommendations.

In 2010 the ImproveND Survey was conducted as part of a university-wide initiative. It provided greater specificity in some areas and omitted others, making it difficult to draw comparisons with the 2006 data. No substantial improvements were noted, however, in any of the student life areas of concern. To my knowledge, no specific action items or recommendations were developed following this survey, other than to distribute results to individual departments.

The most significant movement in the last two years has been an increased focus on the needs of graduate students by entities outside of or in partnership with Student Affairs. Members of the University Committee on Women, the Life Initiatives Office of the Institute for Church Life, the Advanced Studies Committee of the Academic Council, and the Graduate School have brought their influence and expertise to bear on issues of family-friendly policies, resources for pregnant and parenting students, quality of life concerns, housing, and the availability of various services. The engagement of such a diverse cross-section of institutional interests has been the catalyst needed to ignite fruitful discussion and, more importantly, to inspire meaningful action. In particular, Greg Sterling, Dean of the Graduate School and Rev. Tom Doyle, C.S.C., Vice President of Student Affairs, deserve credit for imagining a symbiotic

² See Appendix A for a more complete timeline.

³ See Appendix B for the recommendations of the Graduate School in response to the 2006 survey.

⁴ See Appendix C for the recommendations of Student Affairs in response to the 2006 survey.

⁵ See Appendix D for the complete list of recommendations from this taskforce.

relationship between academic services and student life that has great potential to support student success in the comprehensive and holistic manner hoped for in our mission.

This brief history paints a portrait of honest interest, good intentions, sporadic improvements, and increased awareness. What it lacks, however, is a comprehensive and strategic focus as well as permanent resources and structures for lasting change and on-going growth.

Current Programs, Services, and Resources

Throughout the Fall of 2011 meetings were held with directors, administrators, staff members, and student leaders across campus. These meetings affirmed the competence and commitment of the Notre Dame community in serving students, but also revealed potential blind-spots. Through these discussions, a picture emerged of what a given office's interaction with graduate students looked like.⁶ Did graduate students seek assistance? Were any services targeted directly and intently at graduate students? What were the concerns or needs identified, and what if any roadblocks prevented those from being addressed? And finally, what were the most promising areas of future pursuit?

Most offices had some programs and services available to graduate students, but saw varying levels of participation. Examples include the Writing Center, which offers workshops and tutoring, and Campus Ministry, which provides inter-faith prayer spaces, opportunities for spiritual direction, and silent retreats, among other things. Factors that influence participation include ineffective communication, the difficulty of designing programs that appeal to and address the needs of such a diverse audience, and convincing graduate students that it is worth their time amidst real and perceived pressures not to engage in any activity beyond the classroom, library, or lab.

The degree to which each office tailored itself to graduate student needs depended largely on the type of service they provided as well as the priorities that had been set by themselves or mandated by others. For example, University Health Services and the University Counseling Center treat any eligible student equally, regardless of whether they are graduate or undergraduate. Conversely, the Office of Alcohol and Drug Education and the Gender Relations Center made conscious decisions to focus their outreach on undergraduate students only, figuring in so doing they could make a larger impact with limited resources.

The Career Center is by far the best example of serving graduate student needs, and not by accident – the current structure was enacted in direct response to survey data in which students expressed a desire for better resources for non-academic job placement. Ann Amico Moran was hired specifically to assist graduate students, and is sensitive and responsive to the unique challenges they face. The Career Center offers resume and CV reviews, one-on-one career counseling, career fairs, and programs such as mock interviews, etiquette dinners, and networking opportunities all tailored specifically to graduate students. Additionally, Ann works diligently to increase faculty engagement and improve employer-relations with the aim of positioning graduate students for maximum success.

The flourishing of the Career Center's efforts for graduate students can be attributed to many things: the tireless work of Ann Amico Moran, the support she gets from colleagues in the Career Center and Student Affairs, the hand-and-glove fit between identified needs and tailor-made services, and the strong partnerships developed through the Graduate School Professional Development Team, of which Ann is a member. This team draws on the expertise of a broad and multi-disciplinary group of leaders from across campus who serve to develop the

⁶ See Appendix E for a list of all meetings and complete notes.

professional skills and experiences of graduate students in the areas of teaching, ethics, research, and career. It is a strong model of a simple structure to promote successful collaboration for a common goal.

The on-campus residential facilities for graduate and professional students - University Village and Cripe Street apartments for married students, and Fischer O'Hara-Grace for single students - provide wonderful examples of community-building, effective communication, creative programming, service referrals, and when necessary, crisis intervention. And in their very nature, they promote interaction across disciplines and among a diversity of cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. Though only 15% of graduate students live on campus, these communities and their staffs can inspire best practices to be replicated and modified for the larger graduate population.

Among the campus offices and organizations serving graduate students, the Graduate Student Union has the greatest potential to provide advocacy, resources, programming and communication. As a representative body consisting of students from every academic program, it has the broadest reach of any organization, and is unified in its goals of improving the quality of life and the quality of graduate education for all Notre Dame graduate students. Their signature programs and services include Conference Travel Grants, the Graduate Research Symposium, and New Student Orientation. They provide various and creative opportunities for social networking, professional development, and charitable giving and service. Additionally, their members sit on university advisory committees on health care, technology, library services, and parking appeals, providing perspective and avenues for advocacy in multiple and diverse settings.

Challenges and Opportunities

Just as our image of balance must be adjusted for graduate students, so must most of the planning, delivery, and communication of services. This is because the graduate student population is so different, diverse, and diffuse when compared to undergrads. Demographics on every measurable scale – gender, race, religion, nationality, age, and marital status - differ greatly from the undergraduate population. Creating programs that address the concerns and capture the interest of so varied a group can be quite challenging. The majority live off-campus, and spend most of their on-campus time in relative isolation in labs and classrooms spread throughout dozens of buildings across the university. The resultant lack of communal living, dining, and gathering space poses difficulties in nurturing a sense of community and creating meaningful connections that support healthy interaction.

Notre Dame's institutional identity – its rich history, traditions, and culture – can pose inadvertent challenges when serving the graduate population. It does so by engendering a definition of the “student experience” that is narrowly focused on a predominantly Catholic, residential, undergraduate model. Graduate students, whose experiences do not resonate with this limited definition, do not feel valued by or connected to the institution. In the 2006 survey, students associated this with being treated as “second-class citizens.” This marginalization of graduate students at large is felt even more keenly among certain vulnerable populations, including married students, students with children, international students, and those from underrepresented groups, whose experiences stray even farther from the perceived “norm.”

In both survey data and throughout the series of meetings, ineffective communication was a universally expressed concern. The challenges listed above contribute to the difficulty in communicating efficiently and effectively. The audience is wildly diverse, does not have access to the most common methods of advertising (posters in residence halls and table tents in dining halls), and has been conditioned to expect they are not welcome. In a report to the

Advanced Studies Committee, GSU presented the results of several focus group discussions indicating that the lack of marketing directly to graduate students is a key factor in deterring participation. Unless an event or program explicitly states that graduate students are the target audience, or at the very least a welcome subset, graduate students assume they are not invited.

This could be a mere annoyance when considering inclusion in social events, but is a real problem when students assume that vital services are not intended for them. A disturbing indicator of this attitude is demonstrated in the responses given to question 55 in the 2006 survey, which asks students to rate their comfort in approaching various Student Affairs offices and administrators if they needed help of some kind. University Health Services topped the list at only 38% of students feeling comfortable approaching this department for assistance. Discouragingly, the numbers go down from there. While it is reasonable to hope that students have access to additional sources of support, as the Student Affairs executive summary states, "it is important that student service departments be perceived by graduate and professional students as being relevant and approachable resources."⁷

Resources - or more accurately the lack thereof - present another huge challenge to graduate student life. Many offices, including the Writing Center, the Counseling Center, Campus Ministry, the Gender Relations Center, the Office of Alcohol and Drug Education, and the Housing Office, specifically stated limited staffing and funding resources as creating roadblocks to services. For example, the Writing Center is closed during the summer when many graduate students are feverishly working on major writing projects including conference presentations, articles for publication, and dissertations. The Director of Housing mentioned the scarce resources available for investing in renovation, improvements, or new construction. And as stated above, Gender Relations and OADE have simply opted out of offering dedicated services to graduate students due to funding concerns.

Two financial assistance resources readily available to undergraduate students, The Rector Fund and The Shirt Fund are either not offered to graduate students at all, have no reliable conduit for referrals, or have restrictions that do not reflect the unique needs of post-baccalaureate students. Money, however, is not the only limited resource. Institutional structures that support communication and collaboration, and training of all Student Affairs personnel on the graduate student experience are also needed.

Finally, a common concern expressed by many departments and offices was the mental health and stress levels of our graduate students. According to Susan Steibe-Pasalich, the Director of the University Counseling Center, graduate students seek psychiatric and counseling services in disproportionately high rates when compared to undergraduates, and generally present with more serious or complex needs requiring longer-term services. This puts a great deal of strain on the limited resources of the UCC, and can eventually result in increased cost to the student when outside referrals are necessary. Additionally, it does not address those students who may be struggling but are either ignorant of available resources or hesitant to seek help. This becomes particularly problematic when we lack means to provide assistance and intervention before situations reach crisis level. The Career Center, the Office of Residence Life, Student Activities, ISSA, the Behavioral Concerns Team, and of course the Counseling Center, all wish to see improvements in the ways we communicate services, facilitate referrals, provide programming, and encourage healthy behaviors.

To return to our metaphorical high-wire, the challenges, concerns, and needs expressed in this section may be translated very directly as the things that can cause our students to fall. Though Notre Dame's attrition rates are better than the national average, the most recent data

⁷ Dunn, Monahan, & Moss, *2006 Survey Executive Summary*, (2007), 4.

include 5-year averages up to 35%, depending on the discipline.⁸ The yearly and departmental totals vary greatly, but can be significantly higher for women, minorities, and international students. These percentages translate into just over 400 students in the last 5 years who left without completing the degree they started. That is indeed a challenge.

III. Current Industry Standards & Practices

The Student Affairs profession can trace its roots back over a century to the beginnings of student development and learning theory. But the growth of Graduate Student Affairs has a far shorter history. The pioneers in this younger and smaller niche wrote the first major monograph, *Student Services for the Changing Graduate Student Population*⁹ fewer than 20 years ago. Lisa Brandes, Assistant Dean of Student Affairs and Director of Graduate Student Life at Yale University, is the leading expert in the world of Graduate Student Affairs and is among those with the longest tenure in the field, having served at Yale for the last 17 years. Though academic research and learning theory is relatively limited, professionals such as Dr. Brandes in institutions of higher education across the country have been accumulating and sharing best practices, establishing industry standards, and creating networks for collaborative efforts among colleagues for many years.

The following sections present a summary of the most relevant research and resources that can guide and inform the university's efforts to improve and advance services for graduate students at Notre Dame. This includes a self-assessment guide published by the Council for the Advancement of Standards, principles of best practice and areas of greatest need identified by leading researchers, recommendations from the Ph.D. Completion Project, and the results of the 17-institution benchmarking efforts undertaken by Ms. Beck in her capacity as Program Manager, Graduate Student Services.

CAS Standards

The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education is a consortium of professional associations whose purpose is to encourage assessment through the development of standards, as well as self-help resources and guides. In 2007 leaders in graduate and professional student services collaborated with CAS to create standards and a self-assessment guide for Graduate and Professional Student Programs and Services. This extremely detailed guide for self-assessment outlines fourteen essential components and provides tools for measuring the effectiveness of each. The components cover a broad range of issues including Mission, Leadership, Ethics, Diversity, Technology, and on-going Assessment. To illustrate the comprehensive nature of this resource, here is the established standard for the Mission component:

The mission of Graduate and Professional Student Programs and Services (GPSPS) is to promote academic, personal, and professional growth and development of students enrolled in graduate and professional schools. In support of successful degree completion and achievement of other academic goals, GPSPS must ensure student access to programs and services that address students' needs, provide opportunities for involvement and engagement with students, staff, and faculty members, and facilitate community building

⁸ See Appendix F for full attrition data by year, college, and underrepresented population.

⁹ Logan & Isaac, (1995).

and social integration across disciplines. Central to this mission is the necessity to connect students with appropriate resources through collaboration with campus partners and experts when services are not centrally provided by a GPSPS office.

GPSPS must develop, disseminate, implement, and regularly review their mission. Mission statements must be consistent with the mission of the institution and with professional standards. GPSPS in higher education must enhance overall educational experiences by incorporating student learning and development outcomes in their mission.¹⁰

In this single standard, we see several of the issues we face – providing access to services tailored to graduate students’ specific needs, creating opportunities for meaningful engagement and community building, and facilitating referrals when needed. Though Graduate Student Services at Notre Dame is in its infancy, this document provides a high bar against which to measure our future growth and success.

Best Practices

As the field of Graduate Student Affairs grew under the ground-breaking leadership of professionals at Harvard, Cornell, Yale, and Princeton, the second major monograph, “*Supporting Graduate and Professional Students: The Role of Student Affairs*”¹¹ was published in 2006. In a collection of seven essays, this volume identifies six needs of graduate and professional students that can be addressed specifically by student affairs professionals:

1. Safe or neutral spaces beyond their department or discipline
2. Services designed specifically for graduate and professional students
3. Opportunities to interact across disciplines
4. Community building
5. Academic and student affairs partnerships
6. Assessment¹²

It also establishes seven principles for best practice in graduate student engagement:

1. Continually strives to eradicate marginalization among underrepresented populations
2. Provides meaningful orientation to the institution beyond academic units
3. Invests resources in communication with graduate and professional students
4. Facilitates opportunities for community building and multicultural interaction across academic units
5. Partners with academic schools and departments to create engagement plans for students
6. Enhances career and professional development
7. Systematically assesses satisfaction, needs, and outcomes.¹³

Once again, the research supports what our experience tells us: the importance of services tailored to graduate students’ needs, partnerships between academic services and student affairs, and effective tools for communication.

¹⁰ Council for the Advancement of Standards, (2007).

¹¹ Guentzel & Nesheim, (2006).

¹² ---, 102-103.

¹³ ---, 52-54.

The Ph.D. Completion Project was a 7-year longitudinal study hosted by the Council for Graduate Schools focusing on the elements of graduate education that affect persistence, attrition, and completion rates. This involved multiple phases and over 50 universities, and resulted in policy and practice recommendations to promote student success. While the majority of the recommendations concern issues best addressed within academic units, several areas fall clearly within the purview of Graduate Student Services. These include:

- Peer Mentoring Programs
- Comprehensive Orientation to Graduate Studies, the Department, and the Institution
- Campus-wide Support Networks and Services, Community Building, and Engagement
- Writing & Dissertation Support Groups¹⁴

Additionally, Student Affairs can serve as a valuable partner with academic units on issues affecting communication, recruitment, professional development, and placement.

Benchmarking

If our goal is to help our graduate students keep their footing on the tightrope journey known as degree completion, then learning from those who have mastered that balancing act is key. Throughout the Spring of 2012 Mimi Beck gathered information through email correspondence and phone calls with colleagues at 17 peer institutions. Their generosity in sharing the wealth of their experience and knowledge; their enthusiasm and creativity in forging new pathways; their honesty in describing their pitfalls and challenges; these things and more provided inspiring and enlightening insights, and framed the industry research with context and lived experience.

Unsurprisingly, much of what was learned resonated clearly with many of the issues we have already encountered as well as with the documented research on best practices, industry standards, and policy recommendations listed above. This confluence of the Notre Dame experience with the growth patterns of our aspirational peers and the standard practices in the field is very reassuring, as it positions us for positive future development.

The institutions were chosen through a consultative process with Dean Sterling, who wished to focus on AAU Privates, and Fr. Tom Doyle, who wished to include a selection of Catholic colleges and universities. Additionally, institutions with a known record of success in providing graduate student services were included. The list was whittled down to 19, then later to 17 when two universities declined invitations to participate. With the assistance of Andrea Swanagan, basic institutional data and program information was gathered and organized. This included the type of institution, the number and percentage of post-baccalaureate students, the number and type of academic programs offered, and the names and titles of key personnel in the Graduate School, Student Affairs, and Graduate Student Services.

Surprisingly, few of these descriptive factors seemed to influenced the basic needs identified, the challenges faced, or the ultimate goals pursued. Furthermore, whether services were housed in Student Affairs or the Graduate School (or analogous structures) seemed to make little difference. The determinative factors in the scope and success of graduate student services reside in the human and capital resources dedicated to them, the strategic use of those resources to leverage maximum benefits across common interests but diverse

¹⁴ Council of Graduate Schools, *Policies and Practices to Promote Student Success*, (2010).

constituents, and the forging of multiple partnerships within the academic and student affairs realms.

The conversations with each university representative provided substantial information and valuable insights.¹⁵ However, in the interest of brevity, only two models are highlighted below - that of Princeton and Northwestern. These are representative of the successful intersection between research and practice, and show particular promise in guiding our future growth. Following these two examples is a summary of other notable services and creative solutions from several other institutions Notre Dame may wish to emulate.

Princeton

The Office of Graduate Student Life at Princeton University reports to the Dean of the Graduate School and consists of 6 full-time staff and 6 part-time graduate Community Associates. Additionally, there are residential staff who assist with programming and services for the more than 70% of the graduate student body that lives in campus housing. The Graduate College is both a residential facility for on-campus graduate student housing, and the center for graduate student life as a whole. The staffing model as well as the physical structure facilitates community building, interaction across disciplines, and student leadership and engagement.

Princeton provides a great picture of growth and evolution across almost 20 years. Starting with just one person, adding some residential staff, and then establishing an Office of Graduate Student Life which continues to expand with the addition of both professional and student staff, it is a model sustained by institutional investment, guided by yearly assessment and enriched by the creative energies of empowered student leaders. Community Associates are paid a modest stipend to plan and implement a vast calendar of programs in 7 categories: social, cultural, academic, recreation, community service, local events, and family activities. The Graduate Student Government, similar to our GSU, provides advocacy, funding, and organizational support.

In seeking to address and improve the quality of life for graduate students, Lisa Shreyer, the Assistant Dean for Student Life, pointed out that you have to begin the conversation with how you view graduate students on your campus. Are they simply underpaid staff/faculty? Or are they an integral part of the success of the institution - attracting top faculty, providing excellence in teaching for undergrads, staying connected through alumni giving and volunteering. She mentioned that they have several years' worth of data that supports their success through increased alumni involvement and increased giving.

One of the key elements of the services they provide is a comprehensive orientation for new graduate students.¹⁶ It is a day-long event, plus a calendar of related events throughout the first 2 weeks of class. It includes breakfast and lunch, a Presidential address, a grad info fair, a student-faculty Q&A panel, multiple break-out sessions, walking tours, and an evening social followed by clubbing. This itinerary was revised several years ago with the intention of creating a more formal welcome and introduction to the Princeton community, and of allowing students to become more connected to each other and the institution. They added \$25K to the budget, collaborated with academic departments and student organizations, and made it mandatory for all new students.

¹⁵ See Appendix G for the full listing of universities and notes.

¹⁶ See Appendix H for the full itinerary of this and several other orientation programs.

Northwestern

The Dean of the Graduate School and Associate Provost of Graduate Education at Northwestern presides over an office that is equal parts academic services and graduate student life. Much like Notre Dame, the Graduate School partners with individual colleges and graduate programs to provide support for admissions, recruitment, financial aid, communication, assessment, technology, grant-writing assistance, and post-doctoral affairs. But it also employs 6 full time staff and administrators directly responsible for graduate student life encompassing Multicultural Affairs and Student Services.

Though not a large space, the Graduate Student Commons is a dedicated facility for study, social space, and graduate student events. It is located adjacent to one of many campus cafes, which can also be used for larger gatherings. Three residence halls provide housing for less than 10% of the graduate population, but Student Affairs maintains an off-campus website to assist students in finding housing, and has a listserv to connect and communicate with off-campus students.

Orientation for new students is a full-day event with break-out workshops on topics including financial planning, teaching, grant-writing, surviving grad school, and IT resources. The Graduate School helps advise and support 9 major graduate student associations, 6 of which comprise the Graduate Leadership Council, the primary representative body which focuses almost entirely on advocacy for graduate students throughout the institution.

There are several remarkable aspects of the Graduate School at Northwestern, including its commitment to assessment. There are two full-time staff in the graduate school dedicated to metrics of all kinds, and a strong culture of assessment permeates at the program, department, and institutional level. Furthermore, they administer an annual graduate student life survey which helps guide planning, priorities, and funding every year.

Similar to Princeton, Northwestern empowers students to plan and implement programs that increase student engagement and build community, but they use a very different model. Based largely on MIT's graduate student life grants, the Community Building Grants program allows any graduate student to propose activities and apply for funding. The guidelines are minimal, and focus on fostering social interaction across departments, integrating academic and social aspects of graduate student life, improving communication, encouraging creative expression, and above all – building community. Funding varies year to year depending on the number and needs of proposed activities, but the Graduate School strives to fund as many initiatives as possible.

Examples of the type of activities approved in the past include a 5K/10K Walk/Run and Brunch, Northwestern Graduate Parent Association (NU Mamas), a Co-Sponsored Ski Trip with BGSA, the Engineering and Science Art Fair, and a Chinese Spring Festival. In addition, the Graduate School itself hosts numerous events such as TGS Night Out, Monthly Meetings with the Dean, and TGS Family Days Out.

Finally, Northwestern publishes a “Graduate Education Expectations”¹⁷ document which clearly delineates the responsibilities and expectations of students, faculty, and administrators. Reading through this document, it may seem intuitive and unnecessary. But transparency in communication, realistic expectations established from the very beginning of studies, concise summaries of key procedures and timelines, and a statement supporting holistic development can all go a long way to de-mystify the graduate experience and establish an environment of mutual trust.

¹⁷ See Appendix I for the text of the expectations statements from Northwestern and Rice.

Other Highlights

Though an in-depth exposition on all 17 schools would be impractical, several unique programs and services deserve a quick mention. Boston College hosts a lunch for new students with their subject librarians as part of orientation. Duke provides an online pre-orientation for new international students to facilitate smooth transitions. Duke, Maryland, and many other schools host a Graduate Student Appreciation Week. The University of Chicago, and its relatively new Graduate Student Affairs Office (established 3 years ago), emphasizes the importance of courage and creativity in trying lots of stuff to see what sticks. Assessment is an obvious partner to this bold approach. Chicago and the University of Pennsylvania have both enjoyed great yet unexpected success in creating a sense of belonging and community around a recognizable logo for graduate students. Their “Ask the Gargoyle,” and “Ask the Gnome,” online discussion tools provide useful information while simultaneously creating a common identity.

Anita Mastroieni at Penn gave a memorable piece of advice: no yoga! By way of illustrating a key principle, she described how she said no to yoga classes in the Graduate Student Center because that is a service that is easily accessible to students elsewhere, and she would not be a responsible steward of her resources if she duplicated services in that manner. Lisa Brandes at Yale, a true pioneer in the field of Graduate Student Affairs, also gave some great advice that doesn't require a multi-million dollar donation from Mr. McDougal¹⁸ to follow. She recommended when starting off, spend the first five years focusing only on building community and partnerships.

Finally, the Associate Dean of Student Life at Brown administers an emergency assistance fund for graduate students who find themselves in unexpected and financially challenging circumstances. He gave the example of a student whose apartment caught fire, destroying all his clothing, furniture, books, etc. A modest amount of funding made little difference to the institution but a monumental difference in the life of the student.

¹⁸ Mr. McDougal is the generous benefactor whose donation built the Graduate Student Center at Yale and endowed its staffing and programs.

IV. Recommendations

The narrative thus far has created a portrait of what we have, what we lack, what standards prescribe, and how our peers embody the success we hope to share. What remains is to suggest priorities and make recommendations for action. Each item on the following list is rooted in best practices, supported by research, or has a proven history of success.

- Create and sustain partnerships with academic units, student groups, and student affairs professionals to identify and address needs, tailor services, share best practices, and facilitate referrals.
- Establish communication tools, methods and standards that effectively reach the diverse graduate student population and affirm graduate student contributions to the university community.
- Revise new student orientation to facilitate transition issues, capitalize on the opportunity to welcome and engage students from their earliest moments on campus, and provide timely, accurate and consistent messages about expectations and resources for graduate education.
- Establish a peer mentoring program to assist students in acclimating to graduate studies and promote further socialization to their discipline.
- On the advice of the leading expert in the field, focus on community building across disciplines and within departments, as well as outreach to marginalized/vulnerable populations.
- Allocate permanent resources for the growth and development of staffing, facilities, services and programs.
- Investigate ways to make health insurance more affordable for students and their dependents.
- Provide training for all student affairs personnel to create awareness of and responsiveness to the differing needs and concerns of graduate students.
- Engage in meaningful and on-going assessment at the program, department, division, and institutional levels, including the reiteration of a comprehensive survey of graduate student life.
- Utilizing CAS Standards as well as the Student Affairs and University Strategic Plans, develop a mission statement that is resonant with institutional values to guide priorities and future growth.
- In concert with the Student Affairs Strategic Plan, and in consultation with the Associate Vice President of Residential Life, the Office of Housing, and the Rectors of the graduate residences, establish realistic and attainable goals for graduate and family housing, develop resources for assisting off-campus students, and create non-residential space dedicated for graduate student programming and services.

V. Conclusion

The University of Notre Dame has always been grounded in an educational mission that recognizes the value of holistic development. In the words of Blessed Basil Moreau, founder of the Congregation of Holy Cross, “the mind will not be cultivated at the expense of the heart.”¹⁹ Throughout our history, this mission has been embodied most evidently in the exemplary education and experience provided to Notre Dame undergraduate students. The ultimate goal of Graduate Student Services is to assist the university in fulfilling its mission for all Notre Dame students.

In some instances, the services and structures to accomplish this are already in place - graduate students can serve as liturgical ministers and musicians, join a club sports team, eat lunch at the Huddle, and visit a counselor. But many barriers still exist. The absence of effective communication efforts, the limited allocation of resources, and the lack of strategic focus have hindered our success, as has a failure to understand and address the unique demands of pursuing a post-baccalaureate degree.

As Notre Dame strives to advance its standing as a top research institution, the need to invest in the graduate educational experience grows ever more pressing. For we must first be a place of healing, unity, and enlightenment for our graduate students before we ask them to go forth to heal, unify, and enlighten the world.

¹⁹ Moreau, Circular Letter 36

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