

Graduate Student Experience Report

1 INTRODUCTION

Graduate students attend NIU to fulfill academic and career aspirations. As our future colleagues, they contribute to and learn from our teaching and research missions, bringing new perspectives to our disciplines and campus. Graduate students deserve an experience that contributes to their development as scholars and teachers and supports their ability to complete their degrees in a timely fashion.

Graduate programs at Northern Illinois University contribute to instruction, scholarship and engagement. Some programs contribute directly to the research and artistry mission, while others provide the next generation of educators, thought leaders and entrepreneurs. Many of our graduate programs, in particular those that have the explicit purpose of advancing diversity in a particular profession or the professoriate, support the diversity-and-inclusion mission of the university.

This report is the outcome of a multiyear initiative to encourage academic excellence and curricular innovation that was introduced in the FY2021 University Goals, and then continued as University Goal 3B in FY2022. Specifically, the current year goal focused on completing the assessment of graduate student programs and experiences using metrics developed during FY21 to measure alignment with NIU mission; allocate and reallocate resources accordingly. This initiative also sought to “ *Identify opportunities for strengthening graduate programs and enhancing the graduate student experience.* ” In terms of metrics and progression, the initiative called for:

- Metrics for evaluating graduate programs developed through collaborative efforts between the Office of the Provost, deans, department chairs and graduate faculty.
- Established plan for collecting and distributing relevant graduate program data.
- Graduate program assessment and follow-up incorporated into college multiyear plans.
- Timeline and strategy for acquiring, reviewing and acting on data needed to understand and improve the graduate student experience from recruitment and admissions to degree completion and career placement, with a special emphasis on the experience of BIPOC and international graduate students.

The high-level goal of this process is to ensure that NIU can support the academic and career aspirations of the graduate students who matriculate at NIU. One conclusion from this analysis is that resources of time and funding have been spread thinly across many programs; the graduate student experience can be made stronger by ensuring adequate resources and programming for fewer programs. This report makes several recommendations for the realignment of resources, strengthening NIU’s commitment to diversifying its graduate programs, and supporting programs that most closely align with NIU’s mission, vision and values.

2 PROCESS

During the spring and summer of 2021, the colleges and the Office of the Provost developed guiding principles for the exercise, definitions for graduate programs and templates for collecting information

from departments. Templates were distributed to departments at the start of the 2021 fall semester and were subsequently returned to the respective deans for review. Colleges used various methods for gathering and assessing the data and reports, but all included collaboration with faculty in the departments. Data on enrollment, retention and completion rates are available in Academic Performance Solutions (APS). Programs submitted their own placement data if such data were available.

The provost asked deans to submit summary reports to the EVPP in March 2022. After those submissions, the provost and the dean of the Graduate School met with each dean to review the report. During the summer of 2022, the report was reviewed and refined in an iterative and collaborative process by the leadership team in Academic Affairs.

This report summarizes the findings and makes several recommendations.

3 PROGRAM CATEGORIZATION

3.1 DEFINING THE PURPOSE(S) OF PROGRAMS

One important element of the review was to define the purpose and mission of graduate education at NIU. The following typology was developed collaboratively. Many programs have elements of more than one type of program.

Graduate programs can be broadly, but not necessarily exclusively, categorized as:

1. **Focused on research and artistic creation.** These programs would be focused on producing graduate students whose primary aim is to contribute to scholarship and creative activity. In general, the student would receive a terminal degree. Metrics should measure the scholarly or artistic output of the program faculty and students as well as placement into tenure-track positions or other positions that necessitate a terminal degree.
2. **Focused on regional, state and national workforce needs.** These programs provide advanced degrees to meet the needs of regional, state and national employees and employers. In general, students receive professional degrees. Metrics should measure the regional demand for such degrees, placement of graduates into appropriate jobs and faculty engagement with the region.
3. **Focused on the preparation of students for other advanced programs.** These programs provide students with a stepping-stone to a terminal degree. In general, these would be non-professional master's programs. Metrics should measure the placement of students into strong advanced programs and consider the ultimate job prospects for students with such degrees.

The value of this typology lies in thinking about how the students in each program should be supported with programming and funding. For example, a program of Type 3 should offer distinct kinds of professional development than a program of Type 2.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 CREATE A GRADUATE STUDENT COMMUNITY THAT SUPPORTS ITS SUCCESS

NIU's graduate students, especially those from underrepresented populations, have asked for support in creating community and a sense of belonging. As noted in Appendix II, the graduate student population at NIU is diverse. Approximately 64% of graduate students are enrolled in master's degree programs, 14% in professional doctoral programs and 13% in Ph.D. programs. NIU enrolls a considerable number of non-degree graduate students. About 32% of the professional doctoral and master's students are from underrepresented backgrounds. About 27% of Ph.D. students are international, and about 27% are from underrepresented backgrounds. While all colleges have a significant number of underrepresented students, international students tend to be concentrated in CBUS, CEET, CLAS and CVPA.¹

Many colleges provide support services and experiences for their students, as noted in the individual college reports, and have paid attention to students underrepresented in their fields. At the university level, there has been less attention paid to the experience of graduate students and, specifically, underrepresented BIPOC and international students. This is due, in part, to the nature of the graduate student experience, which tends to focus on community-building within the program. However, we feel that more can be done to create community and support graduate students at the university level.

In addition, graduate students need support in meeting their academic success goals; this includes a reasonable timeline for finishing a degree and a sense of the career paths available after earning the degree. While departments have focused on recruiting students, less attention has been paid to completion rates and professional development. Goal 4.3 is pertinent to this goal; adequate financial support is critical to degree completion.

Many of the reports indicated the need for enhanced professional development opportunities for graduate students. We have also heard from the Graduate Student Advisory Board that students desire to have more engagement opportunities with each other.

¹ Data source: *Weekly Enrollment for the Upcoming Fall by Department/Plan*, Tableau Census Date (weeks prior = -1), Fall 2021.

Recommendation	Tasks	Completion Date	Responsible Unit
4.1.1 Assess the experience of international and underrepresented graduate students using data from climate surveys, listening sessions, and input from the student advisory board.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete analysis of graduate student data from climate survey. • Engage with student advisory board and cultural resource centers to ensure voices of underrepresented students are elevated. • Hold listening sessions with assistance from colleges, centers and student organizations. 	May 2023	<p>Executive Vice President and Provost (EVPP)</p> <p>Dean, Graduate School (GS)</p>
4.1.2 Set goals for completion rates relative to enrollment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide completion statistics to departments with suggested goals. • Obtain feedback from departments. 	December 2024	<p>EVPP</p> <p>Dean, GS</p> <p>Deans</p> <p>Department Chairs and Directors</p>
4.1.3 Enhance professional development, training, and support for career success; provide increased opportunities to develop teaching skills through CITL.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess current approaches to professional development already underway in GSIA, RIPS and CITL • Implement programming to respond to the assessment 	Assessment, May 2023	<p>EVPP</p> <p>Dean, GS</p> <p>AVP, Teaching, Learning, and Digital Education</p>
4.1.4 Create an over-arching structure to effectively mentor and support BIPOC and other under-represented graduate students receiving dedicated funding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue assessment of current assistantship and tuition waiver opportunities for BIPOC students (Rhoten Smith; URM). • Implement an expectation of mentorship and support for programs that wish to take advantage of assistantship/waiver opportunities. 	<p>Assessment completed in Fall 2022</p> <p>Implementation for Fall 2023 awardees</p>	<p>EVPP</p> <p>VP, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion</p> <p>Dean, GS (with input from Rhoten Smith working group)</p>

<p>4.1.5 Promote an environment and culture in which international students are welcomed to NIU's campus.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess programs across the university focused on international students. • Collaborate to create bridges between International Affairs, colleges and Student Affairs with respect to the programming offered. • Create a student ambassador program for international students. 	<p>End of FY23</p>	<p>EVVP</p> <p>VP, Student Affairs</p> <p>AVP, International Affairs</p> <p>Deans</p>
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4.2 ALIGN TUITION WAIVERS TO SUPPORT GRADUATE STUDENT SUCCESS.

NIU primarily offers graduate tuition waivers in two forms: those allocated to programs to offer directly to students, and those awarded when a student is hired as a graduate assistant. Tuition waivers serve many purposes, including supporting diversification of our graduate student body and attracting highly qualified students by offering competitive packages. Strategic allocation of tuition waivers is essential to meeting NIU's goals.

Currently, there is no direct accountability in the budget process at the university level for the number or cost of either form of waivers offered to graduate students. The lack of accountability means that decisions made at the department or unit level create obligations and lost revenue at the university level. More importantly, waivers are not necessarily tied or related to the student's academic program, which can create a conflict of interest in decisions related to a student's academic progress. In addition, this practice disincentivizes faculty to include tuition in the budget for externally funded programs.

In FY22, the estimated value of the waivers awarded to graduate students was between \$6 million and \$7 million. In addition, NIU invested \$12.3 million in graduate student stipends, with \$8.8 million funded from general fund revenues. NIU's units are very aware of the cost of student stipends through assistantships because the funds used to pay the stipends come directly from the unit's budget. In contrast, the provision of waivers has no impact on a unit's budget when they are awarded to students. This inconsistency creates perverse incentives and encourages practices that are not in the best interest of the university, or more importantly, the students served. For example, students on a partial assistantship (10 hours per week) receive a full tuition waiver. Departments perceive that departmental interests are better served by awarding two part-time assistantships rather than one full-time assistantship in order to award more full stipends to students. Hence, there is a tendency to under-support students who must still pay differential tuition and mandatory fees. With respect to the university, these stipends have additional negative impact in terms of unrealized tuition revenue. Because the waiver is not budgeted as an expense, the true cost of offering graduate courses and graduate programs is hidden. In some cases, graduate courses are offered with no source of supporting tuition revenue from the department. While it is imperative that we offer waivers to graduate students, we must also ensure NIU's success by creating an equitable system for students that also addresses the true cost of our graduate programs. Many stand-alone waivers are being re-imagined through an equity

lens to include new groups (e.g., LGBTQ, undocumented students). Once the process is complete, there will be assistantships (Rhoten Smith) and/or tuition waivers (underrepresented minority waiver) for the following students: BIPOC; women in STEM; LGBTQ; and students who are undocumented.

Once we have committed to the strategic allocation of waivers, we anticipate that a working group will meet to assess data and create recommendations on appropriate allocations of tuition waivers to departments, colleges and other units. This will be a significant culture change, and thus engaging in conversations with stakeholders across the university will be crucial. It will be important to ensure that messaging speaks not only to fiscal needs, but also to a larger purpose of creating a more equitable community for our graduate students.

Recommendation	Tasks	Completion Date	Responsible Unit
4.2.1 Prorate waivers relative to the percentage of appointment, maintaining the requirement of a minimum 0.25 FTE appointment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek feedback on proposal from Graduate Council and other impacted units. • Implement a new waiver policy (Graduate Council). 	Feedback completed by December 2022; policy implemented in Spring 2023 for waivers given in FY24.	EVPP Dean, GS
4.2.2 Examine tuition waivers not associated with assistantships using a retention and equity lens.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop criteria for the allocation of such tuition waivers. • Phase out or reallocate waivers as necessary. • Realign waivers in line with criteria and ensure robust support to students. • Implement recommendations of the Rhoten Smith working group. 	Criteria developed Spring 2023. Implementation will occur in FY24.	EVPP Dean, GS
4.2.3 Create 3-year budget model for waivers and graduate assistantships at the college and university level.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop budget data by unit for assistantships and waivers with three-year budget model. • Create recommendations on appropriate allocations for the number of tuition waivers. • Develop communications plan. 	AY 2022-23 for data collection and recommendations. FY25 for first implementation.	EVPP Dean, GS (with assistance from a dedicated budget advisory group)

4.3 SET EXPECTATIONS FOR GRADUATE STUDENT STIPENDS AND MANDATORY FEES

NIU stipends in some fields are not competitive, making it difficult to recruit the most diverse and talented graduate students. In addition, our waiver policy includes tuition but not fees. In some cases, mandatory fees represent a significant fraction of the offered stipend. While a few departments have made efforts to increase their stipends, most departments make offers at the minimum stipend.

The Graduate Council currently sets the minimum stipend and has been reluctant to raise the minimum stipend because of the budget implications. In addition, many students are offered annual packages with no guarantees beyond the year of the offer.

Recommendation	Tasks	Timeline	Responsible Unit
4.3.1 Set stipends to create competitive recruitment packages that extend over the expected completion timeline for the program.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create expectations for competitive packages at the program level. • Assess competitiveness with peer institutions. • Assess mandatory fee structure and budget implications. • Create plan for implementation. 	FY24	EVPP Vice President, Research and Innovation Partnerships (VPRIPS) Deans Dean, GS
4.3.2 Align setting and management of graduate student stipends with appropriate shared governance model.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pursue policy change with Graduate Council and implement in the policy library. 	December 2022	Dean, GS
4.3.3 Create different stipend levels for Ph.D., professional doctoral and master's students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete analysis of appropriate minimum stipends for specialist, master's, professional doctoral and Ph.D. programs. • Implement as part of multiyear budget planning. 	May 2023 for analysis; FY25 for implementation.	EVPP VPRIPS Deans Dean, GS
4.3.4 Reconsider allocation of stipends to strong programs, as evidenced by robust or rising enrollments or good completion rates.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define metrics of a strong program. • Manage as part of multiyear budget cycle. 	FY24	EVPP VPRIPS Deans Dean, GS

4.4 ENSURE ADEQUATE RESOURCES FOR STRONG AND STRATEGIC PROGRAMS

NIU has many strong and strategic programs that align with its mission, vision and values. However, NIU does not have the resources to support fully, and at the level that ensures success, the broad range of programs it currently supports. As indicated in reports, we should empower deans to pursue individual strategies to move resources into programs that most closely align with NIU and collegiate missions.

Recommendation	Tasks	Timeline	Responsible Unit
4.4.1 Phase out established programs that have low enrollment (as measured by collegiate expectations), low completion or poor placement results.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboratively define which programs fall into this category. • Seek input from stakeholders. • Colleges to create rubric and decision points. 	May 2024	EVPP VRIPS Deans Dean, GS
4.4.2 Pursue collaboration across programs to lower degree costs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyze curriculum in cognate programs to assess common course requirements. • Begin discussion of sharing transdisciplinary courses. 	May 2023	EVPP Deans Graduate Council
4.4.3 Allocate graduate assistant and waiver dollars based on program success in enrolling talented and diverse graduate students and accomplishing stated goals for the program.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reallocate graduate waivers and stipends to meet university goals, particularly diversification of graduate student body. • Support and expand strong graduate programs through re-allocation 	May 2024	EVPP Deans Dean, GS

5 DATA

The following tables were derived using the Fall 2021 census date student population.

	Total	% International	% BIPOC
Non Degree	332	3.31%	38.01%
Performer's Certificate and SSP	21	28.57%	20.00%
Master's	2,715	15.43%	32.62%
Professional Doctoral	598	1.84%	31.69%
Ph.D.	564	26.60%	27.29%