SWOT 3: Create and Maintain Excellence of Graduate Programs

Strengths

- UMass Dartmouth is experiencing growth and change.
- We have created new graduate degree programs including certificates and doctoral programs; hired research-active new faculty; and grown graduate enrollments.
- We have a strong desire among both faculty and administration for graduate education to be a growth area and a central institutional activity.
- A number of our programs/research areas have achieved or are approaching national or international recognition.
- We are the University of Massachusetts campus south of Boston with a mandate to serve the region.

Weaknesses

- Graduate-education leadership is overly decentralized.
  - Graduate education policy, direction, and budgeting now occur at the level of the Colleges/Departments. Instead, central campus leadership/authority is required.
  - Resourcing from within each College/Department forces graduate and undergraduate education to compete for resources; weakens across-discipline collaborations; permits resistance to change; and provides no incentives to achieve institutional goals.
- Direction, planning, and resource allocation are lacking but essential to success.
  - We lack a clear institutional definition of the relationship of research/graduate education to the institutional mission: are we aiming to be broadly a “research university” or a “teaching university with areas of identified research strength”?
  - We lack a master plan for graduate education, one that identifies “signature” research and professional areas.
  - Program-specific plans and budgeting are lacking. Each program should be budgeted according to its appropriate “profile” from among the “Research,” “Professional,” and “Niche” program types (for these terms, see Note at end).
  - Program-specific performance criteria and expectations (and assessments based on them) are lacking—for parameters like student quality, domestic vs. international students, full time vs. part time students, outcomes and completion rates, future careers. We tend to recognize grant-funding over scholarly and research achievement. All graduate programs need a basis in scholarly excellence (including the Scholarship of Practice).
  - Some master’s programs need a stronger basis: they need to be(come) Research-active or Professional, or be closed.
- Pervasive elements in campus “culture” weaken graduate education.
  - Assignment of workloads occurs without flexibility or differentiation of faculty roles. Developing strength in graduate education and research requires a lower teaching
load—e.g., 2/2 with reconsideration of thesis/dissertation supervision. Having a category for “teaching faculty” who have higher load expectations than graduate faculty would help.

- There is resistance to identifying a “graduate faculty.”
- Graduate faculty governance is fragmented across multiple Senate committees (Admissions, SFAAC, Financial Aid) rather than concentrated in a “Council for Graduate Affairs.”
- A customary faculty hiring paradigm seeks to have “one of everything” in each department instead of hiring towards strengthening areas of excellence.
- There is a tendency for departments to meet undergraduate needs first and give the graduate level “whatever is left over”—e.g., when scheduling.
- One-size-fits-all criteria for promotion do not specifically recognize scholarly/graduate education productivity.

- There are many obstacles to developing interdisciplinary/research-area excellence (as recommended by Yardley)
  - Criteria for strength in interdisciplinary programs are needed; these should be focused and strong, not just opportunities to make combinations.
  - Because they lack independent structural and budgetary authority, interdisciplinary programs are unable to “command” resources, such as the instruction they need (e.g., MAT, BMEBT), space, etc.
  - Collaboration needs to be enabled through consortia, supportive structures, etc.
  - Graduate programs that have common strengths and interests (such as Materials/Textiles and Mechanical Engineering, or Computer Engineering and Computer Science) are administered by separate departments with little coordination.

- Graduate infrastructure and support are lacking but essential to success.
  - We need to support research and graduate education as year-round, 24/7 activities—for example, by providing air conditioning in summer in the academic buildings, and expanding access and service hours.
  - Grants Office and outreach-development support are inadequate. We must expand/strengthen research-based programs by expanding grants, and professional programs by expanding activities in Centers and through regional partnerships.
  - Access to research space is a major limitation. Access needs to be assigned by productivity in scholarship and determined at point of hire; inactive and underused research and teaching-lab space must to be reassigned.
  - Student laboratories are seriously challenged, as are art studios on the main campus. Graduate students need individual spaces and meeting spaces.
  - Graduate programs lack seminar and conference space. Conferencing support is inadequate to non-existent.
  - In many fields, graduate programs lack sufficient library/reference resources to expand.
  - Administration/support/funding functions are lacking (see Yardley report)—there are unstable staffing for support functions; lack of support for assessment activities; lack of support for graduate recruitment; and only a partial waiver of academic charges
for graduate assistants. Programs with national recognition need vigorous national publicity.

Opportunities

- Responding to pressures for outcomes assessment (NEASC accreditation) and for public accountability (e.g., Spellings Report) will push us to develop a culture of continuous improvement and apply to ourselves rigorous standards for performance and achievement.
- We should differentiate ourselves from for-profit, low-cost, low-quality graduate programs that are based on temporary instruction—and instead offer quality programs based on faculty scholarly achievement and on-load instruction (see second Threat bullet below).
- The Yardley Report has raised issues that can mobilize new institutional practices and focuses.
- Our intention to “prepare students for advancement in the twenty-first century environment” opens opportunities in global issues concerning the environment, emerging countries, etc. South coast economic development offers opportunities for professional programs and for “lifestyle” and cultural activities.
- We can serve regional students better by increasing onsite/distance education and extending beyond traditional M-F, 8-5 scheduling.
- Fundraising can be focused on alumni of graduate programs.

Threats

- Our Carnegie Classification among the state colleges rather than research universities limits our stature and threatens us with “demotion”; yet upon moving to research status we will lose the US News top rating that has been very helpful in undergraduate recruiting.
- We are not good at assessing market demand and then responding proactively to it; graduate programs may not offer what potential students want.
- We face competition from other institutions—e.g., Brown (Portuguese), URI (Marine), and Roger Williams (Business)—and from UMass Amherst (urging that we should not be permitted to do big things). Some external authorities believe that UMass Dartmouth does not need to be an institution producing research and scholarship.
- Some students prefer low-cost, low-quality graduate programs for quick and easy credentialing (see second Opportunity bullet above; the best strategy is not to seek such students).
- Congressional attacks on earmarkings threaten long-standing sources of grant support—for example, the National Textile Center materials/textiles funding.

Suggestion for Revising the Objectives

The current Strategic Plan renewal process does not permit us to modify the plan’s original Goal, “The University is recognized for its excellent undergraduate and graduate
programs....” However, Objectives may be changed. The SWOT 3 Team suggests a new approach to the structure of the Objectives under Goal One: using separate categories of objectives for undergraduate and graduate education. Some common objectives could be used to express unifying educational principles.

**A Note on Terminology for Types of Program**

It is convenient to structure graduate program planning around three main types. Some programs share features across these (Nursing, for example).

- **Research**: Research-based, grant-supported programs, full-time student base, many GAs/waivers; is at least revenue neutral if not revenue-positive.
- **Professional**: Professional-based programs, part-time student base, few GAs; should be revenue positive.
- **Niche**: Mission/reputation-important programs acknowledging existing faculty strengths or special interests; may be revenue negative.

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**Contextual: Relevant Section of the Current Strategic Plan**

**Goal**: The University is recognized for its excellent undergraduate and **graduate** programs that integrate innovative teaching/learning strategies and prepare students for advancement in the twenty-first century environment.

**Objectives**:

- Support and nurture quality core programs (undergraduate and graduate)
- Infuse experiential learning activities into all majors
- Evaluate outcomes for the general education program
- Expand faculty knowledge and utilization of innovative and diverse teaching strategies.
- Integrate co-curricular activities into student's learning experience.
- Continue to engage in external review of programs by formal accreditation bodies and/or peer-review activities.