Graduate Program Review Task Force (GPRTF) Report
__________, 2003

Executive Summary
(To completed after the Graduate Administrative Board discussion.)

I. Report

I. Background

Currently, the Graduate School conducts graduate program reviews on a ten-year cycle. The stated purpose of these reviews is to engage program faculty, other faculty inside and outside the University, and the Graduate Dean in thoughtful and creative study and evaluation of each program’s academic performance in relation to the mission of NC State University. The goals of the review, according to current guidelines, are to gain a clearer understanding of the following: 1) the program’s purposes within NC State, 2) the program’s effectiveness in achieving these purposes, 3) the program’s overall quality, and 4) future objectives for the program and the changes necessary to achieve those objectives. Reviews currently consist of a self-study developed by the program, a review conducted by a review team (external reviewer, senior professor from NC State outside the college of the program being reviewed, and an Associate Dean of the Graduate School), a response to the review by the graduate program, and a discussion of the review and response among the DGP, department head(s), graduate dean, college dean(s), provost, and vice chancellor for research.

Just as graduate programs need to be reviewed periodically, so does the review process itself. Our current review process has been in place for approximately 20 years. For the programs that have been reviewed, the process has been effective in achieving the goals stated above. There are two issues, however, which indicate that changes in the review process are warranted. First, the philosophy of program review on this campus is changing. The new philosophy and culture, as reflected in the recent work of the Committee on Undergraduate Programs, emphasize continuous, outcomes-based assessment where the results of assessment are systematically used to direct program change. Second, to be properly managed, the current graduate review process demands greater human resources than the Graduate School has had available from its current staff. This deficit has led to irregular scheduling such that not all graduate programs are benefiting from reviews on a timely basis. For these reasons, a “re-visioning” of the graduate program review process seems appropriate at this time.

This “re-visioning” will also serve the purposes of the many external accrediting agencies who review NC State’s graduate programs, which are moving increasingly toward outcomes-based assessment. For example, in its new “Principles of Accreditation” approved in December 2001, the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of
Colleges and Schools (SACS) affirmed that “the concept of quality enhancement is at the heart of the Commission’s philosophy of accreditation.” This presumes that each member institution is engaged in an ongoing program of improvement. Specifically, the Commission requires each institution to demonstrate “that each educational program for which academic credit is awarded . . . establishes and evaluates program and learning outcomes” and to provide an institutional assessment plan in which it “identifies expected outcomes for its educational programs and its administrative and educational support services; assesses whether it achieves these outcomes; and provides evidence of improvement based on an analysis of those results.”

Accrediting agencies are only one group among many stakeholders in graduate education at NC State. Others include the graduate students and faculty in the program, departmental administrators, college deans, the Graduate School and graduate dean, the provost, the chancellor, prospective students, and the public, most often represented by the North Carolina legislature. Although their specific interests vary, each has a stake in seeing that the quality of our graduate programs is monitored and, where necessary, improved. In order to address the interests of our stakeholders, as well as the issues discussed above, in February 2002 Graduate Dean Robert Sowell appointed a task force to reassess the process currently in place for graduate program review.

II. Charge

Dean Sowell asked the task force to evaluate the current graduate program review process at NC State and to recommend any changes required to ensure that the process adequately accomplishes NC State’s goals and those of accreditation. Specifically, the charge of the task force was to:

1) Survey peer institutions regarding graduate program reviews in order to obtain a better understanding of their review processes.

2) Evaluate the purpose and goals of graduate program review at NC State University to determine if they meet the needs of the program, college, Graduate School, and university administration. Part of this evaluation would be to determine what each of these stakeholders hopes to gain from the review process.

3) Examine the current protocols for the review process to determine if there is a more effective process for review, especially as related to “continuous and ongoing review.”

4) Determine what role the Graduate School and/or Administrative Board of the Graduate School should play in the review process.

5) Evaluate the current “Format for the Self-Study” to determine if all the necessary components of a continuous, ongoing, and outcomes-assessment-based review process are included.
6) Determine what the appropriate outcome(s) of the review process should be (final report, meeting with dean[s] and upper administration, development of a timeline for implementation of recommendations, etc.).

III. Task Force Activities/Findings

A. Activities
   - Completed a comparison of current graduate review practices of 9 other universities (Appendix IV)
   - Held focus group meetings with the following (see Appendix V):
     ▪ Graduate Operations Council
     ▪ Engineering DGP’s
     ▪ CHASS department heads
     ▪ Graduate students selected by the GSA
     ▪ Reviewed documents and/or websites describing the new Undergraduate Program Review process, key points from Marilee Bresciani’s article on “Writing Measurable and Meaningful Outcomes,” and key points from article by Leonard Baird on “Documenting Student Outcomes in Graduate and Professional Programs” (Appendix VI)
   - Met on a monthly or bi-monthly basis to consider key questions related to graduate program review (Appendix VII)

B. Findings
   - Program reviews at other universities surveyed range from once every 6 years to once every 10 years. A 7-year cycle is the most common. (See Appendix IV.) Most, like ours, follow guidelines established by the Council of Graduate Schools. Thus our review system is “typical” of those employed at our peer institutions across the nation.
   - The self-studies and formal graduate program reviews facilitate systematic evaluation of graduate programs, including inputs (e.g., the GPA’s and GRE’s of applying, admitted, and enrolling students) and outcomes (e.g., students’ ability to conduct independent and original research, time to degree, job placement, and student satisfaction with the program).
   - Faculty and program administrators see the value of both the internal self-study and the input from a reviewer external to the university, which are part of the graduate program review process. The self-study provides a basis for reflection leading to program improvements, and the external reviewer can help faculty see how their program measures up nationally against other similar programs.
   - Graduate faculty are continually revising aspects of their program in order to improve them, often both in response to feedback from current and prospective graduate students and from a desire to improve student learning outcomes. However, the assessments of student needs and student performance that lie behind changes in curriculum and program foci are often not documented as fully as they should be.
• Not all graduate programs at NC State are being reviewed every ten years (See Appendix III). Typically, only 3-4 graduate programs are being reviewed each year, rather than the 7-8 per year necessary to review all programs on a ten-year cycle. The primary reason for this gap is lack of sufficient resources for the labor-intensive task of coordinating and staffing all reviews – a burden which has historically fallen on an Associate Graduate Dean, who must also serve on every review committee and who has many other Graduate School responsibilities.

• Council of Graduate School guidelines, which our graduate program self-studies and data collection follow, currently do not include assessment of student learning outcomes. Many faculty are unfamiliar with or skeptical of assessing student learning outcomes at the graduate level.

• Stakeholders’ interests in and goals for graduate program review can vary widely, as can their measures of quality. Administrators at the college and university levels are interested in measuring the quality of the program against other programs within the university, as well as on a national scale, in order to decide on resource allocation among programs. Thus they are most interested in common measures of quality. Faculty and students within the program are also interested in measuring the quality of a program against that of its peers, but they are also interested in data that will provide the basis for program improvement. Thus they are interested in both common and unique measures.

• Most stakeholders would like to see more frequent and less onerous reviews, perhaps using data collected on an annual basis for other purposes, such as the college activity report, and perhaps a periodic aggregation of annual data during a review that includes an external reviewer. Faculty feel harassed by multiple requests for similar data, as well as by multiple reviews (internal and external).

• Most department heads and some DGP’s are not fully aware of the amount of data centrally available to them from the Graduate School and University Planning and Analysis (UPA).

• Graduate programs would like to be provided with benchmark data from their peer institutions to get a better sense of where they stand nationally.

• Students would like more input into the graduate review process. They feel that simply including data from the exit interviews, completed at the end of a student’s program, is too little, too late. They would like to have annual but anonymous input. And they support surveys of graduate alumni.

• Some programs do surveys of graduate alumni, employers of graduate alumni, and/or students who are admitted to these programs but choose to go elsewhere. Others do not. Except for the exit surveys, there are no centrally administered surveys such as there are for undergraduates.

• Currently, the only accountability that graduate programs have for implementing the changes recommended by reviewers occurs ten years later, when they are reviewed again.
• Although graduate programs often use the results of the review to improve curricula and other aspects of their graduate programs, some faculty are frustrated by the lack of follow-up or feedback from the administrators (deans, provost, etc.) to whom the review report is presented. They would like to receive feedback from the administrators to whom the report is sent, even if requests for new resources are denied.

IV. Task Force Recommendations

The task force believes that the primary goal of graduate program review is to build and maintain high-quality graduate programs through ongoing, systematic, and rigorous evaluation, leading to clear, meaningful communication among stakeholders as to the strengths and weaknesses of each program, a solid plan for making necessary improvements, and clear accountability for the improvements.

The task force identified the following guiding principles for strengthening the graduate program review process:

• It should be continuous and ongoing.
• It should allow the periodic self-study and external review to be less onerous and time-consuming than it has been in the past and more focused on particular issues that the program has identified as of particular importance.
• It should place greater emphasis on assessing outcomes, particularly student learning outcomes, and should utilize the information gained to direct programmatic change.
• It should result in appropriate follow-up by the faculty and by university administrators that leads to program improvement.

The task force envisions the revised review process as being iterative and cyclical. In addition to data supplied by UPA and the Graduate Schools, data on student learning outcomes would be collected annually by individual programs. Discussion and interpretation every two years of data being collected would provide the basis both for timely “mid-course corrections” in the graduate program and for the more formal program review that would occur every 7-8 years. Thus the program review’s self-study, which would provide an interpretive overview of the key findings from the past 7-8 years, as well as a summary of the resulting actions, should be much less onerous and time-consuming to prepare than it is at present. The action plan developed from the recommendations of the review team and the response of the graduate program, which would typically involve commitments by administrators as well as faculty, would be monitored for both implementation and impact through progress reports made to the program faculty and the Graduate School. This process would feed into the next cycle of annual data collection and biennial assessment of that data, thus beginning the next cycle of assessment and initiatives for improvement. This cyclical process is illustrated by the following diagram:
A. The following steps should be taken to make the graduate program review process more continuous and ongoing:

1. To initiate the new process, workshops should be held for the faculty to discuss outcomes assessment at the graduate level. In consultation with the Graduate School’s Director of Graduate Program Reviews, faculty should decide what outcomes should be measured for their graduate programs and what performance indicators should be used. (To the extent possible, the data they need should be provided from the Graduate School or UPA, but data on student learning outcomes can only be collected at the program level.) For the assessment effort to be sustainable, programs should start small, possibly with only 2-3 outcomes to measure.

2. At least every two years, graduate faculty in each program should meet to discuss the information they have collected regarding program performance (e.g., Annual Graduate Profile data, survey data, and learning outcomes indicators), documenting what data are reviewed and any actions taken as a result. It is important that this be a shared effort among the graduate faculty and not just the responsibility of the DGP.

3. Every eight years or in conjunction with other departmental reviews, the information from these biennial reviews should be summarized in a self-study to create a snapshot of program trends and quality, which will then be evaluated by a program review team that includes at least one external reviewer, a graduate faculty member external to the program’s college, and an associate dean of the Graduate School. This would mean that ~7 graduate programs would need to be reviewed each year.

4. Progress reports on the action plans that emerge from the formal reviews and brief reports on assessment activities should be submitted biennially to the Graduate School and copied to the program faculty. Presumably, the information used in these reports could also be used in Compact Planning.

5. Workshops and consultation with faculty to develop outcomes measures, collection and dissemination of information from biennial assessments, and coordination of formal review process, including arrangements for external reviewers, would be the responsibility of the Graduate School’s Director of Graduate Program Reviews (see below).

6. Funding for the formal reviews (e.g., expenses and honoraria for external reviewers), as well as the cost of additional staff to coordinate both formal graduate program reviews and the biennial data collection, interpretation, and reporting, should be provided from administrative funds at the Vice Chancellor/Provost level.

7. The new process, at least in the start-up phase, will require considerable additional time and energy from Directors of Graduate Programs (DGP’s). These assessment responsibilities should be clearly spelled out in the DGP job description. It is essential that department heads and college deans develop a plan for providing DGP’s with adequate support for carrying out
these new responsibilities, either through additional release time, additional administrative support, or (ideally) both.

B. The following steps should be taken to increase the emphasis on outcomes assessment:

1. For the sake of efficiency, graduate program review and undergraduate program review should utilize a shared vocabulary (i.e., common definitions of terms like “outcomes,” “objectives,” etc.); therefore, any workshops on graduate program outcomes should utilize the definitions already developed by the Assessment unit in Undergraduate Affairs (http://www.ncsu.edu/undergrad_affairs/assessment/files/definition/definition.htm), as well as other relevant training materials.

2. The Graduate School should hire a Director of Graduate Program Reviews (DGPR), who, working with graduate faculty, can implement and manage the new assessment and review process. This person would also be the liaison among the graduate program faculty, UPA, and the Graduate School’s Director of Information Systems. Together they would determine additional kinds of data that could be collected and disseminated centrally to help assess graduate learning outcomes. (For a full job description, see Appendix VIII.) There should be a full-time office assistant to support this position, as well as annual operating budget to pay for workshops, travel expenses and honoraria for external reviewers, etc. Annual cost: $153,000 ($86,100 salary and benefits for director + $36,900 for staff support + $30,000 for operational support). In the future, the additional workload created for the Information Systems unit may also require an additional staff position.

3. We recognize that graduate faculty are already doing a lot of assessment informally. They should therefore be encouraged to begin with an inventory of their current student assessment activities (e.g., qualifying exams, capstone projects, thesis and dissertation defenses, graduate alumni and/or employer surveys). With the help of the GPR Director or a college-level assessment coordinator, they could then determine how to design each of these individual assessments so that the data could be formulated in terms of student learning outcomes and aggregated to indicate strengths and weaknesses in the overall program. (See Appendix VI for examples of graduate student learning outcomes from Leonard Baird and the graduate assessment process at Georgia Tech).

4. The self-study guidelines should be revised to reflect the new assessment philosophy on campus (See Appendix II.)

C. The following steps should be taken to ensure appropriate follow-up to graduate program reviews that leads to program improvement:

1. There should be a list of action items developed by the program in response to the review, which should be reviewed and approved or modified during the post-review meeting of the DGPR, review team chair, department head,
and DGP with the college dean, graduate dean, provost, and vice chancellor for research and graduate studies. At that time, action items should be assigned to specific individuals, and a time line for implementing them should be agreed upon.

2. The final review report, program response, and action plan should be presented for approval to the Administrative Board of the Graduate School.

3. Those items requiring resource allocations should become part of the Compact between the department(s) and the dean(s), which in some cases may become part of the college Compact with the provost.

4. Every other year, the graduate program should submit a brief progress report on the implementation of the review team’s recommendations to the Director of Graduate Program Reviews, who should disseminate it to both the review team and the participants in the post-review meeting. (For biennial reporting guidelines, see Appendix IX.) If any action items are not being implemented, the GPR Director should arrange a meeting of the post-review participants to determine if and how these gaps in implementation can be addressed.

Appendix I: Revised description of Graduate Program Review Process (to be developed)

Appendix II: Revised guidelines for Graduate Program Review Self-Study (to be developed)

Appendix III: List of NC State Graduate Programs with Dates of Most Recent Reviews

Appendix IV: Features of Graduate Program Reviews from Selected Universities

Appendix V: Focus Group Questions

Appendix VI: Key Points from “Documenting Student Outcomes in Graduate and Professional Programs” by Leonard L. Baird and “Graduate Education: Framework for Designing an Appropriate Approach” from Georgia Tech Office of Assessment

Appendix VII: Key Questions to Guide the Preparation of the GPR Task Force Report

Appendix VIII: Job Description for Position of Director of Graduate Program Reviews (to be developed)

Appendix IX: Biennial Evaluation Guidelines: Expectations and Reporting (to be developed)
Appendix X: Implementation Timeline for New Graduate Program Review Process (to include submission and adoption of task force report, hiring of GPR director and support staff, spreadsheet of new formal review dates for all programs on an 8-year cycle, assessment workshops, dates by which all programs should submit outcomes assessment plan to GPR, director, development of website on which assessment expectations and review schedule are published and through which centrally available data can be accessed [links to UPA and Graduate School InfoWeb] and reports on annual/semiannual assessment activities, as well as progress reports on action items from formal reviews, can be submitted.)