

# **SUMMARY OF THE GRADUATE PROGRAM RETREAT**

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**On behalf of  
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**A President & Provost Leadership Fellow Project**

***California State University, Long Beach***

# Summary

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In 2015 a graduate studies retreat was developed as part of a President and Provost Leadership Fellows project at the California State University, Long Beach (CSULB). The background material for the retreat included two reports establishing a baseline on the status of the CSULB graduate programs. The first report, led by Dr. Dhushy Sathianathan, was “A Preliminary Benchmark Study of CSU Graduate Programs in Southern CA.” The second report, co-led by Dr. Laura Portnoi and Dr. Cecile Lindsay, was the “Provost’s Taskforce on Graduate Student Success.” The information provided in these reports was used to guide the Graduate Studies Retreat held on March 19<sup>th</sup> 2015. Together in groups, the retreat participants discussed the main topics of strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities in graduate programs at CSULB. Then, each table of participants was assigned a unique discussion topic within the overall theme of graduate studies, focused on moving the conversation forward in a specific area (administrative structure, resource allocation, graduate student services, degree completion and graduation rates, the graduate student experience, and infrastructure for graduate studies). The retreat culminated with each table presenting their discussions to the audience. Each section below synthesizes the comments from all tables based on the information contained within the presenting groups’ Power Point presentations. This effort was meant to frame the bullet points from presentations at the retreat into a narrative for both archival purposes and as a synthesis for on-going discussions and future planning.

In general, retreat participants consider CSULB to be in an optimal position for attracting desirable, high-achieving applicants to its graduate programs. Retreat participants noted several areas for improvement, including streamlining all communications with consistent graduate program information and necessary improvements to the infrastructure relative to technology and campus facilities. Reoccurring discussions also centered on the evening schedule of courses and the potential of offering year round programs. Funding was also extensively discussed, both for faculty serving as program and

thesis advisors and for student employment as Teaching Assistants and Graduate Assistants. Many of the discussion points focused on challenges with the thesis as the culminating activity for graduate studies. Notably, there was also a strong sense of connection to the wider community and regional industry, which was identified as beneficial to student thesis research and potential graduate career opportunities. Through the retreat, participants provided comprehensive input on the dynamics of graduate studies at CSULB. The participants also found that each program is unique in many ways, and diverse on multiple dimensions (e.g., type of culminating activity, units to degree, program format, etc.).

# Strengths

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Overall the retreat participants consider CSULB to be in an advantageous position for attracting talented and high-performing prospective graduate students. The diversity of CSULB's graduate student population on campus is reflective of the diversity found in Southern California. CSULB has a well-known, positive reputation for many of its outstanding and diverse graduate programs, both nationally and internationally. Furthermore, the campus is geographically located in a prime region and the affordability of its graduate programs remains a key strength in comparison with other university options in the area.

Our dedicated faculty and low ratio of graduate students to faculty in several departments prime the path for mentoring graduate students who may potentially enter doctoral programs. The graduate programs at CSULB create highly marketable degrees that provide graduate students excellent employment opportunities both locally and internationally. With faculty mentors, graduate students are focused on developing careers in their chosen fields through internships and research fellowships. Professional connections are continuously created and reinforced among the graduate students networking with peers and faculty who also maintain their industry and community connections. The strong sense of collegiality among faculty, staff, librarians, and graduate students focuses efforts on creating cohesive graduate programs and supporting successful graduate students.

# Weaknesses

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Central to graduate programs at CSULB are research related components of the curriculum and degree requirements, including the thesis as a culminating activity in some programs (some programs require the thesis/project option, others have it as one of two or three options). In the early phases of admitting students into graduate programs, students may not be academically prepared for the rigors of a graduate program. Therefore, they spend extensive time satisfying prerequisite courses. Once graduate students are prepared to initiate the thesis process, they face many hurdles based on unclear expectations of the writing process, limited support for the writing and research process, early thesis submission deadlines, clearance by the Institutional Review Board, and lack of mentoring from faculty. These factors can contribute to low completion rates for theses. Possible solutions include creating a consistent model of training for all faculty involved in chairing theses, encouraging and providing support for chairing faculty, creating graduate student thesis workshops, and finally, providing various opportunities for students to engage in research with faculty.

Retreat participants also identified a lack of resources in technology and infrastructure. Space constrictions prohibit increasing the number of courses with laboratories in addition to increased access to study spaces, such as library carrels and study rooms. Departments and faculty also lack the necessary hardware and software to track and assist their graduate students in completing their degrees. Technological tools available to undergraduates, such as a degree audits or program planners, are not available to graduate students. Overall there is a lack of technological solutions for administrative tasks related to managing a graduate student's academic life cycle.

Issues regarding additional funding focused on measures that would support students and faculty. The retreat materials demonstrated that off-campus employment was a major obstacle for graduate students in completing their degrees. Suggested solutions included increasing the number of tuition

waivers and available employment positions such as Teaching Assistants and Graduate Assistants.

Providing funding for a greater number of students to pursue graduate degrees is necessary in order to retain students on campus. Students who worked off campus were less likely to be on-track for timely graduation. Faculty support for graduate advising and thesis supervision is not well defined among the colleges. There was overwhelming call for well-defined support for faculty involved in graduate advising and thesis or project supervision.

Another setback for students completing their graduate degree on time is the inability to easily offer a year-round graduate level course schedule. Furthermore, graduate programs become restrained due to the inability to rapidly change program structure and curricula due to the once-a-year curricular process. Likewise, additional resources would need to be devoted towards intensive advising efforts which would necessitate a combination of faculty and professional advising to occur regularly throughout the year.

Finally, there is also a lack of recognition and communication on various levels for stakeholders involved. For example, the faculty may lack support for serving as program and thesis advisors, while graduate students may lack research support and career services. Faculty and students could benefit from additional support in topics related to the thesis writing process and submissions to the Institutional Review Board. In general, this is closely tied to a lack of communication within and across the colleges on campus. Retreat participants also noted a lack of graduate culture partly due to the nature of CSULB's commuter campus, and closure of student support offices during the evenings when the majority of graduate students attend classes.

# Opportunities

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Opportunities exist in enhancing the current collaboration within the university, with outside organizations, and with the CSULB Alumni network. Retreat participants noted that at the college level, cross-college collaborations should be recognized and rewarded. University and college-wide retreats such as the Graduate Studies Retreat of 2015 are beneficial for stimulating in-depth discussions on important topics. Most importantly, the university's partnerships with industry partners and local community organizations should be maintained due to their direct sponsorship of graduate internships, thesis research, and scholarships. University and departmental alumni networks also serve as potential source of research funding.

Retreat participants specifically highlighted the great potential benefits of establishing a Graduate Student Center that could serve as the centralized hub for faculty and students in graduate programs. They envision the center providing student support services during the evenings in addition to thesis writing support for both native and non-native speakers. The same technological tools for academic tracking used for undergraduates would also benefit graduate students as well. Other elements of graduate infrastructure include creating year-round operations and sessions, the creation of a university wide graduate handbook, and creating alternatives to requiring a thesis as the culminating activity.

Retreat participants also noted necessary increased support for graduate student resources. For example, an increased capacity in the Institutional Review Board would be beneficial for those conducting research for their theses. Furthermore, opportunity abounds in increasing the funds for faculty led research involving graduate students and positions such as Teaching Assistants and Graduate Assistants. Additionally, international students would be better served with increased support from the Center of International Education and the College of Continuing and Professional Education.

# Administrative Support for Graduate Studies [Retreat Table 1]

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Retreat participants from the first table noted two central components of the Administrative Support Structure for the graduate programs. The first component is related to the graduate student experience. Participants remarked that the graduate studies application process could be streamlined in addition to improving outreach and advising efforts. Overall, more effective communication is needed to broadcast the successes of graduate programs and to promote an environment of excellence among graduate students. Secondly, improvements are needed to the timeline of completing a graduate degree, and graduate studies milestones need to be clearly identified. Also, writing support services need to be centralized on campus for graduate students.

The second discussion element comprised of issues surrounding the infrastructure of graduate advising. In general, the consensus supported establishing mandatory advising into the graduate program requirements that would necessitate increasing the allocation of faculty and staff time towards advising, and general administrative program support. These extra efforts should be recognized through stipends and assigned time because they are related to graduate student success.



# Ideas to Move us Forward in Resource Allocation for Graduate Programs

## [Retreat Table 2]

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Retreat participants from the second table noted several areas related to future resource allocation for graduate programs. Central to their remarks was monetary support for thesis efforts. Therefore, departments should review the number of tenure track faculty in the graduate program and hire additional faculty as needed. Faculty should be equitably compensated for working with graduate students on their theses or projects. Additionally, grants could be used to incentivize faculty and graduate student research collaborations.

Other noted observations include resource allocations relative to graduate student employment, research funding, and academic success. In an effort to retain graduate students on campus and directly involve them in their graduate programs, resources should support increases to on campus employment through Teaching Assistant and Graduate Assistant positions. Similarly, more extensive funding should be available specifically to graduate students attending and participating in professional and academic conferences. Graduate research should also be rewarded through formal and monetary recognition.

In an effort to improve graduate student success, program information needs to be communicated in various forms. For example, an enhanced version of the Student Orientation, Advising and Registration (SOAR) event could be tailored to graduate students. Graduate studies information could also be centralized in an online format. Also, a formalized learning community could be created that would provide mentoring and training workshops for faculty and staff as related to the goals of graduate studies. Finally, there is a need to produce systematic and accurate data in order to assess and track graduate student success.

# Ideas to Move us Forward in Graduate Student Services [Retreat Table 3]

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Retreat participants at the third table proposed various strategies related to administrative and student support efforts for graduate programs. Their suggestions target every stage of the graduate program life cycle, from prospective students to employable graduate students. Prospective students often begin their initial research of graduate programs online. Therefore, it is important that accurate and consistent information about the programs are advertised on the university and departmental websites. Also, creating a University Graduate Student Handbook would be a valuable resource moving forward with graduate student services. Once prospective students have reviewed all available online sources for graduate programs, the admissions applications could then be streamlined to combine the university and departmental application. Presenting reliable program information not only aids prospective students in making informed decisions, but it also reinforces the expectations of current graduate students regarding their programs.

Moving forward, a task force could also be developed to review culminating activities and further assess the graduate programs. Culminating activities such as the thesis, projects, and/or comprehensive exams should be evaluated within the unique context of colleges and departments. Ultimately this task force could identify best practices for graduate student services and programs by comparing CSULB's practices to other institutions at the state and national level.

Other methods for improving graduate student services relate to the direct campus experience graduate students encounter at CSULB. Newly admitted graduate students could become better acquainted with the campus and its services through a university-level orientation or an advertised scavenger hunt activity that would be self-guided through a web application. The activity would highlight campus resources available to graduate students such as the Writer's Resource Lab. Student services such

as the Writer's Resource Lab could then be assessed and evaluated for graduate student satisfaction and identifying potential improvements. Additional student services in career advising would also help graduate students market themselves and prepare for the transition into their professional careers. These efforts combined would support graduate students completing their degrees in a timely manner.

Participants also noted the need for designated study spaces for graduate students that complement their evening and weekend academic schedules. Consequently, the maintenance of public facilities such as restrooms would also need to be maintained for this population of students.

# Ideas to Move us Forward in Degree Completion Graduation Rates [Retreat Table 4]

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Retreat participants from the fourth table addressed several elements related to improving graduate degree completion and graduation rates. Within the realm of financial supports, the participants noted the need for more tuition waivers and fellowship opportunities, as well as Teaching Assistant and Graduate Assistant positions. These efforts would fulfill both a financial and an academic need for the graduate students by providing them with opportunities to work closely with faculty within their discipline. At the same time, support for faculty workloads would also need to be addressed considering the increased quantity of students working in departments.

Retreat participants also noted several campus policies that would need to be assessed and possibly restructured or better communicated across the university. Some of these administrative points include GS 700, probation, and the revalidation of coursework, all of which would need to align with department specifics.

Finally, support systems would need to be in place that holistically encompasses the graduate student experience. For example, university orientations would set the expectations on the importance of timely graduation. Next, e-advising tools such as online degree audits would help students track their program progress. Other methods to support graduate student progress would be to provide early childhood care during days and times that coincide with graduate courses. Students would also need assistance while completing their culminating experience, whether it is a thesis, project, or comprehensive exam. Lastly, career support services would benefit graduate students by providing a tangible link between their graduate studies and professional interests. All of these measures combined target stages of the graduate student life cycle that are ultimately relative to degree completion rates.

# Ideas to Move us Forward in Graduate Students' Experiences [Retreat Table 5]

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Retreat participants from the fifth table identified specific elements within the graduate student experience that would need further improvement in the future. For example, employment types were distinguished into three main categories, each necessitating unique support. The participants recognized that graduate students employed within the field of their academic pursuits versus students employed out of necessity, would have different motives for pursuing their studies in addition to the types of support provided to them by their employers. Graduate students may also be currently employed on campus either full or part-time. They may have already been employed before pursuing their graduate studies, or they may have found employment on campus after starting their graduate programs. Overall the retreat participants recognized the variability of employment situations for graduate students.

Many graduate courses are offered in the evenings to accommodate working professionals. Retreat participants noted that other student support services would also need to be offered in the evenings as well. It would be beneficial to graduate students if services such as campus tours, stress management workshops, and counseling services were available in the evenings when they arrive to campus. Moreover, graduate students would benefit from thesis writing support either through one of the centers on campus, such as the Writer's Resource Lab, or through the Graduate Student Resource Center. The primary concern would be to offer the services in the evenings specifically to graduate students in order to coincide with their evening course schedule.

Finally, a more structured thesis writing experience should be established for graduate students. Many graduate students enrolled in GS 700 are left without any structure on how to complete the thesis. Therefore, a course could be developed that students could enroll in for thesis writing support. Structuring the thesis writing in the same manner as a course would provide students with a dedicated

and supportive environment that gathers students together at the same point in their graduate careers. Retreat participants also noted the need for additional training of graduate advisors specifically on using administrative academic probation. Graduate advisors would need training on the full spectrum of measures in place to support graduate programs.

# Ideas to Move us Forward in Graduate Programs Infrastructure [Retreat Table 6]

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Retreat participants from the sixth table noted that graduate programs are a strategic priority for the campus. Therefore, improvements to infrastructure are necessary in the areas of administration, technology, and facilities. For the administrative infrastructure, participants stated it would be beneficial to include a graduate-focused committee to maintain communications between the colleges and Academic Affairs.

Improvements to the technological infrastructure relate to a centralized and streamlined source of accessing necessary information. For students, this upgrade would serve two-fold purpose. Firstly, technology systems would be in place to support the online filing of applications to graduate programs, online advancement to candidacy, and graduation review requests. Secondly, this centralized website would become the main source for graduate students to access information related to their programs and available student support services. Finally, campus facilities in terms of laboratories and study centers would need to be improved in the future.

# Participants

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*Table 1*

Laura Forrest, Forouzan Golshani, Jennifer Iovanovici, Eileen Klink, Ingrid Martin, Karen Nakai, Terry Robertson. Not pictured: Rob Frear



*Table 2*

Malcolm Finney, Terrence Graham, Virginia Gray, , Augusta Pickens, Ryan Weitzman.  
Not Pictured: Marquita Grenot-Scheyer, Lijuan Li





*Table 3*

Amy Bippus, Elaine Frey, Barbara Kim, Nancy Meyer-Adams, Nancy McGlothin, Ron Norby, Cyrus Parker-Jeannette. Not Pictured: Simon Kim,



*Table 4*

Marie Alford, Lesley Farmer, Teri Yamada, Tracy Maples, Marcus Mueller, Wade Martin, Dan O'Connor, Rebecca Sittler Schrock. Not Pictured: Michael Solt



*Table 5*

Margaret Black, Tom Enders, Nat Hansuvadha, , Mary Anne Rose, Deborah Thien, Barbara White.  
Not Pictured: Laura Kingsford, Paul Laris,



*Table 6*

Stacie Bauerle, Andreas Bill, Melissa D'Eloia, Shireen Pavri, Karen Quintiliani, Jeff Rodrigues. Not Pictured:  
Jim Koval, Nele Hempel-Lamer



*Retreat Organizers*

Dhushy Sathianathan, Katarina Spralja, Cecile Lindsay, Babette Benken, Laura Portnoi

