

Re-envisioning Doctoral Residency at UA: Enhancing Retention, Time-to-Degree and the Development of Doctoral Scholars

Doctoral Time to Degree and Retention: The recent Council of Graduate School's (CGS) 2007 policy publication, Graduate Education: The Backbone of American Competitiveness and Innovation, makes a compelling case for the centrality of quality graduate education, especially at the doctoral level, in future U.S. economic development and our competitiveness as a nation. At the same time, increasingly critical national attention has focused on quality indicators in doctoral education, including time-to-degree and retentions rates.

In early 2008, a portion of Phase I of the CGS's five-year Ph.D. Completion Study, a study of Ph.D. time-to-degree and completion rates at 30 research universities from the early 1990s to the present, was published (CGS 2008). In a nutshell, this research indicated that only 51% of all students who enrolled in Ph.D. programs during that study period graduated with a Ph.D. within 8 years; the figure rose to 56.6% completion after 10 years. Although UA was not one of the 30 institutions in the CGS study set, data from the 16 UA programs that comprise the 2008 NRC Research Doctorate Study suggest that UA's doctoral programs, with an 8-year completion rate of 51.3%, are comparable to national peers. Further, although national median time-to-degree appears to be dropping slightly over the past several years, it is still the case that students in STEM discipline departments tend to take 6 to 7 years to complete their degrees while students in the Humanities and Social Sciences average 8 to 10 years. UA program students fare better than the national medians (overall, STEM, and non-STEM median time-to-degrees of 5.9, 5.5, and 6.6 years, respectively, for the 16 programs in the 2008 NRC Assessment of Research Doctorate study). Even with these better than average numbers, approximately 8% of UA Ph.D. students we included in the NRC study data set took 8 years or longer to complete their degree work.

Should we as a nation or a university be satisfied with the above retention and time-to-degree benchmarks as exemplars of an optimally structured, highly competitive doctoral education system? The answer, both at the national level and here at UA is a resounding "No". Work is already underway in Phase II of the CGS Ph.D. Completion Study to identify and test possible remediation strategies aimed at decreasing the number of students who leave doctoral study without a Ph.D. degree and reducing the time to degree completion. Fortunately, we do not need to wait another five years to begin improving the doctorate at UA, because the basic structure of a sound remediation strategy is already well understood from Phase I work and other existing scholarship.

Although the CGS study above and most of the other work cited in this paper refer specifically to the Ph.D., parallel studies being conducted by CGS and other entities on the Ed.D. are revealing similar trends and concerns. For purposes of this paper and improving the UA experience, re-envisioning doctoral residency and the importance it can have in revitalizing and focusing doctoral education are presumed to be equally applicable to Ph.D. and Ed.D. programs alike.

Why Doctoral Students Leave Without a Ph.D. or Ed.D.: Nationally, many students leave doctoral programs without their degree due to financial difficulties. Nearly one-half of U.S. doctoral recipients in 2006 reported some student loan debt and 13% reported cumulative education-related debt levels of over \$50,000 (Hoffer et al. 2007). At UA the situation is very similar. Programs that can offer students a guaranteed five or six years of stipend and tuition support suffer much lower attrition, and graduate students receive their degrees in a more timely

fashion. We can and should continue to improve financial support for doctoral students at UA, as our stipends and funding percentages are still below SUG averages. Other students leave doctoral study because of personal or family considerations. A percentage of students also leave doctoral programs after receipt of a Master's degree. However, financial considerations and other disincentives notwithstanding, the Ph.D. Completion Study indicates that *most Ph.D. attrition occurs in the first few years of study, i.e., prior to attainment of candidacy, and is due largely to students leaving programs in which they have not become emotionally and intellectually vested.*

High doctoral attrition is a significant problem that must be addressed effectively at UA if we are to meet our goals of a preeminent, diverse graduate school enrolling between 4500 and 5000 students. We can ill afford to expend time and financial resources to recruit and mentor an excellent cadre of new incoming doctoral students each year only to have approximately half of these same students leave the university without their doctoral degree in hand.

In their new book, The Formation of Scholars: Rethinking Doctoral Education for the Twenty-First Century, the Carnegie Foundation's Initiative for the Doctorate working group (Walker et al. 2008) calls for bold initiatives by research universities to develop doctoral candidates (with a focus on the Ph.D.) as fully independent scholars, not only in terms of mastery of their discipline, but in the "larger set of obligations and commitments that are not only intellectual but moral". Central to their theme is immersion of doctoral students in the culture of research and scholarship via meaningful and relevant faculty mentorship experiences, interaction with peers, and full utilization of campus cultural and scholarly resources. Implementing these best practices for developing Ph.D. students as 'whole persons' in the intellectual and moral sense would address the major cause of Ph.D. attrition – lack of program engagement and identification in the early years of enrollment. We need not reinvent the wheel to create such forward-thinking programs for UA doctoral students. Rather, **the salient principles outlined in the Carnegie Foundation publication above can be met by re-envisioning the Doctoral Residency requirement in terms of 21st century needs and aspirations.**

Embracing the Spirit of Doctoral Residency at UA

This proposal calls for a re-invention of the principles of doctoral residency at UA, embracing the spirit of residency, rather than simply the letter of the law, as a primary means to enhance doctoral retention and facilitate the formation of 'doctoral scholar' graduates in the Carnegie Foundation model. How might this be accomplished? Doctoral education at The University of Alabama, as at all large research universities in the U.S., is informed by best practices developed and promulgated by the Council of Graduate Schools and its institutional members. In The Doctor of Philosophy Degree: A Policy Statement (2005), CGS outlines its policy on full-time study and residency for the Ph.D. degree:

"Most universities require at least one or two years of continuous residence. This allows students to concentrate exclusively on course work or research; to acquire the habits, attitudes, skills, and insights necessary for attaining the Ph.D.; and to find opportunities to work closely with the professors and other students. The on-campus residence provision provides other advantages as well. For example, fluency in the language and vocabulary of the specialization is enhanced by frequent and close association with other students in the same field; competence in the field is enhanced by close familiarity with the university's libraries; valuable experience is gained by attending and participating in both formal and informal seminars, colloquia, discussions led by specialists visiting from other campuses, laboratories, or governmental research groups; and thesis or dissertation research is facilitated by frequent consultation with the advisor."

Thus, although study in residence harkens back to its origins in the monastic university model of the European 17th century, its essential purpose in contemporary Ph.D. and Ed.D. programs is not simply to ensure that students are obligated to register for classes on the campus of their home institution. Rather, the spirit of the modern doctoral residency requirement is intended to ensure that apprentice scholars receive the full set of 'value constructs' required for them to develop as effective, independent scholars upon completion of the doctorate (Joint Doctoral Faculty in Agricultural Education 1999). This includes, but is not limited to, full access to the intellectual and physical attributes of a modern university campus and its human community and programs that help students become immersed in the human cultural norms and mores of their chosen profession. In this sense, an optimally organized doctoral residency program can fulfill many of the salient principles of the Carnegie Foundation's Formation of Doctoral Scholars thesis above.

But it is critically important not to confuse the efficacious spirit and intent of residency with its often less than efficacious application in the real world. The reason why nearly every U.S. doctoral program and many programs abroad feature a formal, "one size fits all", enrollment-based, on-campus residency requirement is a purely pragmatic one. We have simply assumed, with very little supporting data, that a reasonably attentive student who is required to be on campus for one or two years will, in the normal course of events, fulfill at least the basic premise of the residency requirement spirit.

Wedding Residency 'Value Constructs' and the Formation of Doctoral Scholars

But Ph.D. program attrition rates approaching 50%, time-to-degree approaching a decade in some fields, and the demand for Ph.D.s (and Ed.D.s) trained to work in a rapidly changing world and for future disciplinary fields as yet unimagined demand that we do better. UA can take a national leadership role by moving beyond the simple requirement for a doctoral residency experience for the doctoral degree to a residency policy that ensures that each UA doctoral graduate will be formed as a fully-functional scholar by the time they leave the University.

At its heart, doctoral residency is anchored in five 'value constructs' (c.f., Joint Doctoral Faculty in Agricultural Education 1999): 1) immersion in advanced study and inquiry, 2) interaction with faculty members and peers, 3) access to educational resources of the university, 4) interchange of knowledge with the academic community, and 5) broadening of educational and cultural perspectives. In a traditional program, authority is implicitly delegated to the Graduate Faculty to ensure that students receive exposure to these value constructs. Walker et al. (2008), in The Formation of Scholars, propose a four-themed action plan to reform doctoral education: talking about purpose, the principles of formation, apprenticeship reconsidered, and the intellectual community. The major difference between the Carnegie Foundation approach and the traditional approach is in the process by which the spirit of residency is achieved. Through application of these four Formation themes, progressive, effective programs purposefully engage *both faculty mentors and students* in a collaborative process that sets program goals for learning, develops students as independent scholars, creates effective multi-generational mentorship models, and creates a thriving intellectual culture within the program. Thus, authority for meeting the spirit of residency and accountability in meeting value constructs is jointly shared by faculty and students.

By wedding best practice residency value constructs with Walker et al.'s proactive, collaborative approach that uses these constructs to develop effective doctoral scholars, The University of Alabama can craft a visionary residency doctoral policy that is both rigorous and flexible. This vision would recognize two ways by which students can meet the spirit of residency and grow as

doctoral scholars; 1) a traditional on-campus residency experience, informed and improved by application of Formation of Scholars themes at the program level, and 2) an alternate residency experience that demonstrably meets the value constructs of doctoral residency and is developed through application of Formation themes. *To aid departmental discussions and policy development, the Graduate School will provide each doctoral department with a free copy of The Formation of Doctoral Scholars.*

We envision that ALL UA doctoral departments and programs would retain Option 1 (on-campus residency) as their default residency policy. In addition, select departments and programs may elect to design and approve a second, alternative residency policy that applies to specified doctoral programs within their unit. To provide simple and effective accountability, the existing Doctoral Plan of Study Form could be modified to display both options for meeting residency, with departmental designation of which option was used to fulfill the requirement.

Revitalizing the On-Campus Residency Track at UA

The on-campus residency track is already operative at UA and meets the needs of perhaps 95% of all doctoral candidates with minimal hardship or difficulties, especially with the new Graduate Council rule that any combination of two consecutive full-time semesters in residence is sufficient to meet the letter of the requirement. For most UA departments and programs, campus-based residency will continue to offer the best, most efficacious method for faculty and students to work together to develop meaningful, value-construct residency experiences and ensure that graduating Ph.D. students have utilized these experiences to grow as doctoral scholars.

A department/program decision to maintain on-campus residency as the sole way to fulfill this requirement is only a first step on the road to re-envisioning doctoral residency at UA. We call on departments to engage in a collaborative faculty-student examination of the spirit of on-campus residency, centered around value constructs and Foundation themes in Table 1 below. What would emerge from this exercise is a living residency requirement, targeted to students in each specific discipline, with the explicit goal of forming doctoral scholar graduates and not simply meeting a set of temporal and locational criteria for doctoral study.

Table 1. Wedding essential value constructs and themed action plans to develop exemplary doctoral residency programs at UA

UA doctoral residency programs should fulfill the spirit of residency by featuring all of the following value constructs:

- Immersion in advanced study and inquiry
- Interaction with faculty and peers
- Access to the education resources of the university
- Interchange of knowledge with the academic community
- Broadening of educational and cultural perspectives

Meeting the spirit of residency and using residency as a tool to create fully-independent Doctoral Scholar graduates requires a collaborative developmental effort by departmental faculty and students centered around four themes:

- What is the purpose of our program and its desired outcomes?
- What techniques and activities do we employ to insure that the three principles for doctoral scholar formation (development toward scholarly independence, integration of scholarship across contexts, and on-going collaboration with both peers and faculty) are a vital part of our residency requirement?
- How do we optimize the "signature pedagogy" of the residency experience – the traditional and critical apprenticeship experience that occurs between faculty and their doctoral candidates?
- How do we create a thriving doctoral intellectual community that is rich in shared purpose, diverse, multigenerational, and encouraging of risk-taking scholarship?

The Alternative Residency Track at UA

As above, simply meeting a set of temporal (number of semesters enrolled) or locational (physical residence on the home campus) criteria does not *in and of itself* ensure that a doctoral student will meet the spirit of residency. In fact, by focusing on meeting the spirit and value constructs of residency, Texas A & M, Texas Tech, the University of Florida, the University of Oklahoma, and a handful of other universities both large and small have successfully initiated doctoral residency policies that actively decouple temporal and locational criteria from meeting the goals of residency.

It is beyond the scope of this proposal to describe the details of alternative residency policies listed above for various programs outside of UA. Rather, pertinent program examples are reproduced in their entirety and may be found in the Appendix. Each successful alternative residency strategy has resulted from an exhaustive, in-depth examination of program goals, aspirations, resources, and other attributes by both program faculty and program students (the ethos of Formation of Scholars), which has created a *detailed, program-specific, and assessable format for meeting the value constructs of residency with activities and programs that are not locationally or temporally proscribed*.

Many of the alternative Ed.D. or Ph.D. residency tracks in place today were designed to address the 21st-century needs and aspirations of distance learning students and programs with strong distance learning components. They demonstrate that it is possible, with adequate planning, attention to detail, a developed consensus between faculty mentors and program students, a focus on residency experience outcomes rather than venue/time, and procedures in place to assure accountability, to offer a residency-rich, distance-learning-based doctorate. However, nothing within the principles espoused by Alternative Residency Track policies would prohibit their use in more traditional, campus-based Ph.D. or Ed.D. programs as well as distance-learning-rich curricula.

In the proposed UA Alternative Residency Track concept, individual doctoral programs would be permitted to design a pedagogically-sound, detailed alternative residency program track for their students. Departments wishing to develop this option would be expected to engage in the collaborative development effort outlined in Table 1 above. The resultant alternative residency plan would need to explain, explicitly and in detail, how students will fulfill the goals of the value constructs listed in Table 1. The joint Texas A&M/Texas Tech program included in the Appendix provides a good model for type of proposal expected. Assuming that these tracks are approved by their respective Colleges or Schools, they would then be submitted to the Graduate Council's Committee on Program and Degree Requirements and then the entire Graduate Council for approval and implementation. As with other special programs and degree requirement waivers approved by the Graduate Council, alternative residency tracks would be reviewed for renewal every four years. At minimum, alternative residency programs would be expected to show that student satisfaction, time-to-degree, and attrition/retention percentages are at least equivalent to the department's on-campus residency track students.

Individual students enrolled in programs that utilize the On-Campus Residency Track as the sole means to fulfill the residency requirement would still be required to meet this requirement. However, departments would have the option of designing Alternative Residency tracks for subsets of students with recurring specialized needs. This latter option could be particularly useful in Ph.D. programs enrolling specialized cohorts of students and faculty who would be involved in

extensive collaboration, course work, and research mentorship efforts between UA and another research entity (e.g., some emerging disciplines in biotechnology, bioengineering, and other inherently interdisciplinary fields).

Outcomes Envisioned

Upon the development and implementation of the dual residency track proposal above, all UA doctoral students would be required to meet the spirit and intent of doctoral residency provisions, not simply the letter of the requirement. All UA doctoral graduates would, at least in principle, leave the University with a firm grounding as independent Doctoral Scholars in the Carnegie Foundation mold. At this writing, no other U.S. institution has embraced this comprehensive vision for excellence. The active and continual engagement that would occur between students and faculty in such a construct would greatly reduce doctoral program attrition caused by the current student 'drift' during early program years. Further, a dual residency track would provide forward-thinking programs with the flexibility to meet their pedagogical objectives and their mandate to develop doctoral scholar graduates without undo attention to temporal and locational strictures.

In terms of assessment, metrics are available (the yearly Survey of Earned Doctorates and individual departmental student satisfaction rubrics) to demonstrate whether a dual residency track program fosters increased student satisfaction. More important, the Graduate School has now begun tracking time-to-degree and degree completion rate data for all of its doctoral programs. Implementation of the new dual residency track model above should result in a measurable increase in doctoral program retention and a decrease in time-to-degree statistics, both for individual doctoral programs and for UA as a whole.

As noted earlier, all Alternative Residency Track programs would be subject to evaluation every four years by Graduate Council. Renewal would be based on objective criteria; student satisfaction data, attrition/retention statistics, time-to-degree metrics, and other data.

David A. Francko, Dean, Graduate School and Assistant VP for Academic Affairs
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Appendices

1. The Doc@Distance degree, Texas A&M University and Texas Tech University. Includes actual degree program construct, plus an extensive treatment of how the alternative residency track they developed meets the Value Construct principles of doctoral residency.
2. The EDFN doctoral program at the University of Oklahoma.
3. The Ph.D. in Latin and Roman Studies and Ph.D. in Classical Civilization degree programs at the University of Florida. Note: these two programs do NOT address the comprehensive alternative residency track model proposed here. There are included because they are one of the very few examples of extant Ph.D. programs at major universities that feature a non-traditional residency model catering to distance students.
4. The Ph.D. program in Educational Studies at Lesley University in New England.