

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

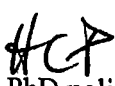
IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Memorandum

To: Department Chairs, Arts and Sciences departments
Directors of Graduate Studies, PhD programs in the Arts and Sciences

CC: Nick Dirks, Vice-President for Arts and Sciences
Alan Brinkley, Provost

From: Henry C. Pinkham, Dean 

Re: Rationale for GSAS time-to-PhD policies

Date: November 7, 2005

This memorandum provides the rationale for GSAS time-to-PhD policies over the past few years. I include relevant excerpts from the GSAS yearly reports that reflect the more than three years of discussion and review of these policies prior to our announcement this fall and their implementation in 2007. It is important to distinguish policies that are already in place (e.g., no GSAS funding for students beyond seven years of residence) from those currently proposed. I will meet with individual department leaders who wish to discuss the impact of these changes on their program.

I. Rationale

Over fifteen years ago it was realized that one of the causes of lengthy time to PhD in the humanities and social sciences was the inadequacy of financial support. It was hoped that by improving financial support, time to degree and attrition would both decrease. Thanks to the Mellon Foundation, a number of prestigious PhD programs in several universities conducted a ten-year, \$100-million-plus experiment in humanities and humanistic social science departments to test this hypothesis. At the outset this 1990-2000 effort included five Columbia departments -- Anthropology, English and Comparative Literature, Music, Philosophy and Religion, with Art History and Archaeology added later.

By the time I became dean in 2001, it was clear that time to degree was not improving at the rate we were expecting and that further measures needed to be taken. (See the excerpt below from my 2001-02 report to the faculty.) This past May the Mellon Foundation shared with participating graduate deans preliminary results of the statistical analysis of data on the departments they supported. Unfortunately, the results indicate that improved funding alone does not cure the time-to-degree problem, nor does it reduce the high attrition rates.

What other factors are at work? Here are three that were presented by the Mellon analysts and conference participants at the May conference.

1) For competitive reasons the top schools moved to similar multi-year funding schemes that guarantee entering students five years of support. Guaranteeing support over that

length of time should have been accompanied by regular and serious departmental reviews that included clear expectations and short term goals for the students.

- Getting course work out of the way expeditiously is the first key to success.
- Making sure that explicit standards are high enough is also crucial. Because students no longer pay tuition and, in fact, receive a stipend, they have little incentive to re-examine their decision to pursue a PhD until their funding runs out. There is now a much greater responsibility, therefore, on faculty to help the students make that reevaluation.
- Controlling progress during the dissertation research and writing stage of the PhD is widely acknowledged to be the most difficult part of the process. Careful mentoring and specific deadlines help maintain reasonable progress here, but there are no magic recipes.

2) It was the consensus of the conference participants that even if it is made clear that funding ends after the fifth year, there must also be a deadline beyond which students are not allowed to stay as regular students in residence, funding or no funding. This is a very strong encouragement to the students to work full-time on their studies.

3) Several of the graduate deans from humanities departments suggested that a difficulty faced in some humanities departments is the lack of accepted standards of knowledge and skills for admissions to a PhD program. Better standards at admission would improve time to degree by removing "remedial" (to quote from one of these deans) time spent at the beginning of the program.

Finally, the Mellon Foundation presented data showing that in most fields students whose time to degree exceeds a certain field-specific norm are penalized in the job search. When these data are made public I will share them with you. We owe it to our students' future success to help them graduate in a timely way.

II. The history of the "Seven Year Rule" at Columbia

GSAS has always had on its book a rule that states that "All work for the Ph.D. must be completed within seven years of full-time registration, less any advanced standing granted." Until the early 90s this rule was not enforced. Since then the successive deans of GSAS and the Executive Committee of GSAS have moved closer to full enforcement of the rule. Under Dean Bagnall, it was decided that GSAS students could not stay in university housing beyond their seven years of residence; under Dean Macagno, it was decided that the bulk of financial aid funding should go to support students on multi-year fellowships, and therefore in their first five (in some cases six) years of residence. In 2002, we moved to limit all GSAS financial aid funding to students in their first seven years of residence. This includes limiting Teaching Fellowships to students in their first seven years of residence. Although a few exceptions are still being made, this is the policy today, as I have announced in several of the GSAS yearly reports (see below), starting in 2002. While this policy is mainly driven by time-to-degree reasons, we do not have enough financial aid available to support our students systematically through six years of residence, to say nothing of seven or eight years.

Even with the seven year rule as currently interpreted, our policies on length of financial support are significantly looser than those of our peers, since our students may be supported not only for their five-year fellowship package, but for up to two additional years at the same level of support if teaching is available. This perpetuates a culture where it may seem to faculty and students alike that the funding will never end. This is why I am proposing that we move closer to a full implementation of our seven year rule, starting in Fall 2007. The implementation I propose is described in the October 26, 2005 email sent to PhD students, on which you were copied.

III. Time to degree at Columbia

In the "bad old days" of poor funding in the humanities and social sciences (the 1980s and the early 1990s) the time to PhD was not as bad as some of us think. For example, the median time to degree in EALAC, History, Music, and Philosophy hovered around eight years. Anthropology and Art History students took longer on average. I will soon be sending you detailed time-to-degree information.

With the right policies, now that we have much better funding, our goal should be to get the median time to degree to six or seven years, depending on the field. I recognize that one of the problems is the poor job market: even students who could get their degree are staying on because they are unable to find suitable jobs. Encouraging students to extend their time in graduate school is not an effective response to a woeful job market.

This discussion of time to degree does not concern the natural science departments, where time to degree has been satisfactory: usually between five and six years. In a few departments recent improvements in time to degree can be linked to specific policies of mentoring and supervision of students.

IV. Policies changes

As noted in my October 26, 2005 email, the policy changes announced there do not amount to a change in rules but to better monitoring of the rules by the departments and by GSAS itself. For example, to our dismay we discovered that a number of currently enrolled students were carrying many Incompletes; some students have as many as seven. Why are departments allowing students with that many Incompletes to continue in their program? We also discovered that GSAS rules concerning time to the MA and MPhil degrees are being enforced inconsistently. We are currently exploring with departments the substantive reasons, if any, for these delays. Regardless, all departments should develop and communicate specific and clear timelines for students so that satisfactory progress is explicitly and operationally defined. **I ask you to revise your departmental web publications as soon as possible to insure that this is the case.**

An important change in the enforcement of the rules concerns the total time allowed to the PhD. It is important to note that no change currently proposed in the seven year rule goes into effect before academic year 2007-08.

V. Relevant excerpts from GSAS Yearly Reports

GSAS 2001-02 Yearly Report, February 11, 2002

http://www.columbia.edu/cu/gsas/pdf-files/GSAS_Faculty_Report20020211.pdf

GSAS interprets the fact that the Ph.D. is supposed to be completed in 7 years to imply that students beyond year 7 cannot teach. There have been a few exceptions this year, but we hope to make this the general rule.

The time to degree remains unacceptably high: a median of 8 years in most humanities and social science departments. We have decreased one of the obstacles to timely completion, namely inadequate funding. The experience of the last ten years in the Mellon departments shows that this in itself does not shorten time to degree. A second obstacle may be inadequate supervision and mentoring of our students. Currently, monitoring of the academic progress of students takes place at the department level alone until the 7th year when students are asked to submit to the Graduate School a "Report on Progress in Candidacy in the Doctoral Program." In many cases, this is too late as funding and housing have already run out. Earlier reviews are needed to ensure that students reach in a timely fashion important milestones such as the MA, the general exams and approval of the dissertation prospectus.

GSAS 2003-04 Yearly Report, April 27, 2004

http://www.columbia.edu/cu/gsas/pdf-files/GSAS_Faculty_Report20040427.pdf

The Graduate School has had for many years a rule that says that graduate students may be in residence for the PhD at most 7 years. This rule is implemented in the following way: no PhD student receives financial support from GSAS after 7 years of residence. We make only one exception: instructors in the undergraduate core curriculum (Literature Humanities and Contemporary Civilization).

A few statistics: during this academic year (2003-04), fewer than 40 of the over 1300 students in the first 5 years of the PhD program in the Arts & Sciences departments at Columbia are not receiving at least the minimum fellowship package which consists of \$17,044 in stipend, a full tuition fellowship and health benefits. The full value of this fellowship package is about \$50,000. Roughly half of these 40 students are first year students who will be picked up on "deferred fellowship" packages next year. The remaining 20 are 4th and 5th year students who arrived before the creation of the deferred fellowship packages, and for whom their departments were not able to find teaching fellowships.

GSAS 2004-05 Yearly Report, February 16, 2005

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/gsas/pdf-files/yearly-report-05.pdf>

A critical issue is that some departments "either do not have a time-table laid out for their students that will allow those students to complete a PhD in 5 or 6 years or they do not insist that students adhere to that time table."