STUDY RECOMMENDS UNIVERSITIES REEXAMINE GRADUATE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

The Association of American Universities, which represents 62 leading North American research universities, today released a report encouraging research universities to reexamine the size, scope, and performance of their graduate education programs.

The report was prepared by a committee headed by William H. Danforth, chairman of the Board of the Washington University in St. Louis. The committee was composed of presidents, chief academic officers, and graduate deans from 14 AAU universities. The study examined institutional perspectives on graduate education, surveyed AAU-member universities about their graduate programs, and drew up guidelines on best practices for graduate education policies and programs. The report concentrated on Ph. D. education because that is the focus of national debate on graduate education.

"Although graduate education in the United States is widely recognized as the best in the world," said Danforth, "it is criticized for overproduction of Ph.D.s, narrow training, an emphasis on research over teaching, and insufficient mentoring of students. We have taken these and other criticisms seriously in our review and in our development of best practice guidelines."

The committee report emphasizes the following points:

- Many universities have already reexamined their graduate programs and responded with a wide range of changes to meet evolving student and societal needs. But more remains to be done.

- Although graduate education makes important contributions to the education and research missions of universities, its overriding purpose must be the education of graduate students. These students' interests should not become subsidiary to conflicting institutional or faculty interests.

- Student interests should also be paramount in designing graduate curricula that prepare graduate students for a broad array of careers, and in building a diverse student body that enriches the educational environment and prepares students to work in a global environment.
• Although unemployment rates for Ph.D.s are generally low, not enough is known about Ph.D. placement and employment. Universities need to track the placement of their Ph.D. students at least to their first professional employment.

• Institutions also should maintain program performance and student evaluation information. Such information is needed for both internal evaluation of programs and external accountability for them.

• Concern has been expressed about the impact of foreign Ph.D.s on the domestic employment market, but several factors suggest that the impact is small. Moreover, those foreign students who remain in the U.S. enrich the nation's talent pool.

• The principal purpose for graduate students' teaching and research activities is to learn how to teach and conduct research. But federal policies governing research assistantships for federal grants undermine this purpose by requiring graduate students supported by those grants to be considered employees.

The committee's guidelines for best practices include the following:

• Institutions should evaluate the graduate curriculum to assure that it equips students with the knowledge and skills needed for a broad array of postdoctoral careers.

• Institutions should ask departments to provide descriptions of their goals and expectations for their graduate programs, and should periodically compare these against departmental performance data.

• Institutions should terminate programs that cannot maintain the infrastructure and student financial support necessary for acceptable program quality; they should not begin new programs absent a regional or national need and sustainable support.

• All admitted students should be given accurate information about the costs they will incur and realistic assessments of future prospects for financial support.

• Institutions should maintain data on Ph.D. completion rates, time-to-degree, and placement in first professional employment. They should provide such program performance data to all student applicants.

• Departmental recruitment and admissions policies should promote the
participation of talented students from groups underrepresented in their graduate programs. Universities should encourage enrollment of exceptional foreign students while continuing efforts to develop the U.S. domestic talent pool.

"I believe the guidelines developed by the committee are very valuable," said AAU president Nils Hasselmo. "We are encouraging our member universities to use them in evaluating their Ph.D. programs, and intend to work with them to assess their impact."

AAU represents 62 research-intensive universities in the United States and Canada. The association's 60 U.S. members represent just 16 percent of the nation's Ph.D.-granting universities, but graduate more than 50 percent of the nation's Ph.D.s.

Additional copies of the report may be obtained by calling Sandie Dickerson at (202) 408-7500. The report also is available on the AAU website at http://www.tulane.edu/~aau/AAUPolicy.html.