TO: OSU Graduate Council  
FROM: Denise Lach  
RE: Follow-up on Three-year Progress Report on the Nutrition Graduate Action Plan  
DATE: October 28, 2015

Prior to meeting with Don Jump, Nutrition Graduate Program Coordinator, I reviewed the action plan and the three-year progress report, highlighting questions for the follow-up discussion. The three-year progress report was submitted to the Grad Council in January 2015, so several things have changed in the Nutrition Program since the report was filed. Those changes will be discussed below in the context of the action plan. We met on Wednesday, October 28, 2015 from 10:00-11:00 am in Dr. Jump’s office.

In my review of the progress report, it is clear that the Nutrition Graduate Program has made progress on most of their goals including shifting to a predominance of PhD students (instead of a mix of MS and PhD); new hires (see below for more detail); completion rates; student mentoring; creation of a student seminar series; graduate learning outcomes in all slash courses; and integrating students into decision making as part of their professional development. We only briefly talked about these successes, mostly in the context of other changes since the ten-year review.

We talked in some detail about matriculation (and subsequent graduation rates). PhD students who have entered this program since 2005 have a 100% graduation rate, while Master’s students have an 81% completion rate. Students who matriculate into the program are successfully presenting and publishing their research, and winning awards and fellowships. However, graduate students are funded almost exclusively on external funds raised by faculty through grants; in attempts to diversity funding options, students were nominated for the Provost Distinguished Fellowship, been supported by the NSF-IGERT Aging Fellowship, and encouraged to apply for USDA and NIH fellowships (not successful) as recommended by the external review panel. As federal funding continues to constrict, however, concerns about the viability of this program remain. So, for example, no PhD student was admitted into the program in 2015 as there was no funding available. Only one MS student entered the program in 2015 as there was a specific project need. This results in a low three-year rolling graduation average of 2 for MS and 1.5 for PhD students, neither of which meets the academic guidelines of 5 per year for MS and 3 per year for PhD. However, as part of College hiring packages, two years of graduate support were promised to each of four new hires so the expectation is that several students will be admitted in the 2015-2016 cohort.

On a related note, we also talked about the costs of graduate student training, and Dr. Jump expressed a concern we hear from many researchers on campus: that employing graduate students on externally-funded research projects is not always a rational business model. A fully-trained post-doc may cost a project less in salary/benefits while providing more productivity than a graduate student. This is not unique to the Nutrition Graduate Program, and there are no plans to move away from a graduate
program, but it does suggest that OSU needs to continue discussion about funding/supporting graduate students.

One update to the submitted three-year action plan: four new faculty members have joined the School of Biological and Population Health Sciences (SBPHS) with assignments to the Nutrition program. This is one more than was projected in the three-year plan. In addition, another five faculty members have joined OSU programs with expertise in microbiome and chronic metabolic disease and have affiliated with the Nutrition graduate program. This is a huge increase in capacity since the review in 2013, which recommended that the program build on its current strengths.

Brief comments about progress on action plan:

1. **Decrease or phase out recruitment of MS Students.** There are currently 7 PhD and 3 MS students in the program, with plans in the College of Public Health and Human Sciences to develop a Master in Public Health concentration in Nutrition that may meet the new Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics requirement that registered dieticians have a graduate degree. The core curriculum will be administered in Public Health, while the nutrition courses will be created and implemented by nutrition faculty. This will move many Master’s students into a terminal degree that results in a Registered Dietician credential. The focus of the Nutrition Graduate program will be primarily PhD students.

2. **Doctoral student recruitment should be made a priority.** As discussed above, there has been a successful transition in the ratio of PhD to MS students. The program also had ambitious plans to recruit students actively, but have no budget for recruitment, marketing, or seminar speakers. They rely solely on their webpage for advertising the program as well as efforts by the CPHHS to market all the graduate programs in the college. Recently, the CPHHS switched to a standard application process that costs more for students to use than the previous system; the Nutrition program saw ~50% decline in applications last year (2014-2015). Prior to last year, the program matriculated less than 10% of total applicants, so feel confident the general quality of students remains high.

3. **Develop a diversified funding plan for doctoral student training.** As discussed above, while the Nutrition program has made efforts since the ten-year review to find additional sources of funding for their students (e.g., Provost Fellowships, NSF-IGERT funding, etc.), the bulk of the funding still comes from externally funded research projects. As part of hiring packages, new hires negotiated resources from the College for two years of student support for each of four new faculty members. Adequate funding for Nutrition graduate students remains a concern for the program as discussed above.

4. **Maintain and build on current NGP strengths.** Five new faculty members and one endowed chair have been hired since the ten-year review (two in 2014, four in 2015). In addition, hires in other programs in the college and around campus have increased the capacity of the Nutrition program in areas related to microbiome and chronic metabolic diseases.

5. **Develop and implement an aggressive recruitment program.** See comment 2 above.

6. **Consider strategies to diversify the research funding portfolio.** See comments 3 and 4 above.

7. **Discuss the possibility of requiring a minor for the PhD to increase the breadth of doctoral students.** While each student’s program of study is unique to meet the needs of the individual, two additional courses (8 credits) of public health-related topics were added to the curriculum, which increases the breadth of all students, not just those who add a minor.

8. **Characterize causes for lack of completion of the degree and develop strategies to increase completion rate.** As noted above, the completion rate for PhD students in the time period 2005-2015 was 100%; and 81% for MS students. This is a vast improvement over the 2003-2010 period
when almost 15% of students failed to complete their degrees. The program has a graduate handbook that is revised/updated annually; it describes expectations of students, applicants are screened for strong backgrounds in nutrition and biochemistry, and all Nutrition program students have an annual review of progress toward completion. All of these efforts appear to be contributing to the increase in completion rates.

9. Continue publication expectations and provide support for travel to present results at professional meetings at least once during the PhD program. Students are consistently co-authoring papers with 19 papers last year (2014-2015), 21 during 2013-2014, and 17 during 2012-2013. They have also been winning awards for posters and presentations. Students are provided support by the Nutrition program to travel to conferences and have encouraged students to leverage those funds with those provided by the Grad School.

10. Encourage faculty and graduate students to seek prestigious graduate fellowships. Two nutrition students have been awarded Provost Fellowships (only one matriculated), another two have received a NSF-IGERT award. PhD students who have passed the prelims submit applications for the F31 pre-doctoral fellowships from NIH. And, to facilitate the nomination process for the Provost Fellowship, the Nutrition program application deadline was changed to December 1.

11. Include mentoring Nutrition doctoral students as part of every faculty member’s position description. Beginning in 2012-2013, School directors explicitly address student mentoring performance in PROF reviews. The Nutrition program makes use of Graduate School materials on grad student mentoring.

12. Review required and elective slash courses to ensure that they have appropriate learning outcomes and assignments for graduate students. All slash courses have been reviewed and revised as appropriate to clearly delineate graduate expectations. The CPPHS has established a uniform syllabus format for all classes that requires clear description of learning outcomes and assessment of those outcomes.

13. Find ways to engage students in program decision-making as part of their professional development. Graduate students have been included in several SBPHS or CPHHS committees, including the Health Sciences Curriculum committee, and the Dean’s Graduate Council.

Summary
In general, the Nutrition Graduate Program has addressed the recommendations of the ten-year review team. They are in the process of “restructuring” through the development of a Master in Public Health to be offered by the CPHHS. There remain issues related to funding graduate students, which are not easy to resolve in the context of shrinking federal research budgets, the changing budget model at OSU, and the increasing costs of educating graduate students. The program remains small with lower than recommended graduation rates; but the program remains robust by recruiting, training, and placing strong students in post-doc or academic positions. There has also been a spate of hiring the past two years, which should bring in more opportunities for graduate student advising and funding.

Assessment: Successfully addressed recommendations from review committee.