

Committee on Research and Graduate Education Response

Enhancing the Academic Quality and Stature of Southern Methodist University: Analyses and Opportunities; Provost's Task Force on Scholarly Research and Creative Impact Final Report

Presented to the Faculty Senate of Southern Methodist University

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Summary Statement: Members of the committee (listed at the end of this document) uniformly commend the university for thoughtfully and carefully considering ways to enhance SMU's academic stature; the role of research on campus, including its intersection with undergraduate life and retention as well as graduate programming; and the contributions and collaborations the university has and can make to local, regional, national, and international communities. Having carefully considered these recommendations, the committee concludes that enhanced commitment to graduate students and graduate programs supports all of these goals, and urges that it be considered an essential component of increased capacity and quality of academic excellence as the university moves forward. Graduate education is central to intellectual inquiry and growth for faculty, and for many undergraduates, in the larger ecosystem of the university.

Response to the *Enhancing the Academic Quality and Stature [EAQS] report:* The committee was impressed with the scope and thoroughness of the report, especially as it endeavored to consider Carnegie, AAU, and *US News and World Report* criteria as benchmarks for academic excellence. Here, we note the vital role graduate students play in almost every one of the measures that the report cites as graduate students are often essential in research endeavors across fields, provide vital assistance with classroom and laboratory teaching, and are an intellectual asset to faculty work and collaboration. In addition to the report suggestion that graduate stipends (and research support overall) be increased so that SMU rises to competitive levels to attract the most qualified students, this committee also emphasizes the need to better and more regularly integrate graduate students across the academic life of the university. More robust interaction between graduate students in different fields, between graduate students and faculty in research and teaching, and between graduate students and undergraduates, would benefit the broader intellectual climate of the university.

The role of graduate programs and graduate students on campus is directly tied to several issues raised by the EAHQS report. The committee notes on page 17-18 of the report that SMU seems torn between its aspirant identities as a top tier research institution and its commitment to being an excellent teaching university, seemingly committing to both with, perhaps, inadequate resources to truly support either. The committee strongly agrees with the EAHQS report that sustained, committed resources to research – including but not limited to equipment, enhanced grant support services, supported faculty leave to pursue research projects (including those not externally funded), improved facilities, and support for interdisciplinary work. Part of this commitment may also require a recognition that not all researchers will be excellent teachers, and not all excellent teachers will be outstanding at research.

The university may need to become more flexible in its thinking and administrative procedures such that faculty who truly excel in one may not be expected or required to also excel at the other for purposes of tenure and promotion. In a similar vein, the committee notes that in discussing the need for a strong faculty on page 3 of the report, the emphasis appears to be more on recruiting new faculty than on supporting the interdisciplinary projects of existing faculty, or of training our graduate students to be excellent teachers. The requirement for external funding also seems to indicate that “research” does not include humanistic and creative disciplines, which do not regularly qualify for external support. Some careful shaping of the document may eliminate these inconsistencies such that “research” in the document remains broadly and comprehensively defined. The committee also notes the vital role graduate students and programs can play in such innovative and creative endeavors and teaching that the report endorses here.

Indeed, enhanced visibility of and collaborative opportunities with and between graduate programs, faculty, and undergraduates may also help ameliorate one of the largest inconsistencies the committee identified in the report, which was the insufficient recognition of the roles the humanities and creative and performing arts play in enhancing the academic stature of the university. Humanistic and creative disciplines, and humanities PhD programs in particular, are core sites of research and innovation on campus, and are most often the places of the interdisciplinary collaborations for which the report calls. Humanities inquiry is very highly valued at all top tier universities in this country, with the notable outlier of CalTech. Thus, MIT maintains top tier humanities programs in a variety of fields. On the other hand, some engineering schools – particularly land grant institutions which pull in substantial federal dollars for research (for example Texas A&M), have struggled to move up in the ranking because of a lack of humanities programs.

To ensure that humanities programs are not overlooked, the document would benefit from strategic shaping. On page 38, for example, the report notes the opportunities for postdocs. The Center for Presidential History and the Clements Center have prestigious (and in the case of the Clements Center, longstanding) postdoctoral fellowships. In the past there have been initiatives to hire a postdoc in the digital humanities. As the university plans to allocate these six postdocs, it should ensure that a responsible number are given to the humanities. To determine that number, perhaps the university could measure the number of research PhDs produced across the university and target postdocs to enhance and build upon these strengths. It would be a mistake to assume all postdocs work in science labs.

The committee enthusiastically supports the recommendation on pages 49-50 of the report that the Office of Graduate Studies be expanded such that it includes staff dedicated to recruiting top tier graduate students, and also for career and professional development to oversee student progress through PhD programs and then placement upon graduation. Given the diversity of PhD programs on campus, however, the committee strongly recommends that such a position or positions reflect differing needs across academic areas, and recommends that anyone in such a position coordinates carefully with directors of graduate programs. A one-size-fits-all model will most likely not be effective in recruiting or placing students in fields as diverse as religious studies, chemistry, or engineering. The committee also affirms continued efforts to support graduate life on campus such that PhD students are more easily able to network with one another, have mechanisms for engaging campus entities and administration, and may become a more visible and active part of campus social and academic culture. Such increased visibility for graduate students on campus will highlight the role of research in the university. In

addition, graduate students are often intermediaries between undergraduates and faculty as they perform teaching and grading duties in labs and classrooms. Enhancing these roles offers an opportunity for undergraduate engagement that may help student retention issues that appear on page 53 of the report. Such an approach may be a valuable and holistic addition to the proposed Office of Student Retention and Student Success, which the committee hopes will examine admission policies and campus life as well as academic issues for the students who are leaving or not graduating in a timely manner.

Finally, while the committee commends the report for its emphasis on collaborations between SMU and our partners in North Texas, there is an internal contradiction between CAPE and leveraging the region to build graduate programs. Page 65 of the document discusses the Continuing and Professional Education program, as well as other ongoing education programs. There is an important missed opportunity here to help build our academic graduate programs. Because the pricing differential between our academic programs and the continuing education programs is so great, strong candidates from the region are often deterred from entering our academic programs. These students, when able to gain admission, would often be strong participants in our programs, using an SMU degree to move into the national academic community. How can SMU help bridge this gap, and avoid competing with itself?

Response to the Provost's Task Force on Scholarly Research and Creative Impact Report: Again, members of the committee are uniformly impressed with the report, and commend its authors for their care and evident work in its creation. Two issues came to the fore for us as a committee in reading the report. First, the committee wishes to underscore the need for consistent and raised levels of research support for faculty across campus, in all disciplines. If SMU is to become a premier research university, we must make the investment to do so. Second, we again point to the role that our graduate programs, and specifically our graduate students, will play in raising SMU's academic stature.

First, the committee concurs with the task force conclusion, articulated throughout the document, that in order to become a top tier research university, SMU will need to invest consistently and in multiple ways in research. This includes a more robust grants office capable of supporting the sustained pursuit and implementation of research funded by external sources, and real investment in the infrastructure required to support daily research, especially in the hard sciences. In addition, the committee applauds the call for seed money in all areas for research that may lead to prestigious fellowships, as well as large grants, over time. The committee notes that a major component of cutting edge research is the time required to conduct it. University investment for research across fields will need to include release time, especially for those who cannot "buy out" teaching obligations as they are in fields that are not generally eligible for large federal grants, most often in the humanities or creative fields. The committee expresses support for the Data Science Institute as proposed in the report.

Second, the report correctly notes on page 12 that graduate students and post-docs are a "defining and necessary element of a successful, highly ranked research and teaching university." This is certainly true. As such, the committee enthusiastically supports the recommendation in the report that the current office of Research and Graduate Studies be divided into a research support office and an Office of Graduate Studies. Such a division will streamline grant and award processes, and also allow for better support of our graduate students and graduate programs as vital parts of campus research and cultural life. As noted above, the committee recommends that care is taken such that any new positions in a

graduate office are attentive to disciplinary-specific needs and concerns. The committee also supports the task force recommendation to strengthen existing graduate programs before investing in new ones, and the suggestion that graduate programs align with faculty interests. This is vital for consistent and coherent research programs, and to raise the general stature of the university going forward. As the report notes, one key element of raising SMU's stature is creating a culture of research on campus, a process in which graduate students play a vital and continuing role. The committee also strongly supports the need to increase graduate stipends such that they are competitive in every program. The current lack of centralized administration, as well as structural inequality between programs, has created vast differences in stipendiary support between programs on campus, and in some cases, within programs. Another problem the committee notes is the uncertainty of support as students progress through many programs. To be truly competitive for top tier candidates, SMU will need to consistently invest in all PhD programs such that students are guaranteed funding, including support for health insurance, for their time on campus. One programmatic support for this problem might be a campus-wide TA/RA policy, administered by the new Office of Graduate Programs.

Sustained and consistent support for faculty research, and for PhD programs and students, are vital components of any plan to enhance SMU's academic quality and stature. It is the recommendation of this committee that the university commit to both.

Respectfully submitted,

Jill DeTemple, Associate Professor, Religious Studies, Chair

Kate Engel, Associate Professor, History

Kevin Hanlon, Associate Professor, Composition Theory

John Levison, W.J.A. Power Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Interpretation

David Rosenfield, Associate Professor, Psychology

Halit Uster, Professor, Engineering Management and Information Systems