

THE 2-4 PROJECT IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

To generate these reports, the DGS of each department solicited comments from graduate students through both semi-confidential means and open forums, and discussed proposals with the faculty in closed meetings. In some cases, the entire department was invited to participate in a town-hall meeting. Each report, while focusing on the 2nd through 4th years of study, also broadly addressed key issues of graduate training. Academic advising was addressed in all reports. Some of the departments also discussed the written prospectus, qualifying exams, relevance of core courses, and availability of advanced courses. Several reports touched on department-specific issues. Each department identified one or more areas where improvement was possible, and either described the steps already instituted to address these, or proposed several possible solutions that, at the time of submission, had yet to be voted on by the faculty.

ADVISING AND MENTORING

Each of the departments has taken specific steps to improve student advising: academic advisors are assigned prior to selection of a permanent research advisor; term or annual activity reports are submitted to the DGS, who then provides the students with evaluations; and students are encouraged to make better use of their thesis committees, especially when the research advisor is unavailable for direct one-on-one interaction. In one department, committees were specifically urged to be more aware of when a faculty advisor might be off-campus for an extended period, and to take responsibility for picking up any slack in the advising function. Most departments require some regular contact between the student and their full committee. In several of the departments, Qualifying Exams and pre-qualifying requirements have been modified to insure that students submit written research results earlier in their training, providing the faculty (research advisor, committee, and DGS) with a tangible example of the student's work and progress on which to base evaluations and provide feedback.

EXAMINATIONS AND PROSPECTUS

Several departments examined their Qualifying Exams, a key element of the 2-4 years, and a demarcation point between the earlier, course-oriented stage of training and the advanced, scholarship-driven stage. Most departments have their exams at the end of the 2nd year, except Linguistics which has an exam after 7 terms; the format of the exams varies between departments. Feedback from students and faculty in each department indicated general satisfaction with the timing and format of the exams. In some of the departments, students expressed a concern that either there were not enough advanced courses offered, or that the Qualifying Exam did not reflect the content of the courses they took. In those departments where these concerns exist, the

faculty agreed that the criticism is fair, and are taking steps to resolve it. Several departments are making modifications to their core curricula. Political Science, for example, has reduced the required number of written field examinations to two, while permitting a combination of coursework and research papers vetted by faculty beyond the course instructor to serve as certification in two other fields.

The writing of a prospectus, the first real step in creating an original dissertation, was addressed either directly or indirectly in most departments. It is generally expected that the research advisor and, ideally, the thesis committee, are involved in this process. Several departments have decided to provide additional support by hosting a year-end workshop about the goals of the prospectus and how to write one; this is aimed specifically at 2nd year students. Another department is encouraging the thesis committee to be more actively involved at this early stage of the project's development. Several of the departments commented on recent changes to the qualifying process that allowed students to submit work that provides a natural transition to the development of their prospectus.

DEPARTMENT-SPECIFIC CONCERNS

The African American Studies department concluded that the structure of its doctoral program presents a logistical challenge for implementing reforms insofar as all doctoral students in African American Studies are enrolled simultaneously in a second participating program over whose curriculum, degree requirements and cultures African American Studies has little or no control. This interdisciplinary arrangement poses a related intellectual challenge for the department in discerning general opportunities for curricular improvement because of its students' diverse research topics and methods. In order to overcome these challenges, the department has committed to working with partner programs to develop a mutual understanding of the standard patterns for fulfilling degree requirements among their shared students and to identify any recurring systematic obstacles to an authentically integrated interdisciplinary program. It has created within its Graduate Studies Committee a permanent sub-committee comprised of faculty and graduate students in a variety of combined fields to pursue these conversations.

In Anthropology, the significant time spent in the field to gather research data is an area of concern. Three specific problems they identify in their report include: the loss of institutional memory (mid-level students who are abroad are not available to advise incoming students); faculty fieldwork takes advisors abroad, affecting student advising; and students who experience delays in their work because of field conditions often find themselves out of synch with the graduate school timeline. The department attempts to address concerns about peer and faculty advising by posting additional information on their web page for junior students, and by getting the thesis committee more directly involved in student advising. With regard to the time spent in the field, they recommend that the graduate school count this year as non-cumulative registration.

In Linguistics, the diverse background of the incoming students, coupled with the small size of the department, makes it a challenge to provide the students with the appropriate courses. Two changes under consideration would be to allow student with expertise in certain areas to enter with advanced standing, or to reduce the required course load and add some additional directed reading and graduate seminar courses.

Having just significantly revised its curriculum immediately before the 2-4 Project began, the Department of Sociology was not required to complete such a report. The revisions to the Sociology curriculum were in keeping with the spirit of the 2-4 Project insofar as they involved realigning course requirements to incorporate mentoring and preparation for examinations, prospectus writing, dissertation research and the publication of journal articles into the early-stage coursework itself. The initial response from both students and faculty suggest that the new curriculum has been well received and promises to be effective.

Other minor changes made by individual departments in response to the 2-4 report include: posting an outline of 1st year course requirements on the web for the benefit of incoming students; requiring a completed chapter of the dissertation before recommending a student for a University Dissertation Fellowship; clarifying the rules governing the final thesis defense; and providing more regular briefings by the chair via e-mail to inform graduate students about faculty recruiting efforts and faculty leave schedules to assist them in planning their research goals.

SUMMARY

Each department reviewed here took the 2-4 Reports seriously, and used them as an opportunity to evaluate their requirements, their advising structure, and student development both within and outside of these critical years. They identified areas of potential improvement and have taken or are taking steps, small and large, to improve the quality of graduate education.