Date: November 30, 2015

To: Wendy Crone, Dean of the Graduate School and Members of the Graduate Faculty Executive Committee

From: Kimber Wilkerson, former RPSE Chair (at time of review) and Professor of Special Education
       Bonnie Doren, Associate Professor and Special Education Area Chair

Re: Special Education Area follow up to the Ten-Year Program Review

Thank you for your careful consideration of our program review, which was conducted in April 2014, and for the additional recommendations for our consideration.

Below we provide a summary of our additional responses, as requested in your letter dated April 6, 2015.

1) Suggestion to consider eliminating the comprehensive examination for MS students with certification.
   • We considered this idea and have voted to eliminate the comprehensive examination for these students. This change has already been implemented.

2) Consider whether our program needs both a qualifying and preliminary examination for doctoral students.
   • The Special Education Area gave careful consideration to this suggestion. After examination of our current and recent past students’ competencies and their progress toward degree, we came to the conclusion that both exams are necessary and serve pedagogically unique and important functions. We have, however, also taken steps to make the workload associated with these exams to be more streamlined and developmentally useful. Our revised doctoral program and handbook located at http://rpse.education.wisc.edu/rpse/programs/graduate-degree-programs/special-education-ph-d-program/ describes the different purposes and timelines of the qualifying and preliminary exam.
   • These two doctoral competencies are commensurate with practices at the top 3 graduate programs in Special Education in the U.S (University of Kansas, Vanderbilt, and University of Oregon).
3) Program should consider doing more to improve the research environment for PhD students, including offering an ongoing proseminar.

- We have added a 1-credit professional seminar for our PhD students which we are offering each year. All PhD students will be required to take this course (RPSE 873), which is offered as a repeatable course.
- We have taken steps to include students more actively in faculty research. All Area doctoral students are currently involved with at least one faculty research project.
- We have also instituted more faculty involvement and mentorship in the required research internship that culminates in the completion of the preliminary exam. This requirement and its associated activities require students to pursue and complete an independent research project with support from faculty.
- These requirements are reflected in our newly revised doctoral program documented in newly revised doctoral handbook available online at http://rpse.education.wisc.edu/rpse/programs/graduate-degree-programs/special-education-ph-d-program/.

4) Consider phasing out admission to the master’s non-certification program.

- We also considered this recommendation thoroughly. We convened a small working group that came back to the Special Education Area with recommendations in October, 2014. One recommendation was to make improvements to the general master’s track so that it might serve as a pipeline to our doctoral program. We are still in the process of weighing options with the goal of making a decision about the fate of general master’s track before AY 2017-18.

5) Consider collecting various kinds of data as recommended by original review committee.

- For the non-certification masters program, we did take this recommendation and collected data on recent past graduates. We found that four of our general masters students entered PhD programs, supporting our idea that students in this track may be viable doctoral students.
- The review committee recommended that we meet with our master’s certification students each semester to make ongoing adjustment to refine the program. We are currently collecting more formal feedback from this group of students while they are enrolled in the seminar that accompanies their two semesters of student teaching. We hope this information will help us make positive adjustments to the program as necessary. We have already experienced some of these benefits. For example: Based on feedback from last year’s students, we have created a new masters-level course to replace some of the undergraduate courses that these students took in the past. This allows them more interaction with other students at their level and also reduces the overall credit requirement in their program, which brings us into compliance with Graduate School credit requirements.

6) Consider the benefits of increased synergy between the Rehabilitation Psychology (RP) and Special Education (SE) Areas.

- We agree that increased synergy would help play on our strengths and also help us to be more efficient in our programming. To this end – we are working towards a combined
research methods course for doctoral students in both the RP and SE Areas. We view this as pedagogically beneficial – and also practically beneficial as it would allow the department to merge to currently under-enrolled courses (i.e., RPSE 872 and RPSE 985).

- The Special Education Area has also opened up a number of graduate and undergraduate courses to include rehabilitation counseling students that have traditionally been offered to only our SE majors. These courses cover content, competencies, and professional goals that are relevant to both SE and RP students (e.g., RPSE 472: Transition and Vocational Education; RPSE 330: Behavioral Analysis: Applications for Person with Disabilities; RPSE 660: Access to the General Curriculum for Students with Disabilities).

7) Create and publish a handbook for the M.S. program in Special Education.

- The department’s student services coordinator developed a site dedicated to providing information targeting incoming and current Special Education Master’s students (http://rpse.education.wisc.edu/rpse/programs/graduate-degree-programs/special-education-graduate-programs).
- The new website provides a clear description and relevant information and documents for incoming and current students, including, documents focused on the application process, an overview of the Special Education Master’s with Certification Program, and a document specifying degree requirements and a sample program plan. The information and current documents are currently undergoing review and integration into a single handbook to meet the purposes of the graduate program.
- A handbook focusing on the general Special Education Master’s program is less developed. The site above includes a description of the program, graduate requirements, and a sample program planning checklist; however, the program remains individualized to meet student’s post-master’s professional goals. It is anticipated that a handbook will be developed as item 4 above is addressed.

8) Enhance overall funding for M.S. and Ph.D. students

- Two faculty in our department were recently awarded a masters level personnel preparation grant form the US Department of Education. This grant will fully fund 14-16 master’s certification students over a 5-year period. We are also currently working on a leadership grant, to be submitted to the same funder, which would fund doctoral level scholars.
- We have worked with our Student Services Coordinator to be more proactive in pursuit of fellowships for our incoming doctoral students. We have made these improvements in conjunction with the RP Area – in an attempt to be more systematic and proactive in seeking funding for students across the department.
- As a note – we have funded general master’s students through a combination of department and scholarship funds over the past two years. In addition, we currently do not have any full-time doctoral students who are not fully supported. This has been true in our department for many years.
9) Be mindful of PhD application numbers to avoid a drop in the SE PhD program’s selectivity.

- We are monitoring doctoral applications and working to increase our number of applicants – as well as the quality of our applicants.
- We have made improvements to the marketing of our doctoral program and are monitoring the effectiveness of those efforts. (e.g., highlighting the unique strengths of our program in our online and print materials)
- We have increased our selectivity by instituting a mandatory interview for doctoral applicants before acceptance.
- We have revisited and revised our internal selection criteria and process. We have also made those enhancements more explicit in our doctoral handbook and on our website.
April 6, 2015

Kimber Wilkerson  
Chair  
Department of Rehabilitation Psychology and Special Education  

Bonnie Doren  
Area Chair, Special Education  
School of Education  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
Madison, WI 53706  
Sent Electronically

Dear Professors Wilkerson and Doren:

As you know, an important part of the University’s ongoing review process is the vetting of graduate programs by the Graduate Faculty Executive Committee (GFEC) of the Graduate School. When the School of Education assembled a review committee to conduct a ten-year assessment of the Special Education M.S. and Ph.D. programs, a member of the GFEC, Aparna Dharwadker, was asked to join the committee and was given responsibility for attending to graduate training issues of particular interest to the Graduate School. Professor Dharwadker led a discussion of the review at the GFEC meeting on March 13, 2015. In this letter, I summarize the committee’s discussion.

Members of the GFEC were excited to learn of the central role UW-Madison’s special education program played in the development of the area as a scholarly field internationally. The Committee appreciates the work undertaken by faculty members over the past several years to improve the quality of the Ph.D. program and the experience for graduate students in it. Finally, the GFEC was pleased to learn of graduate students’ allegiance to the program. Graduate students with whom the review committee spoke praised the quality of the training they receive and the mentoring they get from faculty.

In addition to the many positive things GFEC members learned by reading the review and through Professor Dharwadker’s presentation of it, the Committee heard about several areas where serious consideration of change is warranted. First, the review committee suggests eliminating the comprehensive examination for MS students with certification on the grounds that this differs from the practice of institutional peers and seems excessive when added to the requirement to complete an applied research project. The GFEC believes the program should give further consideration to this recommendation. Second, while the Special Education program apparently modified its PhD qualifying examination in light of the program review, it remained unclear to the committee whether the program needs both a qualifying examination and a preliminary examination. Again, the GFEC recommends the program further consider whether having both examinations is pedagogically necessary. Finally, the GFEC believes that the program could do more to improve the research environment for PhD students, offering, among other things, an ongoing proseminar.
There are several other recommendations in the review committee’s report that the program should consider taking action on. First, the program should consider phasing out admissions to the master’s non-certification so that faculty can devote more attention to the doctoral and certification programs. Second, the program should consider collecting the various kinds of data suggested by the review committee in the interest of refining its different graduate programs to best serve the needs of its students. Finally, the Department could profitably work on building better synergy between the Rehabilitation Psychology and Special Education programs.

There are several areas that were not fully addressed in the review or the program’s response. First, there is the matter of the graduate student handbook. While a handbook exists for the Ph.D. in Special Education program, the M.S. in Special Education does not have a handbook. We recommend that this tool for students also be provided in the future. The Graduate School has a handbook template available at [https://kb.wisc.edu/GSAdminKB/page.php?id=34123](https://kb.wisc.edu/GSAdminKB/page.php?id=34123) which may be of help to you. Second, the overall funding rate for graduate students is low and should be enhanced, particularly the funding of M.S. students\(^1\) in their first two years of study and Ph.D. students\(^2\) in the first four years of study. Third, your program had a sharp drop in Ph.D. applications last year. It is not clear that there is a trend here, but if so, you will want to work to maintain the program’s selectivity.

I want to congratulate you on your efforts to maintain first-rate graduate study experiences for your students. While the GFEC certainly saw areas where the Special Education graduate programs could be improved, overall, the committee was impressed with the programs and the work faculty have undertaken to improve them. Since there are certainly areas that require attention, the GFEC would be grateful if you could provide a written update to the committee no later than December 2015.

Thank you again for your efforts.

Sincerely,

Wendy C. Crone
Interim Dean

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\(^1\) [http://grad.wisc.edu/education/academicprograms/profiles/101MS.pdf](http://grad.wisc.edu/education/academicprograms/profiles/101MS.pdf)

\(^2\) [http://grad.wisc.edu/education/academicprograms/profiles/101PHD.pdf](http://grad.wisc.edu/education/academicprograms/profiles/101PHD.pdf)

cc:
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