

Proposal for Bolstering Graduate Programs and Continuing Studies at Hollins University

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Introduction:

For over 60 years, coed graduate programs have been an important component of Hollins University's educational offerings. Its graduate programs have prepared outstanding alumnae/i, including Pulitzer Prize winners; award-winning playwrights, dancers, children's book writers and illustrators; a mayor, police chief, school superintendent, director of the Arts Commission, and other community leaders in its hometown of Roanoke, Virginia; outstanding teachers, business leaders, and many others. In addition, the net revenue generated by these programs has been an important component of the institution's budget. Given rapidly occurring demographic changes and the increasingly competitive market in higher education, now is the time to consider how the university might maximize its potential at the graduate level in order to meet the needs of post-baccalaureate learners (the largest growing population of learners in the U.S.) and keep pace with changing trends in higher education.

Background:

Graduate programs at Hollins began in 1958 with the establishment of a master of arts in psychology. Two years later, the English department began offering an M.A. in creative writing (which in 2002, became an M.F.A.); this is a year-round, full-time program that has produced four Pulitzer prize winners to date. In 1969, Hollins launched the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program, featuring an evening class schedule that acknowledges the work and home responsibilities of adult learners in the region; the Master of Arts in Teaching program, created in 1996, also follows this model. Additional graduate programs were established in children's literature (1992), screenwriting and film studies (1999), dance (2005), and playwriting (2007). These additional programs were developed around the novel concept of intensive, residential, six-week summer terms taught primarily by visiting faculty from other institutions.

Today, Hollins' coed graduate programs include the M.A. and M.F.A. in children's literature; M.F.A. in children's book writing and illustrating; M.F.A. in creative writing; M.F.A. in dance; M.A. in liberal studies; M.F.A. in playwriting; M.A. in teaching and learning; teaching licensure and M.A. in teaching; M.A. in screenwriting and film studies and M.F.A. in screenwriting; and certificate programs in advanced studies, children's book illustration, new play directing, and new play performance. These programs include options for full-time enrollment during the traditional academic year, summer term intensive programs, and evening courses during the academic year plus limited summer offerings. The prevalence of the multiple-summer model, the limited number of year-round options (degree and non-degree), the increased competition from other graduate programs, and the lack of available financial aid for graduate programs are some of the factors contributing to declining enrollments in some of the graduate programs. While the 3-4 summer term model may remain attractive to some groups, the university needs to develop a variety of program offering options and modalities in order to respond to adult-learner needs.

Enrollment and Financial Challenges:

For many years at Hollins, graduate enrollment was strong, and net revenue from the graduate programs averaged close to \$2.6 million a year. However, since 2012, both graduate enrollment and revenue have declined steadily. Given that the graduate net revenue declined to \$2 million in 2019, this annual dip, when coupled with the decline in undergraduate net revenue, is of serious institutional concern.

Other challenges now facing Hollins and the independent college sector include the projected decline of undergraduate enrollment over the next decade (the so-called “cliff” the higher education community has heard so much about), growing concerns about student debt and the cost of education, continued public scrutiny and criticism of higher education, skepticism about the value of liberal arts education, demographic changes, and increasing income inequality in the nation. Given these challenges, Hollins will need to both increase undergraduate and graduate enrollment in order maintain its commitment to academic excellence at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Finally, Hollins has historically viewed graduate studies as being ancillary to the undergraduate program. The institution is in process of an intentional culture shift that will allow it to embrace graduate education as an integral and compelling part of its identity as a university.

Despite these significant challenges, the senior administration believes that, with the right leadership team in place and the university’s collective, innovative thinking, Hollins will be able not only to right the course, but to achieve or exceed enrollment, retention, and revenue goals. The campus community looks forward to facing these challenges together and achieving success.

Proposed Solutions:

1. Meet the market where it is

A logical part of the solution to Hollins’ financial sustainability is to invest in and enhance the graduate and continuing studies sectors given the increase in the number of post-baccalaureate and non-traditional students nationwide. According to data compiled by the National Center for Educational Statistics (<https://nces.ed.gov/>), projected enrollment of adults 20 years-of-age and older shows continued growth over the next several years. By 2025, almost 42% of the nation’s total students will be adult learners. Now is the time for Hollins to seize the opportunity to meet the market where it is, and in the process, serve more students, build a more vibrant campus community, raise its institutional profile, be innovative, support existing and future graduate programs, and generate the income needed for the institution.

In order to meet the market where it is and keep pace with it as it changes, Hollins also needs to recognize that standard practices in graduate education in the past may not be what today’s and tomorrow’s graduate students are seeking. For instance, interest in

traditional master's programs is declining nationwide.¹ This is not to say that the university should not continue to support and grow its successful M.A. and M.F.A. programs, but many learners these days are seeking credentialing programs, including badges, certificates, and micro-credentials. By ignoring such programs, Hollins has effectively turned a blind eye to a potentially advantageous opportunity. However, with minimal effort, this circumstance can be reversed, and Hollins could be an early adopter in the region.

Another change that cannot be ignored is the manner in which graduate programs are delivered today (including many more online options). Through its new membership in NC-SARA and its growing expertise with hybrid learning, Hollins has the opportunity to reach a larger audience with online offerings.

Furthermore, changes in higher education and the marketplace as a whole are happening at a dizzying pace. If Hollins can adapt more quickly and effectively to unexpected opportunities in the graduate and continuing education markets, it will be better positioned to move nimbly to increase needed net revenue and enhance overall institutional viability.

2. Hire a vice president for graduate programs and continuing studies

In order to move Hollins forward in the area of graduate programs and continuing studies, it needs to hire a dynamic leader who will work collaboratively with the other members of the president's leadership team.

The vice president's key responsibilities include:

- Provide leadership for and oversight of graduate programs and continuing studies, including the curriculum, faculty, staff, program development, and assessment.
- Support graduate and continuing studies program directors by facilitating their work in the areas of budgeting, hiring, marketing, advocacy, assessment, and fundraising.
- Work in concert with the manager of graduate services and the staff in the Graduate Studies Office, who currently support all graduate programs, to assist them with the student life cycle from recruitment to graduation.
- Work closely with the manager of graduate services to review and revise systems and procedures that may be barriers to the success of graduate programs and continuing studies initiatives.
- Work collaboratively with the provost to lead ongoing efforts to integrate graduate education into the culture of the university and to create synergies that benefit both graduate and undergraduate education at Hollins.
- Develop innovative graduate and continuing studies initiatives at Hollins that are revenue-generating and that extend the university's mission, and design and

¹ See Lilah Burke's "The Landscape for Master's-Level Education," *Inside Higher Ed*, November 8, 2019, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/11/08/graduate-school-officials-struggle-deal-fast-moving-landscape>, for more information on the rapidly changing nature of master's level education.

- implement strategic plans for graduate programs and continuing studies based on aggressive and attainable enrollment and revenue goals.
- Identify, in partnership with the president and institutional advancement, funding opportunities to support graduate programs and continuing studies.
 - Work collaboratively with the vice president for external relations to develop a fundraising plan in support of scholarships and graduate-level research.
 - Collaborate with the university's marketing department to develop and enhance existing marketing strategies and to align resources accordingly.
 - Create and implement structures that enable graduate and non-traditional programs to function within the liberal arts mission with effectiveness, efficiency, flexibility, and academic integrity.
 - Research and implement best practices to support academic innovation for graduate programs and continuing studies initiatives including being familiar with and responsive to the rapidly changing market, being strategic about proposing and implementing new programs, and creating new programs that might fall outside of traditional undergraduate or graduate models.
 - Develop relationships locally, regionally, nationally, and online to ensure Hollins can proactively provide learning opportunities for these prospective populations. Also serve as a connector to the Roanoke community to position Hollins to respond quickly to emerging prospects in the region.
 - Use data to inform decision-making regarding new program development, implementation, and assessment including tracking retention and completion rates, overseeing accreditation issues related to graduate programs, and remaining current with all regulatory requirements related to online education for both the state of VA and NC-SARA.
 - Serve on the Graduate Academic Affairs Committee, and represent that committee at faculty meetings.

The vice president for graduate programs and continuing studies will have a seat on the president's cabinet so that graduate programs and continuing studies will have a dedicated voice in discussions of the future of the university at the highest level.

3. Establish a separate governance body to review and approve new graduate courses and programs

In 2020, the faculty approved the creation of a new committee to handle academic matters related to graduate programs. The reason for the creation of this committee was that previously, review of all new academic courses and programs (undergraduate and graduate) involved a multi-step process including a combination of the following governance entities: department chairs/program directors, the Academic Policy Committee, divisions, the Academic Affairs Committee, and the full faculty. While that system worked well most of the time, it had its inefficiencies, especially with regard to the time it took to move a course or a program through all the required steps. In the graduate market, that slow process was hindering the university's ability to act nimbly in response to market demands, needs, and opportunities. The hope is that this new committee will allow the graduate directors and the new vice president to propose new courses, programs, and other academic initiatives in an efficient and timely manner. The

new committee outlined below, has been in operation since the beginning of fall 2020, and has gotten off to a strong start.

Graduate Academic Affairs Committee

Function:

- To develop and review policies and regulations for graduate programs.
- To make recommendations directly to the faculty regarding all graduate programs, such as proposals for new and substantially changed graduate degrees and post-baccalaureate programs (including badges, certificates, and micro-credentials), elimination of these programs, changes or additions to these programs, organization of the academic year and system of credits awarded, overall credits required for the degree or program, and all aspects of the accreditation of graduate programs.
- To review and recommend to the faculty enrollment limits for certain categories of graduate courses.
- To conduct, in collaboration with the graduate vice president, program reviews and to recommend to the faculty specific action items related to those reviews.*
- To consult with relevant departments with regard to the development of new graduate programs in order to create synergies whenever possible and to ensure program quality.
- To recommend to the faculty all requirements for degrees; all course changes, including new courses; changes in course levels; substantive changes in course descriptions; and elimination of courses for graduate programs.
- To review petitions from graduate students and graduate faculty concerning academic policies and regulations.
- To discuss and make recommendations for academic services related to graduate student success.

The Graduate Academic Affairs Committee shall have final authority in the following areas (subject to review by the faculty on appeal):

- Graduate admission decisions when there are questions about applicants' eligibility.
- Course substitutions as appropriate.
- Eligibility guidelines for teaching graduate courses based on SACS and NC-SARA requirements.
- Individual grade changes for graduate students that cannot be handled by the manager of graduate services and the registrar.
- Approval of transfer courses to count towards graduate degree requirements.
- Approval of enrollment limitations for particular graduate courses.

Composition:

Voting members: The vice president for graduate programs and continuing studies (the interim vice president for academic affairs, or their designee, shall stand in for the graduate vice president until one is hired); the manager of graduate services; the graduate program

directors; a tenured or tenure-track member of the faculty elected from and by each division not represented by the graduate program directors.

Consulting members: university librarian; director of the Writing Center; registrar; and chief information officer.

The chair shall be elected by the committee from the faculty and administrators on the committee.

Terms: Tenured faculty representatives: three years, no limit on terms.

*Note: All new graduate programs and continuing studies initiatives (including master's programs, badges, certificates, and micro-credentials) will be approved for an initial three-year period in which they will need to achieve predetermined enrollment and net revenue goals. After three years, a thorough review of new graduate programs will be conducted by the Graduate Academic Affairs Committee, and new continuing studies program reviews will be conducted by the vice president for graduate programs and continuing studies to determine whether the programs should continue based on: i) market research regarding the need for the programs; and ii) whether the programs have achieved student enrollment and net student revenue goals or show the strong potential to achieve those goals within a reasonable period of time. If the need for the programs no longer exists, or the programs are no longer profitable, they will be discontinued. Programs that pass the initial review at the end of the third year will subsequently be reviewed as follows: in addition to program reviews that occur on a regular cycle, existing programs that experience decline in enrollments in three consecutive years are to be reviewed by the Graduate Academic Affairs Committee (for graduate programs) and by the vice president for graduate programs and continuing studies (for not-for-credit or continuing studies initiatives).

The vice president will be responsible for initiating the review of both new and existing programs to ensure that enrollments remain robust and programs continue to be relevant, lucrative, and of high quality. Also, going forward, all new and continuing programs will need to be both self-sustaining and revenue-generating. As noted earlier in this proposal, the graduate vice president will work with program directors to set and monitor both enrollment and revenue goals for graduate programs.

4. Consider creating a school for graduate programs and continuing studies

Looking forward, once new initiatives have been implemented and enrollment numbers grow in the areas of graduate programs and continuing studies, it may behoove Hollins to create a school for graduate programs and continuing studies. This school would not be in competition with the institution's undergraduate, liberal arts college for women, but rather would serve as its complement by allowing graduate programs and continuing studies to evolve in areas that may not be as grounded in the liberal arts. The institution's mission statement says the following: "Hollins University offers undergraduate, liberal arts education for women, selected graduate programs for men and women, and community outreach initiatives." While the liberal arts are, and should remain, the central focus of the undergraduate mission, Hollins has a tremendous opportunity in graduate programs and

continuing studies to reach beyond that mission to offer programs that appeal to a broader population.

According to Michael Horn, “Continuing education programs – in the form of extension schools and schools of continuing and professional education – are well-positioned to experiment with different student-centered learning models, create innovative programs that generate new revenue streams, and build bridges with industry partners. [...] Continuing education programs are an ideal place to not only test new ideas, but also launch new programs.” He goes on to say that the continuing education programs of the future will focus on such initiatives as “supporting on-demand learning, [...] offering creative financing options, [...] adopting competency-based learning models, [...] and partnering with companies to create custom employee training programs, improve career services, and even establish a new credentialing system.”

Having a separate school would allow the graduate vice president and the program directors to innovate outside of the traditional model of the undergraduate, liberal arts mission in order to attract a broader audience. Horn explains how, “Most continuing education programs remain relatively autonomous [...], [and are] more responsive to industry and consumer needs, have less restrictive budget policies and procurement systems, operate under lower political pressure, and are often infused with the ‘startup mentality’ that is critical for responding to and pioneering disruptive innovations.”² A school of graduate programs and continuing studies would become an incubator for new and innovative program ideas to evolve.

For marketing, recruitment, and financial purposes, the creation of a school of graduate programs and continuing studies also makes sense. The school would give graduate programs and continuing studies an identity of their own that can still work in concert with the undergraduate program, but allow them to have the autonomy they need to be more innovative and creative. The creation of this school is a logical next step in Hollins’ evolution as it endeavors to meet the market where it is, while at the same time continuing to work in concert with the undergraduate, liberal arts program, and to live into its identity as a university.

Conclusion:

These proposed solutions will allow for quicker responsiveness to new program ideas or changes in the current graduate programs, resulting in greater innovation at the graduate level and the

² Michael Horn, Why Continuing Education Programs Are Poised to Become Hubs of Innovation,” EdSurge, August 30, 2016. <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2016-08-30-why-continuing-education-programs-are-poised-to-become-hubs-of-innovation>

ability to respond more nimbly to unexpected opportunities in both graduate programs and continuing studies.

Hollins is at a pivotal time in its history, and needs to be able to change with the new realities that are before it. The university's graduate programs are, and will continue to be, a vital part of the institution's identity, mission, and longevity. Graduate programs, along with continuing studies initiatives, need to be fully supported so they can help Hollins remain competitive and successful in the rapidly changing landscape of higher education.