To: OSU Graduate Council  
Re: Three year follow-up review of action plan for the graduate programs in Design and Human Environment  
Date: 28 Oct 2015  
From: Theresa Filtz, Chair OSU Graduate Council AY 15-16

The graduate programs in Design and Human Environment (DHE) were reviewed in 2010 and an action plan developed in winter 2011. The three year follow-up should have been conducted in winter 2014 but the date was missed and it was only noted this fall that a review was due. As one of the original internal review team members, I conducted the follow-up review on 22 October 2015 with Dr. Hsiou-Lien Chen, the current graduate program director.

At the time of the original review in 2010, DHE was planning to move out of the College of Public Health and Human Sciences and into the College of Business. The faculty in the traditional disciplines of the program, apparel design, historical and cultural aspects of the near environment, human behavior in the near environment, interior design, merchandising management, and textiles, were to be joined by faculty from graphic design leaving the College of Liberal Arts. The main findings of the original review were that the faculty were barely sufficient to meet the needs of the program, that the program should narrow itself to two main areas of research—suggested to be consumer behavior and design innovation, and that a comprehensive strategic plan be developed to guide the program as it integrated itself as a School in the College of Business. The action plan at the time addressed these findings.

At the follow-up review (now five years since the decadal program review), changes to the program were revealed that undermined the ability of the faculty to make progress on the action plan. Although a strategic plan in response to the review was developed in 2011 by the former head and former graduate program director of the School of DHE, the plan was not very specific or strategic, and appears to have been written, filed, and never referred to again. Dr. Chen uncovered the plan in preparation for our meeting. Thus, the program did not have a meaningful strategic planning process or follow-up, although the letter of the requirement was met.

Further, retirements of the department chair and graduate program advisor present in 2010 and the exit of the School head in summer 2015 (and the on-going vacancy of this position), apparently due to faculty difficulties, have left significant holes in a program that was already barely sufficient to support its curricula. The number of graduate students in the program has shrunk to levels that barely meet university minimums for the PhD and will not meet university minimums for the Masters degree. Graduate student complaints to the Graduate School raise significant issues, and Dr. Chen reports that a personnel issue in 2012 led to a significant morale issue among graduate students and other faculty that has yet to be resolved.

The program needs reduce its graduate program disciplines to two that can be supported by the existing faculty. The original recommendation of the 2010 review team that the program focus future graduate program admissions and faculty hires on consumer behavior and design innovation is broadly accepted by the program director, Dr. Chen.
While this focus may disadvantage existing faculty members who cannot find a way to redirect their programs towards one of these two areas, the size of the faculty requires focus. The faculty now need to move forward in revising the graduate program and reach consensus on curricular changes and admissions. Faculty appear to be having difficulty grappling with this issue and reaching consensus.

The significant issues uncovered in this follow-up report, including the lack of a strategic guiding document, faculty and student morale issues, declining student numbers, faculty retention problems, lack of faculty consensus on disciplinary foci, and unresolved completion of integration into the College of Business, require immediate attention. Given the significant issues in the program, it is time for either the leadership in the College of Business to take over the program, and/or for a replacement to be found for the School head, along with resources and support for the program director.

Therefore, I recommended to Dr. Chen—with the concurrence of the College of Business and Graduate School leadership—that the program suspend admissions until some of these issues are resolved. Dr. Chen agreed that this was a reasonable approach and I received notice from her on 26 Oct 2015 that the program was voluntarily suspending program admissions. I commend Dr. Chen on her leadership in this. I suggest that the Graduate Council support the program in this decision, and offer whatever help would be useful to the program as they restructure. I also recommend that a follow-up review of the program be conducted as soon as the program director feels ready to recommence acceptance of program applications. I recommend that the follow-up reviewer make certain that a sustainable program is constructed with a small number of disciplinary areas of strategic focus, that the College of Business leadership be involved in and approve the plan for restructure, that a plan be developed for new faculty hires, and that a plan to improve faculty and graduate student morale be implemented.

Commented [HC1]: I suggest not to include this sentence because I think all current faculty would be able to contribute their expertise to one of the 2 areas in one way or another. However, some are not willing to give up their program as the focus area in fear of losing their identity—e.g. apparel design faculty insisted apparel design should be kept as one of the area of concentrations.

Commented [HC2]: I think this is no longer an issue because the merchandising management program has already become a major under COB.