

Structure and Functional Responsibilities of Graduate Schools: An Organizational Analysis

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The contemporary graduate 'school' is facing a number of significant challenges. In addition to the fundamental question of its role as a shared service provider, graduate education units are exploring ways that they can demonstrate a value-added component to the graduate school experience. These activities include offering graduate certificates about how to be a faculty member, how to best teach and mentor graduate students, and offering undergraduate courses on how to get into graduate school. The current study explored 84 graduate 'school' or equivalent unit organizational charts, noting major differences between those with research administration attached to them and those without such responsibilities. Findings also included the identification of small administrative staffs and growing innovation to serve graduate student needs, such as providing mental health services and food pantries.

Keywords: graduate schools, graduate education, organizational structure, Higher Education Institutions

INTRODUCTION

The world of graduate education is changing rapidly. Although there continue to be traditional, high-residency graduate programs complete with individually written doctoral theses, there are an ever-growing variety of programs, structures, and delivery modes that have become common. And these modifications to graduate programs are not only offered through emerging and online universities, but are the modes and structures implemented by some of the most elite universities in the United States.

Changes to graduate education have somewhat mirrored the changes that have rapidly become woven into society at large. Education, along with a wide variety of services, has become largely online friendly, and the requirements of traveling to participate in both formal and informal education have dissipated. Online education has become commonplace throughout all sectors of education, and although these programs were at one time considered experimental and perhaps less rigorous than their on-campus counter parts, they are now viewed with great similarity (Sasseen, 2021). Graduate education has also embraced online formats and modes of delivery, and the once experimental hybrid and low-residency options of

program delivery have similarly become commonplace. These trends are entirely consistent with so many other elements of society and reflect the reality that knowledge generation and distribution can be managed in an ever-increasing variety of formats.

Graduate education is also experiencing a dual curricular shift at an unprecedented pace. There was a slow evolution of the doctor of philosophy degree to include other professional fields, such as the doctor of education and the doctor of arts in teaching, but these occurred slowly and cautiously, first by select institutions and then embraced once they were legitimized by others. The current pace of change, however, is happening much faster and on many different fronts. First, there is a greater integration of multiple disciplines to form new degree programs and emphases, such as in data analytics or health care administration, where faculty from different programs come together to provide their expertise to new disciplines. Second, faculty are creating increasingly specialized programs and new areas of emphasis, perhaps to provide students a greater focus in their work. In the discipline of nursing, for example, there are degrees that offer specialized training such as the master of science in nursing education, the master of science in nursing, the doctor of philosophy in nursing as well as the doctor of nursing practice. Health fields that have grown as of late also include degrees such as the master of public health and the doctor of occupational therapy. Muhlenberg College, for example, recently launched a new masters degree program in medical leadership and the University of the Cumberland launched a new masters degree in addiction studies (Jaschik, 2022).

As graduate programs are evolving, their requirements are similarly evolving. Many graduate degrees, particularly professionally applied degree programs, no longer require a formal completed research project materialized as a doctoral thesis, and now require either a capstone research project, a group applied research project, a pre-registered research proposal, or even a professional portfolio of coursework learning (Anderson, Saunders, & Alexander, 2021). In addition to how these programs are offered, including as mentioned online, hybrid, and low-residency formats, these programs also require different mechanisms to determine entry. The Covid-19 pandemic was a driving force to eliminate several standardized tests for entry, and this trend has grown with many programs determining that they do not and should not require such an examination for entry. So as the process for entry and completion have changed so significantly, the forums that facilitate them must either similarly evolve or will have evolution forced upon them by the market-demands that have historically made use of their services.

To begin the conversation about what the structure, and possibly the continued relevance and need of a graduate school is, there must be an initial baseline of understanding about what graduate education units are undertaking and how they are organized. Therefore, the purpose for conducting the study was to develop a better understanding of the activities, and ultimately the relevance, of the contemporary graduate school structure in higher education. Historically these units served important record keeping and policy enforcement roles for graduate programs (Nichols, 1959), but technology and trends in responsibility centered management have resulted in a growing perception that these units are unnecessary.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Graduate schools emerged in American higher education approximately 100 years ago, although some academic units maintained their independence. Teachers colleges and graduate schools of business were often separate from other graduate programs, but throughout the 1900s, these units merged into a central office that recruited, processed, and maintained graduate records.

Historical Uses of the Graduate School

Historically graduate schools or divisions had several key responsibilities that defined their purpose and demonstrated their value to the institution (Murry & Miller, 2021). Typically, these included the complex record keeping of graduate student information and ultimately processing some form of audit to clear a student for a degree. Prior to the emergence of technology, this paper-based processing required a multitude of personnel to verify academic credentials, to process completed research projects and to simply keep track of a relatively small number of highly specialized students.

The second domain of graduate schools has historically related to the approval of a graduate curriculum, including both the specialized courses and programs of study required for a degree. In previous decades, with a unified approach to graduate curriculum, graduate schools would empanel a council to approve the rigor of a class and the appropriateness of a curriculum to award an advanced degree. In many colleges, this serious process would require a complete review of syllabi, readings, and even tests.

The third historical domain of graduate schools was the approval of which faculty held the appropriate credentials and qualifications to teach at the graduate level. This approval process has typically been through the graduate schools faculty council, with fellow professors reviewing the curriculum vitae and advanced degrees of others who would potentially teach at the graduate level. And, in order to assure that these faculty maintained their research productivity and interest, they were often approved for specific term lengths.

And the fourth historical area in which graduate schools functioned was research administration. Generally, faculty with strong research programs were those who received external funding, and as such, it made sense that the graduate school would provide the accounting and support for these grants.

Current Role of the Graduate School

Changing technology along with changing ideas about academic program independence have altered many of the functions and the primacy of graduate schools. Additionally, the complexities of research compliance have typically driven the separation of graduate divisions from their historical housing of research administration. The overarching result is that contemporary graduate schools, in addition to being an advocate for graduate education, serve administrative functions for an institution. As technology has enabled colleges and universities to be more efficient, there has been a decreasing reliance on graduate schools as facilitators of the graduate student experience. Additionally, technology has decreased the reliance on physical spaces to receive and store student information, meaning that the structural use of graduate schools as repositories of student information and documents has shifted.

One of the other major changes facing graduate schools has been their role in student recruitment. Although graduate schools do process applications and verify the academic credentials of new students, technology has enabled individual academic units, departments, and faculty members to efficiently recruit their students without having to rely on a specific graduate recruiting professional. Potential students are capable of accessing online information, forms, and have personal conversations with faculty members and department chairs without relying on a specific recruiter. Recruitment can still be an important function for graduate schools, but their centrality to the process has become lessened.

An area where graduate schools have become more prominent is in leading graduate diversity research (Dowe, 2020). In these instances, graduate schools occasionally provide funding, experiences, and other resources that aid in the recruitment of diverse graduate students. Dowe specifically reported on one institution's use of a mini-conference to bring under-represented minorities to campus for an intensive recruitment event that included discussions with diverse faculty, networking with current diverse students, and focused opportunities for discussions of financial support.

Historically, the evolution of the university included discussions about the academic preparation of faculty members, resulting in a clearly defined set of undergraduate and graduate faculty who had distinct and separate roles. This separation has changed as well, as regional accrediting bodies have established clear criteria for faculty members and there is less separation of faculty along these graduate and undergraduate lines. Despite this, graduate schools continue to claim and establish part of their value in the vetting of who is entitled to teach at the graduate level, anointing some faculty as "graduate faculty." Institutions no longer define 'undergraduate faculty,' making the designation with the 'graduate' modifier somewhat less significant than it was in the middle of the 20th century.

Changing Roles

The fundamental roles of graduate schools and graduate education have not changed dramatically. They continue to function as administrative units designed to house information on the curriculum, students and faculty, and to serve as the fiscal agent for certain financial aid programs and packages, including graduate

assistantships. Changes in the structure and expectation of the academy, however, have changed the implementation of many of these functions, and one dramatic change has been the dissolution of what has traditionally been defined as a “college,” and instead, these offices have been reconfigured as entirely administrative functions under academic leadership (e.g., the creation of a vice provost for graduate education).

As higher education institutions become increasingly sophisticated and financially driven, they similarly have separated functions that can be emphasized with greater specificity. For example, the research administration function has been removed from many graduate ‘college’ portfolios of operation for a number of reasons, including the growing emphasis on research compliance and the competitive nature of research grant funding.

Another growing trend is the emergence of new areas of graduate study, with these initiatives being driven by individual academic areas rather than coordinated through a graduate college model. For example, new programs are studied and assessed in academic colleges and brought forward to a graduate college for approval rather than having the graduate college create the programs and market them to academic disciplines. Although there are differences and exceptions to this model, the academic college format of most major research universities means that the graduate college is an administrative repository of documents and institutional approval.

Graduate schools have provided leadership, however, in areas that help to demonstrate a value-added approach to their work. These efforts include certificates and badge-type programs around preparing doctoral students to teach, for example, or manage a faculty career. Workshops and professional development activities coordinated by graduate schools also include grant writing for graduate students, curriculum vitae preparation support, academic job search support, and research competitions among graduate students. These activities tend to be supportive for graduate students both in terms of academic preparation and community building, and these later programs also include food pantries, child care assistance, orientation programs for new teaching assistants, orientation and support programs for international graduate students, and even some activity around building community and support for faculty members.

The overarching theme of the current state of graduate ‘colleges’ is one of innovation and creativity, in part enhancing the graduate education environment of a campus, and in part defending the historical construction of a graduate academic unit. The only consistency across the literature on graduate education is that the structures, as well as the content and delivery methods, are changing at a rapid pace and that institutions need to find ways to best incorporate graduate learning into complex fiscal structures.

RESEARCH METHODS

Data for the current study included organizational charts that were publicly available through the websites and online documents at the sample institutions. The sample for the study, as an exploratory undertaking, included the institutions that have been identified by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education as Very High or High Research Activity. These institutions receive their Carnegie classification based on the number of doctoral degrees they award along with how much research money they generate. The Carnegie Classification includes 146 Very High Research institutions and 133 High Research Institutions. To create a baseline of understanding, however, private institutions and special interest institutions such as medical schools were removed from this overall listing, resulting in 107 Very High Research and 93 High Research public universities (N=200).

Once the sample of institutions were identified, each university website was consulted in an attempt to locate an organizational chart for the unit responsible for graduate education. In some instances, and the most common title was “graduate school.” There were derivatives of this nomenclature, including “graduate studies,” “graduate college,” and “graduate affairs.” In total 84 organizational charts were identified from the initial sample of 200 universities, and as a note, these documents were retrieved from the institutions during the spring and summer of 2022. The majority of institutions did not provide a formal organizational

chart of their graduate studies offices, although most did provide staff listings with contact information, but no hierarchical information was included.

The study was theoretically grounded in organizational analysis theory. This construct is based largely on the work of Frederick Winslow Taylor and his studies of manufacturing and how organizations align their structures to maximize efficiency. This initial framework has evolved to include multiple iterations, such as modern systems and natural systems models as well as rational modeling. Most relevant to the current study, however, is the relatively new approach to organizational structures referred to as sociotechnical modeling. In sociotechnical organizational modeling, changes and adaptations to an organization can occur without long term formal planning and offices, initiatives, personnel, and policies emerge on an as-needed basis, and specifically incorporates the interactions between the people of an organization and the use of technology.

Each organizational chart was downloaded and reviewed by each of the researchers to determine themes and trends, using a process similar to a constant-comparison method. In this process, themes and categories were noted by each researcher and then compared across each other's analysis, resulting in primary trends or themes that could be used to respond to the purpose of the study.

FINDINGS

There were at least two dominant structures of graduate education units that were identified, and the structure they employed was primarily determined by their role and mission, and this ultimately was reflected in larger organizations. The main differentiation between graduate schools were the inclusion, or lack of, of research administration. This was the dominant differentiation between the two types of graduate 'schools,' with one including large administrative staffs and structures that facilitated the research enterprise of the institution. In these institutions, typically more than half of the administrative structure had functions related to grant preparation and submission, post-award grant management, research accounting, compliance and export control, and foundation and government relations. This type of structure was identified in approximately a third of the institutions organizational charts that were reviewed for the study.

The majority of institutions identified did not include research administration and indicated offices that were primarily student related, including, for example, student records, processing student application materials, student recruitment, student ombudsperson, and student graduation services. Several institutions, less than 30%, also had employees identified who worked with student welfare, including counseling services, food security, and broadly, student mental health.

Less than a quarter of the institutions identified had fewer than four professional direct-reports to the graduate unit leadership. In these cases, in-direct reporting lines were indicated as connecting to the academic colleges. Presumably, these institutions relied on limited centralized systems and had a greater reliance on the academic college in areas such as student welfare, recruitment and retention, etc.

Additional findings from the review of these organizational structures include:

- Graduate schools hold a primarily administrative function. There were several institutions (n=23; 27%) that included some sort of academic programming such as coordinating inter- or multi-disciplinary programs or certificates.
- High number of titles with little professional depth. In over 50 institutions, there were at least 6 direct reports to the graduate education unit leader, however the majority of these positions rarely had direct reports. This means that there are assistant and associate deans or assistant or associate vice provosts, but these individuals rarely had a large staff.
- Increasing attempts to demonstrate value through unique programming, such as coordinating a teaching certificate, credential, etc. Nearly three-fourths (n=61; 72%) of the institutional organizational charts indicated a staff member who held responsibilities for some relatively newer, non-degree program.

- There is a wide diversity of models. Although not time based, the study seemed to reflect more vice provost level type administrators who coordinate the work of graduate education without the formal ‘college’ model. Over half (n=46; 54%) of the institutional organization charts provided a title that included a ‘vice provost,’ ‘assistant/associate vice provost,’ or similar title (within the vice chancellor/president for academic affairs nomenclature) either independent or in addition to a ‘dean’ title.
- Generally small professional administrative structures (or at least not reported). On average, the institutional organizational charts identified in the study included 4 assistant/associate level individuals (such as assistant dean of the graduate school, associate dean for student services, etc.), and instead relied on individuals with a ‘coordinator’ or ‘director’ title.
- Admissions was the most commonly identified functional area, followed by student services and administrative/fiscal affairs. Very few incorporated research administration, international affairs, language studies, or multi- or inter-disciplinary academic programs.

DISCUSSION

Higher education does not have a reputation for changing quickly. The foundational structure of the academy in the US dates back centuries, yet changes, driven possibly by technology and its subsequent impact on society, has resulted in notable changes to higher education in recent years. The role of the Covid-19 pandemic similarly has resulted in noticeable changes to higher education. These changes, ranging from how programs are delivered to the types of credentials offered, have resulted in some institutions in how the organizations are structured. For some institutions, organizational structures have expanded to accommodate more professional specialization (as well as employee demands), and in others, there has been a constriction in offices, payrolls, and services. Graduate education appears to be at the nexus of this debate.

As suggested by the findings of these organizational charts, there are indeed many institutions that are expanding what traditional graduate schools are undertaking. These are the institutions that are coordinating and providing mental health services to graduate students, providing specialized food pantries for graduate students, and are offering certificates and credentials that give the institution’s graduate students some sort of competitive advantage in the job marketplace. In other institutions, however, the idea of a graduate ‘school’ has been elevated to be a coordinated, centralized service by a vice chancellor level office. In these institutions, a service-minded office staff facilitates rather than directs graduate programs, harkening back, perhaps, to the model of teachers colleges and graduate colleges of business or law that host their own student services.

Nothing in this analysis has the ability to suggest the effectiveness or efficiency of any graduate education model. The findings do, however, illustrate just how different various institutions approach graduate education and how many of them are working creatively to demonstrate their value in advocating for students. Additionally, the variations of responsibilities and titles that were available in organizational charts shows how institutions are looking for unique and creative programming that can benefit their students. Programs such as the Preparing for the Professoriate and College Teaching certificates seem to be emerging at a large number of institutions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

There are at least three major implications for practice that arise from this organizational chart analysis. First, institutions need to consider their philosophical approach to graduate education. Deciding upon the role graduate studies plays in turn determines the importance it should hold in central administration and how best an individual can advocate for graduate programs and the unique needs of graduate students. Holding a ‘vice provost for graduate education,’ for example, might place greater visibility for the institution on graduate students and programs, and might similarly position these priorities to receive both

greater attention from faculty and administrators as well as scarce resources that might be available at the institution.

Second, the organizational structures reviewed represents a larger conversation about the idea of shared services. The current operational structure of many colleges and universities is to create silos, separating out everything from purchasing and copying to travel services and payroll based on academic units. Colleges of sciences duplicate many of the services provided by a college of engineering, for example. Graduate school structures have historically been the original provider of shared services, and as higher education institutions seek ways to reduce expenses, inevitably the lessons learned from graduate school structures can play a role in larger institutional conversations and planning.

And third, there is a lesson of innovation present in this analysis. Several institutions are very visibly finding creative ways to assist their students and are assembling programs, opportunities, and services that can provide important assistance to graduate students. Seen in offices and services identified such as mental health counseling, food pantries, and professional development, these graduate education units are innovating to demonstrate their value. By doing such, they represent the change that has begun to become more common in higher education and in a way that takes less time than in previous decades.

These findings represent a time and place for graduate education that is changing rapidly, and these changes can continue to be realized through further attention to their leadership. Future research that explores graduate education leadership, as well as the effectiveness and efficiency of graduate education models, is both needed and will be critical to the future of the academy.

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