

# Action Plan for Increasing Graduate Enrollment at East Carolina University

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## **1. Rationale**

Graduate education is an essential function of East Carolina University. Graduate students represent about 19% of ECU’s enrollment and student credit hour production. Graduate programs at ECU meet critical workforce training needs in eastern North Carolina and beyond, especially in today’s increasingly complex and technologically oriented society where the graduate degree is seen to be replacing the undergraduate degree as the minimum credential necessary for entry into many high-paying jobs. The scholarship, research, training activities, and capacity for innovation, as well as professional development activities enabled by ECU’s diverse inventory of graduate programs is a critical resource for the residents of North Carolina and a pre-requisite for sustainable economic development in eastern North Carolina and beyond. Thus, recent drops in graduate enrollment and graduate student credit hour production at ECU pose a threat to eastern North Carolina’s long-term economic health and represent a significant budget challenge for the university.

## **2. A brief history of graduate enrollment**

ECU experienced a decade of unprecedented growth in graduate enrollment from a headcount of 2863 in fall 1998 to 6417 in fall 2008 (+224%). A significant amount of this growth occurred as ECU tapped into new markets by offering online delivery of many of its largest graduate programs.

*Table 1: Total graduate enrollment (headcount), fall terms*

<u>1998</u>	<u>2003</u>	<u>2008</u>	<u>2009</u>	<u>2010</u>	<u>2011</u>
2863	4517	6417	5892*	5812	5414 <sup>+</sup>

\*One-time re-classification (see text)

+ Un-official headcount

After reaching a peak in 2008, ECU's graduate enrollment declined to 5414 in the fall of 2011. Part of this drop was due to re-classification of 600 "graduate" students as "undergraduate" students in 2009 in compliance with federal financial aid regulations. This re-classification resulted in a net shift of about 600 graduate students to non-degree undergraduate status in fall 2009\*. Discounting this one-time reclassification, net graduate enrollment declined by about 500 students in the last three-year period.

A detailed analysis of enrollment trends by college and by program for the most recent three-year period reveals that the single largest drop in graduate enrollment occurred in online master's level teacher training programs (see enrollment data for the College of Education in Table 2). The second largest decline was in "non-degree" graduate students. An analysis of non-degree student credit hour production revealed that most of the non-degree declines were also in teacher training programs. These large declines in teacher training programs observed at ECU are consistent with national trends<sup>1</sup> and were not confined to the College of Education alone. Comparable declines were also observed in teacher-training programs offered in all of ECU's colleges, for example; the MAEd in Child Development, College of Human Ecology; the MAEd in Health Education, College of Health and Human Performance; MAEd in Art Education, College of Fine Arts and Communication. Much of this decline is likely the result of state budget cuts to public schools, including threats to abolish the automatic 10% salary bonus for teachers with master's degrees.

Declines in teacher training programs were partially offset by enrollment increases in other colleges. For example, graduate enrollment in the Harriot College of Arts and Sciences increased 4.6% this year (general increase); 9.0% in the Brody School of Medicine (new MS in Biomed Sci), the College of Technology and Computer Sciences (new MS in Software Engineering); College of Nursing (general increase).

<sup>1</sup> The Council of Graduate Schools reported first-time graduate enrollment in education declined -8.3% from 2009 to 2010 in its October 2011 newsletter, Vol. 44, Issue 8.

Table 2: Graduate enrollment (fall headcount) in selected colleges and programs

<u>Decreases</u>	<u>2009</u>	<u>2010</u>	<u>2011*</u>
College of Education	1455	1351	1184
Change		-7.1%	-12.4%
College of Business	890	930	908
Change		+4.5%	-2.4%
Non-degree students	683	614	427
Change		-10.1%	-30.5%
College of Allied Health	453	465	458
Change		2.6%	-1.5%
College of Health & Human Perf.	353	320	295
Change		-9.3%	-7.8%
College of Human Ecology	344	348	321
Change		+1.2%	-7.8%
College of Fine Arts & Comm.	164	141	122
Change		-14.0%	-13.5%
<u>Increases</u>	<u>2009</u>	<u>2010</u>	<u>2011</u>
Harriot College of Arts & Sciences	667	702	734
Change		+5.2%	+4.6%
College of Nursing	492	520	533
Change		+5.7%	+2.5%
Technology and Computer Science	216	236	238
Change		+9.3%	+0.8%
Brody School of Medicine	165	178	194
Change		+7.9%	+9.0%

\*Un-official headcount

### **3. Action plans - immediate steps**

Three steps are being taken immediately to address graduate enrollment declines.

1. The Office of Continuing Studies will feature online graduate programs in its marketing efforts this spring. The eight-page newspaper insert called “East Carolina University Options” circulated via local newspapers throughout the state is the single most cost-effective marketing effort conducted by the university. Over 1.5 million copies were circulated last year at cost of \$0.04 each, and the phone call volume from prospective students to admissions offices and departmental offices during the two weeks following distribution was overwhelming. The spring 2012 insert will prominently feature several of our online programs in half-page and quarter-page insets.
2. The number of online sections offered last summer declined by more than 10%, largely due to budget cuts or uncertainty in availability of funding for faculty online instruction. The Provost’s office and Financial Affairs is setting aside funds this year to ensure an adequate number of online sections are offered during the summer of 2012.
3. Deans of each individual college were asked to address the three questions listed below (a-c). Meetings with individual deans were conducted with the Provost or VC of Health Sciences as appropriate, the dean of the Graduate School, and the VC for Research and Graduate Studies at which time their responses were discussed.

- a. Which of your graduate programs have potential to grow (at what cost) and which do you expect to decline?
- b. Faced with increased competition for online students, what innovative strategies can / should be employed to increase the competitiveness of your online programs in the market place? Are there new programs that you can take online?
- c. Cuts to college assistantship budgets may be necessary to accommodate new programs or planned growth. Which graduate programs in your college would you consider for assistantship budget cuts?

The results from these meetings are summarized in the section “*Opportunities for growth*”, below.

#### **4. Action plans – summary of long-term plans**

Increasing graduate enrollment is a complex, multi-faceted problem. Efforts to increase ECU’s graduate enrollment will require thoughtful long-term efforts, including centralized initiatives in the Graduate School and decentralized efforts coordinated with individual colleges. Prescriptions are offered for improvements in eight major thematic areas with details in subsequent pages. These eight themes are present in priority order, 1 being the highest and 8 being the lowest.

1. **Focus on quality** – Long-term plans for increasing graduate enrollment must not compromise quality; rather they must focus on recruiting high-quality students into high-quality graduate programs. High-quality graduate programs will increase the prestige of the university in the longer term and thereby increase student demand and employer demand. An increase in student quality will also lead to *lower attrition rates*, better retention, higher degree completion rates, and shorter times-to-degree.
2. **Increase marketing and recruiting efforts** – The university must present a relevant and engaging value/price/quality proposition to prospective graduate students through an expanded program of traditional and online/social media marketing. Centrally coordinated marketing efforts should be directed by an advisory board that includes a representative from the Board of Trustees, University Marketing, Academic Affairs, Health Sciences, Continuing Education, the Graduate School and appropriate colleges. Central recruiting efforts conducted by the Graduate School include promotional brochures, participation in 15 graduate fairs and two minority-recruiting events per year, participation in open houses and sponsoring of a graduate recruiting fair at ECU. Recruiting efforts at the college level vary by department with plenty of opportunities for significant improvements. The Graduate School in partnership with the departments must clarify the role of central school and the dept. programs in recruiting and develop processes for closer coordination.
3. **Opportunities for growth** – Through collaborative efforts with individual deans and colleges, strategically select new and existing graduate programs to be targeted for growth. Some programs targeted for growth will require reallocation of graduate assistantship funds. Efforts must also focus on adding online delivery of existing on-campus programs where appropriate and creating new graduate programs in high-demand areas. Short-term and long-term efforts in this area will yield improvements.

4. **Increase retention and graduation rates** – High attrition rates in some graduate programs adversely affect overall graduate enrollment. First-time efforts to systematically collect and disseminate attrition data for *all* graduate programs began this fall semester. Preliminary data indicates that attrition rates in online programs compared to on-campus cohorts tend to be higher. Action plans to address attrition in online programs are currently under development in some colleges. Best practices learned in these colleges will be shared with all colleges. Preliminary graduate student retention data indicates that attrition rates, excessively long times to graduation and low graduation rates can be found in many (but not all) smaller research intensive programs with thesis and dissertation requirements.
5. **Faculty capacity and workload issues** – Recent budget cuts have led to increased teaching loads and decreased numbers of graduate course sections offered, especially courses offered during the summer in online graduate programs. Efforts are currently underway to provide adequate summer funding for online instruction to restore capacity to appropriate levels.
6. **Reduce barriers to admission** – Steps to reduce barriers to admission will be carefully studied and considered for possible implementation, including expedited provisional admission. These steps will be considered only if simpler and reliable assessment methodologies can be proven to work without compromising the quality or safety of ECU’s graduate student body.
7. **Offset threats to current enrollment** – ECU is expected to experience continuing declines in its graduate teacher training programs until such time as public confidence is restored through improving economic conditions and improved state support for K-12 education. Steps are proposed below to stem declines in teacher training programs, but increases in enrollment in teacher training programs appear unlikely at this time. Other threats that must be addressed include increasing competition for online students from private, public, and for-profit universities.
8. **Competitiveness of graduate assistantships stipends** – Surveys of peer institutions and reports from external reviewers of graduate programs continue to indicate that our graduate assistantship levels and tuition scholarships place ECU at a competitive disadvantage, primarily in master’s programs, whereas ECU’s assistantship levels in PhD programs are competitive. ECU expends a significant amount of funds for assistantships in its on-campus master’s programs, whereas many schools focus their assistantship funding in PhD programs. Before making additional investments in master’s programs, an assessment of the number of master’s students supported at peer institutions is needed. A primary concern is that increasing investments for assistantships in master’s programs are not likely to produce the desired effects of increased enrollment and increased quality compared to investments in PhD programs. The long delayed Graduate Enrollment Task Force report is due out soon in draft form with numerous valuable recommendations for allocation of assistantship funding.

#### **4.1. A focus on quality**

Immediately prior to the 2010 recruiting season, the Graduate School established new guidelines for regular admission, including a minimum undergraduate GPA of 2.7 and a minimum score of 30<sup>th</sup> percentile on a standardized graduate admission exam. Departments may request that up to 10% of their students be admitted by exception with proper justification by the program director and approval of the graduate school. This change in admission standards resulted in a significant overall increase in the quality of the entering graduate student body (see Table 3).

*Table 3: Graduate application trends*

	Fall 2009	Fall 2010	Fall 2011	10-11 Change
<b>Applied</b>				
<b>N</b>	3831	4074	3868	-5.1%
<b>Undergrad GPA</b>	3.17	3.18	3.2	0.02
<b>GRE Verbal+Quant</b>	1010.2	1002.5	999.7	-2.8
<b>Admitted</b>				
<b>N</b>	2057	2032	1843	-9.3%
<b>Undergrad GPA</b>	3.2	3.2	3.26	0.06
<b>GRE Verbal+Quant</b>	1026.2	1037.3	1046.8	9.5
<b>Enrolled</b>				
<b>N</b>	1506	1526	1371	-10.2%
<b>Undergrad GPA</b>	3.18	3.21	3.22	0.01
<b>GRE Verbal+Quant</b>	1016.2	1034.0	1040.7	6.7
<b>% admitted</b>	53.7%	49.9%	47.6%	
<b>Yield (enrolled/admit)</b>	73.2%	75.1%	74.4%	

The change in minimum admission guidelines resulted in an increase in the average GRE scores of admitted and enrolled students. All other factors being equal, the increased admission standards resulted in a decrease of about 150 new first-time first-year graduate students in fall 2011 compared to fall 2009. Better marketing and recruiting efforts are needed to increase the pool of actionable applications to offset more selective admissions processes. Not considered in this simplistic analysis are confounding internal and external factors such as decreasing number of available online sections; increasing competition for online students from public, private and for-profit universities; as well as the impact of the protracted economic downturn.

#### **4.2. Marketing and recruiting plans**

Marketing of graduate programs and recruiting graduate students is a complex process, and if done well, will require the coordinated efforts of many offices, including centralized efforts of the University Marketing office, the Graduate School, the Office of Continuing Studies, as well as the decentralized efforts of individual colleges, departments and faculty. The importance of decentralized efforts at the college and department level cannot be underestimated.

A successful marketing plan for ECU's graduate programs must include (1) a thorough understanding of the marketplace through proper research; (2) carefully defined goals and objectives with measurable outcomes; (3) attractive offers to prospective students and their families; and (4) personal communication from faculty and staff to prospective students.

At the present time, the most aggressive marketing of ECU's graduate programs is through the Distance Education "Options" campaign. The university needs to expand and enhance the marketing of the graduate school in general, but it must also *increase the targeted promotion of specific graduate programs.*

To assure alignment between ECU's strongest programs and the greatest opportunities for growth, the expanded targeted promotion of programs should be funded and managed at a university level with coordination between The Graduate School, Distance Education and University Marketing. To that end, increased efforts are needed to identify our strengths, understand our competition, and track market demand .

1. Proposed marketing and recruiting goals:
  - a. Develop and convey an effective value/price/quality proposition to prospective graduate students
  - b. Increase brand awareness of ECU's online and on-campus graduate programs
  - c. Develop targeted recruiting efforts for high-quality, high-demand graduate students
  - d. Increase the number of actionable graduate applications
  - e. Increase the yield of matriculated students, especially high-demand students
  - f. Develop effective online and social media marketing materials
2. Establish a reasonable, appropriate and sufficient marketing budget.
3. Develop a marketing plan for ECU's graduate programs, including:
  - a. Assessment of current recruiting efforts and communication plans
  - b. Survey of prospective students and community focus groups
  - c. Analyze regional competitors, student demand, and employer demand
  - d. Assess recruiting publications, including electronic publications, websites and social media
  - e. Develop revised marketing tools and communication processes
  - f. Redesign recruiting websites and electronic communications
  - g. Increase marketing budget for the Graduate School to support expanded promotions
4. Hire a full-time public communication specialist devoted to marketing and recruiting of ECU's graduate programs at an estimated cost of \$60,000 to \$75,000. Job responsibilities to include:
  - a. Develop, coordinate and implement central recruiting efforts.
  - b. Coordinate campus visits by high-quality, high-demand prospective students (marketing budget must include travel funds).
  - c. Identify best practices and train departmental faculty and administrators to communicate personally, effectively, and appropriately to prospective students.
  - d. Work with the University Marketing and Publications to develop promotional materials in accordance with the marketing plan. Conduct systematic and periodic

review of print and electronic recruiting materials of all of ECU's 76 master's programs and 18 doctoral programs.

### 4.3. Opportunities for growth – college plans

Through collaborative efforts with individual deans and colleges, the following *preliminary* list of existing or new graduate programs have been identified as potential high-growth areas for graduate education. In cases where increased graduate assistantships funds are required to support proposed growth, reallocation from existing programs will have to be made.

1. College of Business
  - a. Offer the MSA (Masters of Science in Accounting) degree online.
    - i. Benefits: Tap into new market; high paying jobs; low unemployment rate; great growth potential; enrollment expansion at relatively low initial cost and low long-term operating expenses.
    - ii. Growth potential: increase from 30 students per year to 60? 90?
    - iii. Down-side: ECU's MSA program is ranked in the top 10 national programs because of the graduate's very high CPA exam pass-rate. Faculty are resistant to taking the program online because it may decrease overall pass rate. Steps to engage online students in periodic weekend face-to-face activities, or an off-model weekend program might address some fears and discussion with the faculty are on-going.
2. Technology and Computer Science
  - a. Increase enrollment in the online MS in Software Engineering program
    - i. Benefits: New program in 2009 (32 students) has seen rapid initial growth, 2010 (54 students) 2011 (80 students). Tap into underserved market in NC; high paying jobs; low unemployment rate; good growth potential; enrollment expansion at relatively low cost due to online nature of the program.
    - ii. Growth potential: 80 students per year to 100? 120?
    - iii. Down-side: Insufficient software engineering faculty (3 total) to handle increased enrollment.
  - b. Offer the existing MS in Computer Science degree online
    - i. Benefits: Tap into new market; high paying jobs, low unemployment
    - ii. Growth potential: good.
    - iii. Down-side: Initial investment to take content online, challenges to faculty workloads
  - c. MS in occupational safety – increase marketing efforts for this on-campus and online program
    - i. Benefits: Only online program of its kind in NC, at one time enrollment was as high as 50, now down to 20, marketing plan needed.
  - d. Create new MS in Biomedical Engineering, on-campus
    - i. Benefits: Tap into new markets, great synergies and opportunity for strategic research alliances with BSOM, chemistry, biology, physics, computer science and other departments; high paying jobs; low unemployment rate, moderate growth potential.
    - ii. Growth potential will be low initially due to nature of the program

- iii. Down-side: High initial start-up costs and high long-term operational costs.
- 3. College of Fine Arts and Communication
  - a. Increase enrollment in the MA in Communications program through increased graduate assistantship support
    - i. Benefits: Focus on health communication has good job placement, high student demand. Increased support for graduate assistantships will allow program to grow
    - ii. Reallocation of \$34,000 from the MFA (Masters in Fine Arts) to the MA in Communications has been implemented immediately (\$17k spring 2012, additional \$17k effective fall 2012) to enable enhanced recruiting efforts now.
- 4. College of Education
  - a. Increase marketing efforts of online master's programs through the "East Carolina University Options" newspaper insert
    - i. Implementation planned in March 2012.
- 5. College of Health and Human Performance
  - a. Increase marketing and funding for summer online instruction in teacher training programs (MAED Health Ed, MAED Physical Ed., MA Health Ed.)
  - b. Increase graduate assistantship level for the MS in Exercise Sport Science to more competitive levels (\$15k / yr)
    - i. Benefits: Student demand is high (90+ applications for about 45 seats) but program is losing high-quality students to more competitive programs. Investment will increase quality and reduce attrition.
  - c. MS Recreation and Park Admin and MS in Recreation Therapy may be potential candidates for going online
    - i. Benefits: Tap into new market, increased student demand. Further discussion and development efforts will be needed within college
    - ii. Licensing requirements for Recreation Therapy is likely to increase from undergraduate requirements to graduate level requirements in the future which will present opportunities for graduate enrollment growth.
- 6. College of Human Ecology
  - a. MS in Criminal Justice – moratorium on admitting new online students was put into place a 3 years ago to allow for program restructuring and improvements. On-campus has continued. Scheduled to go back online next year, potential for high growth due to strong student and employer demand.
    - i. Will need help with marketing to re-establish robust enrollment
    - ii. Increased competition from private and for-profit institutions poses a threat to robust enrollment.
  - b. MS CDFR, MAEd B-K Teacher Education and MAEd Family and Consumer Science Education – Approval to move these programs online was granted in AY 2008-09, but funding to market them has been non-existent because of budget

cuts. These online offerings offer a real advantage for rural populations and for full-time teachers.

- i. The MAEd programs are critical for teacher education in North Carolina and the MAEd FACS, MAEd BK, and MS CDFR are the only such programs in the state.
  - c. MS Nutrition - serves Eastern North Carolina by providing registered dietitians to underserved rural areas of eastern North Carolina. Obesity prevention is especially critical to eastern NC (not to mention the rest of the nation) where obesity rates hover at 57% for the adult population and 20% for children.
    - i. The online program needs marketing assistance. This program has much growth potential.
  - d. MSW (Master's in Social Work) – The MSW is the terminal clinical practice degree for the profession. Many graduates advance to senior administration positions within social work related agencies, medical facilities and establish their own private behavioral healthcare clinics. Employment forecasts indicate high growth rates in the demand for social workers.
    - i. Used to be one of only two programs in NC. Competition from many new programs is affecting enrollment. Marketing efforts needed to preserve ECU's market share in eastern NC.
7. Harriot College of Arts and Sciences (HCAS)
  - a. HCAS hosts a several large masters programs and many small high-quality master's programs that have potential for growth, but cost may be high.
  - b. MA in English – 144 students, many part-time, online, pay-as-you-go students. Program provides training for community college instructors, and other fields. Increased marketing efforts may yield increased enrollments at low cost.
  - c. MA in Psychology – Enrollment limited by amount of available assistantship funds.
    - i. Benefits: Because of high student demand, students in this program receive half-time assistantships. Small investments will yield better than average increases in enrollment.
    - ii. Downside: Job market for MA in Psychology is weak and unemployment rate is higher than average for master's degrees
  - d. MA in Anthropology – expand track in forensic anthropology
    - i. Benefits: Good student demand, good job prospects, may increase opportunities for collaboration with Master's in Criminal Justice
    - ii. Down-side: Teaching lab facilities would be needed along with significant expansion of graduate assistantship budget.
8. College of Allied Health Sciences (CAHS)
  - a. Most of the graduate programs in CAHS have far more applicants than available seats, and thus there is potential for growth; however, all of the programs are limited in the number of available seats. Graduate enrollment in the college has grown 74% since 2001. In the last three years the college has lost 15 positions (combination of new positions and existing positions).

- i. In some programs the number of seats are limited by the number of available clinical internship sites
  - ii. In some programs the number of seats are limited by the number of faculty
  - iii. Most programs are limited by a combination of (i) and (ii).
- b. MS in Occupational Therapy plans to increase enrollment 50% from 20 to 30 by 2012 using currently available resources (barring further cuts in faculty positions).
- c. The Master's in Physician's Assistant program has the capability to grow from 30 to 40 but would need additional clinical internships and would need to add an additional two faculty members to do so.
- d. The proposed new MS in Health Informatics and Information Management if approved will grow to 30 students in about 3 to 4 years.

#### 9. College of Nursing

- a. Most of the enrollment growth in the College of Nursing in the last three years has been in the RN/BSN online option (an option for RNs returning to school to obtain the BSN degree) and the MSN degree (nursing education and nursing leadership concentrations). There are no shortages of applications for the 8 concentrations in the MSN program and the alternate entry MSN option, and production of large numbers of BSNs ensures that student demand for MSN programs will remain high. Like the College of Allied Health Sciences, the number of available seats in the MSN program is limited by a combination of available faculty and clinical practicum sites.
- b. The greatest potential for growth is the MSN program is the Nursing Education and Nursing Leadership concentrations. These two options do not have limitations in practicum site placements as experienced with options that require intense clinical training in health care settings. The number of available nursing faculty is the limiting factor. Enrollment in these programs could easily grow if additional faculty were available
- c. The curriculum for a new Family Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner (FPMHNP) concentration in the MSN program has been approved and is ready to go but the college cannot move forward to offer this new concentration because it lost 9 faculty positions in the last year.
- d. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) has called for moving the level of preparation necessary for advanced nursing practice roles from master's preparation to the doctorate level by the year 2015. This would mean transitioning nurse practitioners, nurse anesthetists, nurse midwives and clinical nurse specialists into a practice-focused doctorate—the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) degree, which will ultimately impact the ability of students to become credentialed as advanced practice nurses. A proposal to establish the DNP has been submitted to UNC-GA and is awaiting approval.
- e. Students admitted to the Alternate Entry MSN program spend their first year on campus. Currently there are 30 available seats limited by the number of available faculty and clinical practice sites. Graduate assistantship funds are used to support these students in their first year.

#### 10. Brody School of Medicine (BSOM)

- a. The PhD programs in biomedical sciences have plenty of applications. Additional marketing is not necessarily needed here. The limiting factor is the number of available graduate assistantships. There are sufficient faculty members to increase enrollment in these programs by 20%.
- b. More than 50% of the PhD students in BSOM are now supported by funds other than Graduate School funds.
- c. BSOM is losing its best applicants to other schools because ECU does not cover student fees (ca. \$2000 per student per year).
- d. The new MS in Biomedical Science is in its first year of operation and will grow to a steady-state enrollment of about 20 to 25 in three years. First-year students are supported with institutional funds while they are being trained. In the second year, students are supported from grants. Some are pay-your-own-way students.
- e. The Master's in Public Health (MPH) is currently over capacity at 115 students. Either more faculty members are needed or fewer students will have to be enrolled.
- f. The proposed new PhD in Epidemiology will require two more faculty members and assistantship funds to cover them.

#### **4.4. Increasing retention and graduation rates**

Steps aimed at significantly reducing attrition in ECU's graduate programs will yield significant gains in graduate student enrollment and completion rates. National data indicates that attrition in online graduate programs is typically 40%, which is higher than attrition in equivalent on-campus programs. ECU data from the College of Business and College of Education are congruent with national trends. Online students in master's programs are usually full-time employees taking courses in their spare time to improve their salary and employment opportunities. They are often raising families and funding their education through loans or with scarce family savings. Minor or major life events cause these students to drop out at higher rates than full-time students enrolled in on-campus master's programs. Examples of such events may include changes in health status of an aging parent, illness or injury of a family member, loss of a job of a family member, or higher course workloads than expected. The ECU College of Business is a campus leader at developing methods to address attrition rates in their online MBA program, and these best practices will be shared with graduate program directors in other colleges and programs. Best practices under development in the College of Business include:

1. Mandatory attendance at pre-enrollment orientation session for students and family members to:
  - a. Help students set appropriate work expectations. Family signs off too so they know what to expect.
  - b. Help student develop personal rapport with faculty members prior to start of online instruction.
2. Early warning systems have been developed to identify students at risk of dropping out, e.g., not pre-registered for a subsequent term.
  - a. These students receive a personal phone call from a college advisor to see if any help can be offered.

3. Redesign of curriculum is being studied to reduce remedial type course work in 1<sup>st</sup> year when students have appropriate professional experience, thus reducing total number of credits and total cost as well as shortening time-to-degree. It should be noted that the MBA program has a variable credit curriculum ranging from 30 to 60 credits depending on the level of the student's undergraduate preparation.
4. Redesign of the course sequence is being considered to take advantage of the concept of "escalating commitment". As students progress in their program of study their level of commitment to complete the program escalates. Curriculum sequencing is being studied that may place more difficult courses later in student's program of study. By the time more difficult courses are encountered students are more likely to have increased skills and a willingness to work harder, thereby increasing overall success and degree completion rates.

Preliminary data from ECU indicates that attrition in some smaller graduate programs with thesis or dissertation requirements is very high. Data is being collected now that will be vetted and distributed university-wide. Programs with high attrition rates will be asked to develop plans for improving retention and degree completion rates with prospects of reduced assistantship fund for programs that do not improve over a two to three year period. Best practices will be presented in workshops to assist faculty, program directors and administrators design customized strategies to decrease attrition and improve retention and graduation rates in their own programs. Examples of best practices that may help in this area include:

1. Developing non-thesis tracks for students who do not wish to complete and defend thesis projects.
2. Developing professional science masters degrees with industrial internships as alternatives to research-intensive programs.
3. New student orientation sessions aimed at helping students set appropriate work expectations.
4. Curriculum sequencing or redesign projects aimed at tapping into escalating commitment
5. Better financial support so that students can devote full-time effort on research intensive programs of study

#### **4.5. Faculty capacity and workload issues**

Recent budget cuts have led to increased teaching loads and decreased numbers of graduate course sections offered, especially during the summer terms. Changes in graduate enrollment during summer terms were observed to be correlated to the number of online sections offered. Steps are currently being taken by the Provost's Office and Financial Affairs to ensure there is adequate funding to cover necessary sections in the coming summer 2012 terms. Decreases in summer course offerings may lead to unintended long-term detrimental consequences. For example, many school teachers take advantage of summers to register in graduate courses. Fewer available course sections in the summer may lead to disruptions in their plan of study, such that missed prerequisite courses would impact their ability to enroll in courses in subsequent terms.

Insufficient course offerings may make students ineligible to receive financial aid. Overall, the net effect will result in higher levels of student frustration and higher levels of breaks in enrollment. The Graduate School does not control faculty teaching assignments thus a lack of course sections must be addressed within individual colleges and departments; however, the Graduate School will play a role in helping to monitor course offerings and capacity similar kinds of capacity issues.

#### **4.6. Reducing barriers to admission**

The graduate admission process is tedious and sometimes leads to frustration on the part of prospective students. At ECU, like all of our peers, we require official transcripts from all universities attended, even if they only took one course. We subscribe to an online database that allows us to check which universities and colleges a student has attended, and they are sometimes surprised to learn we know where and when they have attended different schools. Some students, for example those who have served in our nation's armed forces, find themselves moving frequently while simultaneously enrolling in a few courses at local colleges or universities. It is not uncommon for students in this situation to have 5 or more transcripts.

1. In order to facilitate more rapid decision-making and encourage prospective students to complete their applications, the ECU graduate admission office will investigate implementation of an expedited provisional admission. Provisional admission can be offered for selected high-quality students in cases where sufficient partial information is available to make a reliable decision. Once students are provisionally admitted, they would be required to provide official transcripts from all colleges and universities attended before being allowed to register for courses.

ECU offers a professional admission track for students who have earned an undergraduate degree more than 10 years ago and have been working in a profession related to their proposed program of study for at least 10 years. The standardized admission exam is waived for such students.

2. The Graduate School will study professional admission programs at other universities and consider modifications to the professional admission track if appropriate.

#### **4.7. Offsetting threats to current enrollment**

The largest decline in enrollment occurred in teaching training programs due to uncertainties in the North Carolina's education system funding and the proposal to abolish the automatic salary increase for teachers with master's degrees.

1. In order to offset this decrease the Graduate School will work with the College of Education to identify certificate programs and other continuing education opportunities relevant to teachers. The certificate admission process is simpler and students recruited into certificate programs are more likely to enter into a degree program as the economy improves. While this action alone will not be sufficient to provide an enrollment increase in the College of Education, it will help offset continuing declines due to economic factors.

Another threat with increasing consequence is the addition of online offerings in the market place. New online programs are being offered by our sister public institutions and private

colleges in the state. ECU's first mover position in online delivery is no longer a competitive advantage. A continued threat is the abundance of for-profit schools promising an easy admission experience and a short time to degree. Their marketing campaigns reach many prospective students in our market. Students begin these programs unaware of the high costs and low value of the degree.

2. Through centralized marketing efforts, ECU must develop clear position in the market in regards to quality, cost and value. We as a university have high quality programs both on-campus and online. We make initiatives to train faculty for effective online teaching. Our costs are quite low for in-state students compared to sister institutions, private colleges and for-profit schools. An integrated marketing and communications plan should be implemented at both the Graduate School level and department level. ECU must not rely on the mere offering of online programs as their differentiator in the market place, but instead develop an identity based on leadership, innovation and value.

#### **4.8. Increasing competitiveness of graduate assistantship stipends**

The selective awarding of graduate assistantships is an essential strategy for increasing the competitiveness of graduate recruiting efforts at ECU. Recent program reviews have pointedly demonstrated the non-competitive nature of ECU's assistantship offerings both within NC system schools and at ECU's peer institutions. The next few years will require a challenging strategic approach. In the current budget situation funding allotted for graduate assistantships is not likely to increase over the next three to four years. The only two realistic ways to increase assistantship levels will be to (a) reallocate funding from low-priority programs to high-priority programs and (b) reduce the number of assistantships offered, thereby increasing the amount available per assistantship.

A soon to be released draft of the report from the Task Force on Graduate Education has specific proposals on metrics and procedures to be used for assessment of minimum graduate assistantship funding levels maintain the viability and sustainability of ECU's graduate programs. Fund levels above minimum viability requirements may be allocated strategically according to methods and procedures described in the task force report. In addition to the task force report, program priorities developed by the Program Prioritization Committee (PPC) will inform the allocation of assistantship funds.