To: Academic Deans and Directors, Academic Department Heads and Program Directors, Graduate Council, Graduate Education Taskforce, Registrar
From: Myron Allen
Subject: Elimination of graduate faculty designation
Date: 6 November 2009
Copies: Dr. Sara Axelson, Dr. Bill Gern, Dr. Carol Frost, Dr. Rollin Abernethy, Dr. Nicole Ballenger, Dr. Maggi Murdock, Dr. Jay Puckett, Dr. Tom Buchanan

The Graduate Education Taskforce, with concurrence of the Graduate Council, has recommended that the University of Wyoming no longer maintain a distinct graduate faculty. I accept this recommendation. I believe this decision will allow UW to maintain its emphasis on high-quality graduate education while streamlining the pathways for faculty members to contribute to it. With this memo I’ll sketch the rationale for the decision and summarize the new procedures for assigning people to graduate committees.

Rationale

The traditional justification for distinguishing a graduate faculty is to provide consistent assurance that faculty members who participate in graduate student supervision — especially those who are starting their careers — are qualified to contribute. Whether or not this mechanism was ever effective, I’m convinced that it no longer is. UW’s junior faculty members are generally as active in advanced research or creative endeavors as their senior colleagues. And there is an institution-wide expectation that faculty members in graduate degree-granting programs begin contributing to graduate education as soon as possible. Thanks to their dedication and the mentoring that they receive from senior faculty members, new faculty members routinely prove themselves to be highly effective graduate student advisors and committee members. Thus, as a requirement for initiating faculty members’ careers in graduate education, graduate faculty status appears to be an extraneous barrier.

As a mechanism for terminating faculty members’ involvement in graduate education, graduate faculty status is nugatory. In practice UW faculty members who enjoy this formal status relinquish it not as a result of any assessment of their capacity to direct graduate students but instead by resigning or retiring.

Procedures

The rules governing graduate faculty status currently reside in UW Regulation 7-580, “Regulations of the Graduate School”. With the recent elimination of the Graduate School as an administrative unit, this regulation is effectively inoperative. Indeed, one purpose of the Graduate Education Taskforce, which I appointed this past summer, is to recommend administrative procedures that UW will follow henceforth, in the absence of UW Regulation 7-580. After the taskforce finishes its work and the Graduate Council has reviewed the academic merits of its findings, it will be appropriate to amend the regulation.

Until then, the Office of Academic Affairs will determine eligibility for involvement in graduate education using the following principles:

1) All tenure-track and tenured faculty members are eligible, a priori, for graduate committee service, chairing graduate committees, and serving as internal or external members of graduate committees. A faculty member’s service in any specific capacity of this kind is subject to written approval by (a) the affected department head or program director and (b) the college dean or, in the case of cross-college programs, the provost. Approval is necessary for each specific committee assignment. Programs, departments, and colleges
are responsible for assigning people to graduate committees, for ensuring that faculty members assigned to such service are prepared for it, and for guarding against conflicts of interest, nepotism, inappropriate personal relationships, and other pitfalls.

2) It is possible for non-tenure-track UW academic employees with terminal degrees in relevant disciplines or special expertise to chair graduate committees. Approval of such assignments must be on a case-by-case basis. The employees typically have appointments governed by UW Regulations 5-408 (academic professionals), 7-490 (archives faculty), 7-631 (library faculty), or 5-1 (clinical faculty or research professors); occasionally they may have other classifications. To request approval of such an assignment, the responsible program director or department head should forward the nomination of the potential committee member, including the curriculum vitae and a brief explanation of the nominee's expertise, to the college dean or Office of Academic Affairs, in the case of interdisciplinary graduate programs.

3) Graduate committees may include non-UW employees. However, there must be sound scholarly justification, and the committee composition must satisfy the requirements enumerated in the Graduate Bulletin or its successors. Including a non-UW employee does not reduce the number of UW employees required.

4) Otherwise, the rules governing graduate committee composition remain unchanged from those in the current Graduate Bulletin. Every graduate committee at the masters (MS and MA) and doctoral (Ph.D and Ed.D) level requires a UW committee member, from outside the department or program, whose expertise is appropriate for the thesis or dissertation topic. Degree programs that do not require theses or dissertations, such as the PharmD, JD, and some professional masters’ programs, are exempt from this requirement.

5) All graduate programs should provide first-time graduate committee members and first-time graduate advisors with a mentor or a mentoring program for graduate student advising and committee service. A faculty member's mentor(s) can also serve as mentors for other aspects of the career.

6) The Office of the Registrar will maintain records of graduate committee composition and actions. It is possible to change graduate committees. The department head or program director normally initiates the request.

Under this system, department heads, interdisciplinary program directors, deans, and the Office of Academic Affairs share responsibility for maintaining effective, rigorous, and equitable graduate committees. Responsibility for the most difficult judgments about these matters should reside at the department or program level, where decision-makers can bring discipline-specific expertise to bear. However, college deans and the provost retain the authority to override decisions about graduate committee membership in the hopefully rare cases in which academic standards appear to be weak or where personal matters threaten the integrity of the scholarly experience.