Response to Offsite Review Summary of Lines of Inquiry
Additional Information Request #4:
Description of Difficulties Experienced in Assessing Graduate Programs
August 2018

4. Documents illustrating the difficulties UCR experienced in assessing graduate programs.

UCR's fundamental approach to graduate education has long been based on faculty-driven assessment of individual student learning. Graduate students demonstrate their knowledge and skills in their coursework, and at various program milestones that may include written and oral qualifying exams. Individual faculty mentors and committees evaluate and provide feedback to students in each course, presentation, and program milestone. In addition, most master's students on campus are in professional programs or in programs that have their own, discipline specific, assessment process (e.g. ABET). For Ph.D. students, additional assessment occurs during the defense of the research prospectus, and a defense of the thesis or dissertation. Students also receive annual progress reports. This individualized approach to graduate assessment is consistent with our commitment to assessment that is faculty-owned and tailored to programs.

Our faculty members are adept at assessing individual graduate student learning as described above, but we have lagged in the creation of tools that can help to provide evidence of learning outcomes at the program level beyond those provided during the regular cycle of external reviews. A major focus of our ongoing improvements to graduate assessment is to reorient from an emphasis on compliance to an emphasis on program improvement and the usefulness of uniformly documented criteria-based program-level assessment. Administratively, graduate assessment development has been rushed and not enough time has been spent communicating how criteria-based tools could enhance already existing individual assessment. Going forward, we will emphasize how such tools provide evidence for pedagogical improvements and curricular revisions that will give an overarching assessment of the graduate program, and that can be incorporated into regular external program reviews that are conducted by the Academic Senate.

To address this need for regular program-level assessment, in 2010-11, the Graduate Division requested that every graduate program develop a plan for learning outcomes assessment, to be in place before the end of the 2011-12 academic year. This effort was successful and was described in the 2015 Interim Report. Self-assessments of program learning outcomes are placed on-line on a Blackboard site to which all programs are given access.

In 2013-14, Graduate Division and Graduate Council (the Academic Senate committee that oversees graduate education) came to the understanding that if the faculty and administrative approaches were integrated into an electronic database, then assessment would become both more efficient and more meaningful. Two faculty subcommittees were formed, one for STEM disciplines and one for non-STEM disciplines, and each was tasked with producing a new Annual Research Progress Evaluation (ARPE) form that was designed to capture information needed for individual student assessment, program learning outcomes assessment, and academic program reviews—and thus would provide the foundational material for the database. Graduate Council developed these forms and recommended their adoption by all graduate programs. Concurrently, in 2014-15, Graduate Division introduced new annual training

for graduate advisers (faculty who serve as graduate program directors). Part of this training focused on the ARPE forms and programs were encouraged to further develop and use them.

However, in this emergent form, the ARPE still lacks meaningful, program-specific rubrics and only addresses those aspects of graduate education that are general to most graduate students and are therefore not program specific. For this reason, the ARPE is not always seen as a useful tool. We recognize that our next steps require supporting every program in developing more appropriate rubrics to document the assessment of graduate student learning at the program level. This effort will be led by the Graduate Division with assistance from the Office of Evaluation and Assessment and in consultation and cooperation with the programs as well as Graduate Council. It is important to note that while Graduate Division will provide assessment support and resources and set deadlines, programs will lead the internal development of these criteria-based tools.

In 2015, Graduate Division also began engaging with Information Technology Solutions (ITS) to plan for the electronic database and associated reporting infrastructure required for program-level assessment. Graduate Division realized that the project would require digitizing not only the assessment materials, but also all of the graduate student affairs workflow—which remains paper-based. Thus, the already large and complex project grew further in scope. Moreover, the implementation of a new campus-wide student information system (Banner) was planned for 2016-17, which slowed project planning for two reasons: first, ITS was heavily impacted by Banner implementation; and second, any new electronic system in Graduate Division would necessarily have to be integrated with Banner, and so it would be preferable to have Banner implemented and stabilized first. This caused the project to be further delayed. Following Banner stabilization, ITS remains heavily impacted with a set of unusually high-priority projects (including UC Path, described elsewhere in these response documents), and so the graduate assessment project remains on hold until campus resources become available for its implementation (likely upon stabilization of UC Path).

Meanwhile, programs have continued to use their original (2012) approaches to assessment—some with and others without the addition of the ARPE forms. Currently, programs have completed two assessment cycles, although timely submission of reports has been uneven, partly due to the underlying reasons laid out at the beginning of this response, but also due to turnover in Graduate Division leadership that happened before reporting was sufficiently institutionalized.

Looking ahead to the future of graduate assessment at UCR, we are committed to supporting faculty members in developing criteria-based rubrics to assess graduate student learning at the program level. This support will be led by the Graduate Division in collaboration with the Office of Evaluation and Assessment and Graduate Council. In doing so, we aim to enhance our faculty members' ability to gather and utilize information that can inform and improve their programs. Our current plan is to support the programs slated for graduate program review in 2020 in producing rubrics related to their key program milestones. By tying individual student learning assessment to program review, we hope to further emphasize how documenting assessment in this way can lead to valuable program improvements.