



THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

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Department of English
College of Liberal Arts
The University of Texas at Austin

11 June 2014

Dean Randy L. Diehl
Associate Dean Esther Raizen
College of Liberal Arts
The University of Texas at Austin

Re: Opposition to Proposed College of Liberal Arts Time-to-Degree Guidelines

Dear Dean Diehl and Associate Dean Raizen,

We, the undersigned graduate students in the Department of English, are writing to express our concerns about the recent decisions regarding funding for College of Liberal Arts (CoLA) graduate students. The new policy, as outlined in an email to the Department of English administration on 28 April 2014, dictates that as of Fall 2014, CoLA graduate students will not be funded beyond their seventh years in the program, and, as of Fall 2015, beyond their sixth years in the program. We have considered the policy statement regarding these changes published 4 June 2014 on the CoLA website, but we respectfully suggest that the statement raises more questions than it answers. Alarmed about the implications of these new policies, graduate students in the Department of English have written and signed the letter below, outlining what we understand to be the policies' failings and our specific concerns about them.

Denying funding to seventh-year students will have far-reaching ramifications, harming our abilities to successfully compete on the job market and secure academic careers. Graduate students in the Department of English have designed their research, teaching, and service projects based on reasonable departmental expectations that have driven degree plans over the course of our enrollment in the program. The immediate implementation of this new policy will require advanced graduate students to significantly alter the scopes of their projects. We request that the College of Liberal Arts reconsider the terms of this policy. A standardized model for graduate funding does not serve the interests of English graduate students, undergraduates, or the department at large.

We understand via communication from Department of English administration that these proposed time-to-degree standards were motivated by intentions to make College of Liberal Arts' graduate programs more attractive to applicants by increasing stipends for students who enter CoLA graduate programs in the future. While this objective is reasonable, CoLA departments would have to institute major overhauls in program structures and degree progress benchmarks

in order for students to finish their degrees in six years. Given that CoLA administration has not yet made available to department faculty, administrators, or graduate students any argument for structural, curricular, or advisory changes to department operations, reducing time-to-degree standards will disadvantage all graduate students, even those who have the advantage of a stipend increase. That financial resource does not make up for the intellectual, professional, and pedagogical resources and experience to which CoLA grad students will have decreased access with a reduced time to degree.

In order to succeed in an increasingly competitive academic job market, graduate students in the Department of English follow a rigorous course of study. Our professional training entails two years of coursework and completion of the MA Report, continued coursework during preparation for a Field Examination, and the oral defense of a full dissertation prospectus. English dissertation projects can require extensive archival research (often necessitating international travel) and acquisition of one or more foreign languages. These conditions preclude a standard time limit across dissertation projects in the field. Because competitive job candidates must complete 60–80% of their dissertations before entering the academic market, issuing a blanket denial of funding for seventh-year students will limit the scope of scholarly inquiries that students may pursue, limiting students' abilities to compete on the job market with colleagues from peer institutions.

Moreover, English graduate students bear significant teaching responsibilities. The majority of introductory writing and literature courses in the departments of Rhetoric and English are taught by English graduate students. In the academic year 2013–2014, graduate student instructors taught 1,855 undergraduates in introductory Rhetoric courses, and 766 undergraduates in introductory English courses. As a condition of employment, English graduate students also staff the Undergraduate Writing Center, which provided a total of 11,306 consultations to undergraduates enrolled at UT for the 2013–2014 academic year. These teaching positions offer graduate students opportunities to design unique courses and refine pedagogies, both of which skills strengthen our professional profiles. Reducing time-to-degree forces students to divert time away from teaching, afflicting not only our progress as teachers but also the undergraduate population across the entire university.

During our time in the English graduate program, most students take on additional service responsibilities that have a significant impact on the undergraduate and university population. Graduate students act as Assistant Directors for the Undergraduate Writing Center, the Lower-Division Writing Program in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing, the English Department Lower-Division Curriculum Committee, and the Digital Writing and Research Lab, implementing curricula and overseeing graduate student orientations and training. Graduate students manage and edit *Praxis*, a peer-reviewed journal, and the *E3W Review of Books*, which brings together graduate students from across the university and contributes to professionalization. We also serve as managing editors for *The Journal for Undergraduate Multimedia Projects*, which provides undergraduates with an opportunity to publish their scholarly work. We work as teaching partners in the SPURS (Students Partnering for Undergraduate Rhetoric Success) program, which pairs with underperforming high schools in greater Texas to reach high-school students historically underrepresented at institutions of higher learning, in conjunction with programs such as Summer Bridge which helps to increase retention

rates and the success of students from underrepresented groups. These are just a few of the service positions our graduate students undertake that provide vital support for undergraduates, younger graduate students, and the greater Texas community. Shortening the time to degree will discourage graduate students from taking on these professionalization opportunities, making us less competitive candidates for faculty positions and negatively affecting the larger community of the University of Texas.

Importantly, the manner in which this policy was announced—informally, disparately, late in the semester, and without opportunity for discussion through established channels of communication such as the Graduate Assembly, the Graduate Student Assembly, or the Faculty Senate—raises concern about administrative decisions in the College of Liberal Arts with relation to the University community. In crafting this policy without open and considerate dialogue with graduate students since our learning of the regulations in late April, in CoLA's lack of transparency regarding new policy changes, in attempting to run liberal arts programs by business models, and in notifying departments of new policy without reasonable time for adjustment for students most immediately affected by new regulation, CoLA appears to have acted in a manner inconsistent with the research and educational mission of the University of Texas. Because of the particularities of CoLA degree programs, we ask for an opportunity to discuss, deliberate, and determine significant changes in policy publicly alongside other University stakeholders.

The proposed changes to CoLA graduate student funding will hamper our abilities to be effective teachers, community leaders, and research scholars. In light of these concerns, we request a suspension of the current policy and an open dialogue about how graduate students, faculty, and the College of Liberal arts might together address reducing time to degree and working within current budgetary restraints while maintaining a competitive graduate program. Such a discussion will benefit all interested parties by providing the best opportunity for students to pursue successful academic careers and by preserving and potentially improving the English Department's national graduate ranking and ability to compete with peer institutions.

We thank you for your time and consideration of our concerns.

Sincerely,

Raúl Ariza-Barile
Axel Bohmann
Jeffrey Boruszak
Delia Byrnes
Meredith Coffey
Lynn Cowles
Loren Cressler
Elizabeth DeMott
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