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Panel II - Graduate Student Experience

presentation by

Mariam Perryman

Masters Student in Biochemical Engineering, College of Engineering

- I am currently finishing my Master's degree in biochemical engineering, planning to graduate in the Summer of 2015. My focus is on plastic degradation and fragmentation in the marine environment, which is considered a relatively new area of scientific inquiry. My entire experience, as a whole, has been a fantastic one.
 - I have an amazing and inspiring major professor who offers academic and professional mentoring, introduces me to prominent figures in the field, encourages me to attend various conferences, and invites me to be involved in various phases of many other projects related to my thesis, including publishing a prominent paper.
 - With that said, if I had to do everything again, I would 100% repeat this experience. I would like to share some of the experiences I found most exciting or beneficial, and then discuss how we may be able to guarantee that every graduate student is presented with similar opportunities.
- The two major parts of the graduate education experience are thesis research and writing, and classes. With my particular area of focus, there is no clear-cut, laid out path; I had to piece many seemingly dissimilar courses together including biochemistry, chemical oceanography, environmental ethics, polymer science, and biophysical interactions.
 - Not only did this contribute immensely to my research and the design of my experiments, but also allowed me to look at my overarching questions with totally different perspectives: environmental, physical, biological, and even ethical.
 - Furthermore, I met two of my three committee members (besides my major professor) through taking these classes.
 - Even with as many classes as I was able to take, there were also quite a few that I wasn't able to take either because of timing or an already full schedule.
 - How can we ensure that every graduate student is presented with the opportunity to take as many classes in as many different, complimentary departments as possible, with the most ease and greatest encouragement to do so?
 - Likely not a simple answer and quite a bit of restructuring may have to be

involved. However, some of the things I've thought of or have heard discussed are:

- Making shorter, more intense courses offered more frequently
- Encouraging professors to record lectures and offer courses electronically so that the course can be taken any time, with the professor agreeing to be available in person for additional questions or guidance throughout the course
- Still, is it better to have more general courses offering a broad perspective with shallow coverage of many aspects, or specific courses offering in-depth coverage of only a couple? Is it more beneficial to have lecture-based courses, project and paper heavy courses, discussion courses, or some combination? What should be expected in a superior graduate program?
- I have briefly mentioned my committee and how it is made up of a fairly diverse group of professors with expertise in very different areas, allowing me to extract advice from a variety of expert backgrounds
 - However, I was very familiar with many different professors and their particular areas of research from my undergraduate experience; what about those students who are not as familiar with UGA faculty?
 - I think it would be hugely beneficial to have a larger, cross-departmental database with professor bio's, areas of expertise, and current or upcoming projects and needs within those projects, that is regularly updated. In this way students can easily search and find professors that could offer valuable advice or mentoring, and further encourage inter-departmental collaboration.
- A major part of graduate education lies in research and professional development
 - Some of the most inspiring experiences I've had as a graduate student have been attending conferences. Not only do you get the opportunity to present your research to peers and experts, you get to hear their feedback and become familiar with other research in your field
 - I strongly feel that this is an experience that every graduate student should have at least once. I think that attending a conference should be required to graduate, or, at the very least, strongly, strongly encouraged.
- I would also like to briefly talk about my undergraduate experience, also at UGA
 - I was also very lucky as an undergrad here to be exposed to many different research opportunities that inspired me to further my research understanding in graduate school

- I spent two summers as an undergraduate student researcher for two very different projects. One of these continued through the first year of my graduate studies with my major professor and is now published. The other project I continued working on as an undergraduate and developed it enough to participate in CURO. There it won the best paper award for physical sciences, and the professor I was working under took me to a conference that inspired me to continue the project and be able to write a paper for publication, now in review.
 - Both of these experiences strongly influenced my decision to continue my education and gave me the confidence to do so. This is an extremely important part of recruiting graduate students, whether they become graduate students at UGA or elsewhere. Without this research exposure I am fairly certain I wouldn't be in graduate school now.
- With that I would like to leave you with a couple of important questions:
 - How can we encourage students, undergraduate and graduate, to take part in as many opportunities as are available during their educational experience? Because remember, it is undergraduate students that must eventually become graduate students.
 - How might restructuring the graduate program so that attending many various, perspective-enhancing classes and participating in inter-departmental collaboration are not only simplified, but stimulated and encouraged?