

PRINCIPLES AND CHARACTERISTICS
OF
GRADUATE EDUCATION

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY



Principles and Characteristics of Graduate Education at Brigham Young University

Graduate education distinguishes itself by advanced systematic study and experience in depth—a depth in understanding, knowledge, scholarly competence, inquiry and discovery. Graduates are equipped to contribute to their disciplines, to teach and transmit knowledge within their disciplines, to conduct research and produce creative works, to apply their learning in the everyday world, and ultimately to extend service to their disciplines and to humanity.

Although diversity in focus, methodology, and implementation is expected across the spectrum of graduate programs at BYU, strong programs are characterized by selective admission of highly qualified students, graduate faculty committed to excellence, and rigorous programs of study conducted in a context of faith. A few fundamental principles characterize all strong graduate programs. These principles emerge from and complement the *Mission and Aims of a BYU Education*. These principles are listed below followed by some characteristics that are required to realize these principles.

Principles of Graduate Education

Expertise in the subject matter. Graduate education leads to expertise in the content and skills of the discipline at a level appropriate to the degree sought.

Critical thinking. Graduate education develops and refines critical thinking skills including a thorough knowledge of the assumptions of the discipline and an understanding of viable alternative assumptions.

Theoretical understanding. Graduate education provides an understanding of the theoretical bases of the field of study. It grounds application and performance in theory.

Proficiency in research and/or creative activities. Graduate education develops proficiencies that advance the knowledge and activities of the discipline. These proficiencies include writing skills as well as the ability to present original insights and creative expressions.

Spiritual discernment and moral integrity. Graduate education facilitates the growth of integrity and wisdom and the integration of faith into the pursuit of knowledge within the discipline.

Service orientation. Graduate education instills responsibility to return the special benefits of graduate training to the larger community.

Wide representation of perspectives . Graduate education presents an intellectual and rich encounter with the discipline. Study and inquiry are conducted in a context sensitive to diversity and belonging.

Characteristics of Strong Graduate Programs

I. Clear Definition of Purpose

A. Planned programs

1. Only graduate degrees essential to the department's mission and important to the larger mission of the university are offered by the department.
2. The department has determined and clearly stated the aims for the future of its graduate program(s). It has a strategic plan for constant improvement and is pursuing it vigorously.
3. The department has determined and clearly stated the focus and purpose of its graduate program(s). It does not necessarily attempt to offer degrees or emphases in all areas of its discipline. Students admitted pursue coursework, research, and degrees only in areas in which faculty are producing and publishing scholarly work and are well qualified to teach and direct research.
4. The department regularly evaluates its graduate programs, faculty, facilities, and digital resources, identifying weak areas that need strengthening and determining if any programs or specializations should be dropped or added.

B. Theoretical orientation

1. The department does not see a graduate degree as simply an accumulation of credits. Faculty members understand that graduate work at a university is inherently involved in the discovery of new knowledge, and they seek to understand and propound the theoretical principles that lie behind what can be observed and tested.
2. Graduate education extends beyond the acquisition of practical skills and endeavors to encompass the practical within the theoretical. The department makes a concerted effort to educate graduate students to extend their understanding using both tools and theory.

II. Qualified Graduate Faculty

A. Effective mentoring

1. The department and college apply appropriate criteria for identifying graduate faculty. There are sufficient numbers of well-prepared, full-time graduate faculty members in the department's areas of specialty to support strong graduate work in those areas. All department graduate faculty members support the graduate programs of the department.
2. Department graduate faculty members keep current in their fields and continually update course content and teaching methods to engage students and immerse them in the discipline.
3. Faculty members strengthen students spiritually by integrating spirituality into formal teaching, by teaching the ethics of the discipline, and by exemplifying integrity and devotion.

B. Scholarly productivity

1. Graduate faculty members are active scholars or artist-scholars who do significant research and regularly publish in national or international refereed journals and presses, or who present or perform their artistic work for wide and authoritative critical review. Their books, articles, papers, and creative work make significant contributions to their disciplines.
2. Faculty members are involved in scholarly and creative activities in their discipline, participate in regional, national and international conferences, and work with colleagues at other universities and centers of learning.
3. In disciplines where the norms of scholarship require external funding, faculty members actively seek funding to support their research programs and to enhance graduate student involvement in research or creative work.
4. Faculty members use professional development leaves to extend their knowledge in their disciplines and to develop enhanced/expanded research opportunities for graduate students in the future.

C. *Dedication to service and citizenship*

1. Faculty members strive to assure that all activities support the mission of the university, build the Kingdom of God, and bless students, colleagues, and humanity.
2. Faculty members contribute to the intellectual climate of the department and the university through service, including conscientious attention to committee assignments and collaboration in research, scholarship, or creative endeavors with colleagues and students.
3. Faculty members contribute to the professional community through service such as conference organization and participation and editorship of journals and other forums. Competing activities, such as paid consultation work, are kept to a minimum, and are engaged in only when such activities advance knowledge and skills in the discipline, strengthen research, and enhance the influence and respect of the university.

III. High Academic Standards

A. *Well-established admissions standards and practices*

1. The department has an active recruitment program to attract excellent students from undergraduate and graduate programs at other universities. It does not rely solely on an applicant pool of its own undergraduates.
2. The department has clearly stated and effectively communicated admissions standards. These standards are reviewed regularly and revised as needed. The department sets high expectations and employs several criteria such as the undergraduate GPA, letters of recommendation, and professional experience in making admissions decisions. It admits provisionally only if an applicant shows exceptional promise.
3. The department admits students only when all or virtually all prerequisite requirements have been met.
4. The department is consistent in applying its admission standards, and it is timely in making admissions decisions. These decisions are made by a faculty admissions committee or by the faculty as a whole. All graduate faculty members have some input in admissions decisions.

5. The department attracts sufficient numbers of qualified applicants to offer full-fledged graduate programs with appropriate course offerings and to provide a stimulating graduate culture for students. Nevertheless, the department admits only as many students as it can effectively guide through a rigorous, carefully advised program. It considers student-faculty ratios, especially in light of specialties that applicants wish to pursue.

B. Strong curriculum and rigorous course work

1. The curriculum is well designed, relatively stable, and leads to strong preparation of students. The department offers enough courses to support a full graduate program, and it lists no courses that are “on the books” but rarely taught. The curriculum is appropriate for the preparation and specialties of the faculty and reflects leadership in the discipline.
2. The classroom experience is qualitatively different from that in the undergraduate program. The department should avoid all practices that dilute the classroom experience for graduate students. When advanced undergraduates register for 500-level courses, they do so with the understanding that the course is taught at a graduate level and that the expectations for them are the same as for graduate students.
3. Credits earned through directed readings, independent or off-campus projects, or employment-related projects are kept to a minimum, and where such courses are approved by the department, they are as rigorous and demanding as regular courses. In such courses, the teacher and student formulate an agreement of requirements and expectations. It is important to directly assess the outcome of these specialized courses. Students receive credit only when the requirements and expectations have been fulfilled.
4. As appropriate, courses require extensive writing assignments of substance and consequence that train students to think critically. Student papers adhere to high standards of composition, and they are carefully criticized and assessed, sometimes by both teacher and other students.
5. All courses, even those considered to be applied courses, have a strong theoretical foundation based on current research. They require investigation beyond classroom experiences and textbooks. Where possible, they include substantial written assessments using essays or advanced scientific, mathematical or statistical analyses.

6. Every graduate course provides a course outline and syllabus in which the teacher's expectations are clearly stated and course learning outcomes and assessments are comprehensive and clear.
7. Graduate students have opportunities for learning outside the major department.
8. The department enriches its graduate curriculum with presentations by visiting lecturers, with colloquia, and with other opportunities for learning outside the regular curriculum.
9. Course grades accurately reflect student achievement and are not inflated.

C. Excellence in dissertations, theses, and projects

1. The department may offer courses in research methodology specific to the discipline.
2. The department requires a culminating writing experience of its graduate students, regardless of whether the student is in a traditional or an applied program. The final paper is usually a research-based dissertation or thesis, but may be a project or report in a master's program. All doctoral students prepare formal dissertations.
3. Dissertations and theses are on topics of real consequence, and their content makes substantial contributions to some aspect of the discipline. The contributions of projects are held to standards appropriately set by programs. By their excellence and uniqueness, these research and writing experiences impressively demonstrate the achievements, knowledge, and skills of the students at the time the graduate degree is completed.
4. The prospectus is treated as a critical aspect of the student's research. It is ideally prepared during the initial phase before intensive research begins and is subjected to department review.
5. The research design, the preparation of the prospectus, the research itself, and the preparation of the dissertation, thesis, or project are carefully directed by the student's advisory committee. Problems in research design or methodology are discovered and corrected at the prospectus stage.

6. The dissertation, thesis, or project engages a topic that the faculty adviser is well prepared to direct.
7. The dissertation or thesis is well written and leads to a publishable piece of work. Students are encouraged to publish their work and may be assisted in the effort to find a publisher. Where appropriate, faculty members and students publish collaboratively. Projects are similarly held to appropriate standards set by programs.

D. Well-developed procedures for conducting comprehensive and oral examinations

1. Department comprehensive and oral examinations are demanding and fair. They require currency in the field, thorough analysis of the questions or problems posed, and synthesis of knowledge in the discipline, all at a level appropriate for the degree to be awarded. They also require grace and skill in expression.
2. The examination questions are carefully conceived and well-written. Test questions demand a grasp of essentials and the ability to analyze and synthesize.
3. The department provides published and well-publicized criteria as to what constitutes acceptable performance on department oral and comprehensive examinations. The purpose, format, range of content, and nature of examinations are described, and sample questions from past examinations are available for study.
4. The department applies consistent and rigorous standards in the evaluation of examinations. There is a mechanism for providing feedback and a clear policy on the retaking of failed comprehensive examinations.

IV. Well-defined, Clearly Articulated, and Helpful Procedures

A. Broadly based college and department governance

1. Graduate faculty members participate in all departmental decisions that affect the department's academic programs, the quality of the degrees offered, and the professional lives of the faculty.

2. The goals of graduate programs are not based solely on expectations of external accrediting agencies. Rather, they exceed the quality required by such agencies and thus maintain independence.
3. Department programs are created, defined, and influenced by genuine, significant developments within the discipline consistent with available resources rather than by perceived market demands and short-lived trends.
4. The department has a written assessment plan and uses it routinely to improve graduate programs.

B. Effective advisement of students

1. Faculty members are conscientious in their advisement of students. They keep regularly scheduled office hours and have frequent scholarly interaction with students. They return thesis drafts and other materials promptly so that students experience no unnecessary delays in completion of their programs.
2. The department recognizes that a student's first responsibility is to his or her own academic program. Care is taken to ensure that other duties, such as teaching undergraduate courses, enhance the graduate education experience and do not impede student's progress toward a degree. Graduate students teach an appropriate number of courses so as to not hinder progress toward their degrees.
3. The department has a published set (a student handbook) of current policies, requirements, expectations, and procedures that describes with clarity and in detail what graduate students need to know to enter a program and successfully complete a degree in the department.
4. University and department deadlines are well publicized and communicated to students effectively.

5. The department has formal orientation procedures or seminars to acquaint new students with the expectations and requirements of graduate study in the department and the university.
6. Each student is well informed from the beginning, having been assigned a graduate faculty member who assists in the selection of a permanent adviser. That selection is made by the end of the first semester.
7. The department conducts semiannual evaluations, at clearly designated times, of each student's progress and informs the student of his or her status. If marginal or unsatisfactory progress is noted, the department informs the student of action required to demonstrate satisfactory progress.
8. The department has determined an optimum time length for program completion and moves its students through on schedule.
9. A high percentage of the students on the department's rolls are actually on campus pursuing degrees at any given time.
10. The department graduates a high percentage of the students it admits.
11. The department provides published information about financial aid opportunities for students in its programs.
12. Students who have teaching assignments are well trained to perform those assignments competently and successfully.
13. The department assists the proactive efforts of graduate students in finding employment or advanced educational opportunities suitable to their preparation and experience after they leave the department.

C. *Appropriate faculty assignments*

1. Faculty members who are teaching and advising in the graduate program are given ample opportunity for scholarly work and professional development.
2. The department encourages reasonable limits on the number of graduate advisees mentored by any one faculty member.

3. Faculty assignments in the graduate program are not performed on an “overload” basis.
4. Faculty members who are teaching and advising in the graduate program should avoid an "overload" basis for teaching neither in night school or in off-campus programs.

D. Responsible class scheduling

1. The university publishes and distributes to graduate students a multi-year schedule of course offerings, enabling students to plan their study.
2. Graduate course offerings are sequenced appropriately and offered with sufficient frequency to prevent delays in degree completion.

V. Adequate Resources

1. The department regularly assesses its resources and makes realistic decisions about its graduate program(s) in light of these resources.
2. The department provides research support—in the form of equipment, laboratories or studios, staff assistance, and funds (where possible)—for the research programs of faculty members who teach and advise graduate students. In many disciplines faculty secure external funding to complement department support.
3. The department may work with the library subject librarians to ensure that the collection supports the research and teaching needs of the department. The department is aware of particularly valuable library resources in its discipline and informs graduate students of those resources.
4. The department and its faculty members actively and persistently seek outside funding to support research and graduate students. Department graduate students receive adequate financial support and early notification of that support.
5. The department allows faculty members sufficient time to do superior work in both teaching and research, and to advise and mentor graduate students in a thorough manner by appropriately managing citizenship responsibilities.
6. Graduate students have adequate space and opportunity for informal discussion and interaction, and those who teach undergraduates have adequate facilities for advising and helping their students with class assignments. Graduate students also have access to facilities and equipment needed in their graduate research.

7. The department encourages faculty members to consult, collaborate, and share resources with colleagues who have common curricular interests in other departments and colleges.

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