Graduate School
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

Project Charter
PhD Education Modernization Task Force

Project Name	**PhD Education Modernization Task Force**
Executive Sponsors	John Zumbrunnen, Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs William J. Karpus, Dean of the Graduate School and Vice Provost for Postdoctoral Affairs
Primary Stakeholders	University of Wisconsin-Madison schools/colleges and departments with PhD programs, graduate faculty, staff, and graduate students

Project Description/Statement of Work

The purpose of this task force is to review the current state of PhD education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and to make recommendations for transformative changes that align with the new campus strategic framework with respect to delivering unrivaled educational experiences that prepare students for their future and discover, create, and innovate to change lives. The workgroup will engage with PhD programs, faculty, staff, and students over the course of six months to gain insight into the doctoral program enterprise and address the following points/questions:

1. Reduction of time to degree.
    a. Are program didactic course credit requirements too high?
    b. Does the breadth (minor and/or certificate) requirement add extra time to degree?
    c. Can programs get their students to the dissertation research project faster?
    d. Will reduction in time to candidacy result in decreased time to degree?
    e. How can the annual written assessment on progress to the PhD shorten program length?
    f. Are institutional credit transfer and counting policies too restrictive?
    g. Is a publication requirement necessary and does it add unnecessary time to degree?
    h. Does funding mechanism or source influence time to research start, time to candidacy, and/or time to degree?
2. Curriculum, skill acquisition, professional development, and career outcomes.
    a. Does each program's curriculum prepare graduates for the known spectrum of career outcomes?
    b. Should the curriculum consist of tracks based on known career outcomes; i.e., should there be an "industry" track?
    c. Does the curriculum contain sufficient experiential learning opportunities?
    d. Are there experiences that directly prepare graduates for careers in industry?
3. Dissertation format.
    a. As a final product for the PhD degree, does the current form of the dissertation makes sense in light of known career outcomes?
    b. Should there be different forms of the dissertation based on career trajectories?
4. Entrepreneurship
    a. Our vision is to be the premier university for students, staff, faculty, and alumni to pursue entrepreneurial endeavors and creatively solve problems to create a better world. Is entrepreneurship a prominent part of PhD education? Should it be an integral part of PhD education?
    b. How can the entrepreneurial vision be better integrated into individual PhD programs and be used to enhance recruitment of talented students who are better prepared for a broad spectrum of career outcomes?

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The task force will consider building a model, modern PhD program from the ground up that adheres to the principles and addresses the questions stated above. All background materials will be made available in a Box folder and access to institutional data will be made available.

Business Case / Statement of Need

Ensuring high-quality PhD education that is student-centered, provides appropriate skill development for career outcomes, and prepares the next generation of thought leaders and change makers is an important goal that benefits students, faculty, institutions, and society. While maintaining rigorous scholarly standards and ensuring high-quality research training must remain paramount, shortening unnecessarily long pathways to degree completion can improve educational outcomes and strengthen the impact of doctoral education.

Enhancing student success and well-being. Extended doctoral enrollment can increase financial strain, delay career advancement, and contribute to stress and uncertainty for graduate students. More efficient progression through coursework, milestones, and dissertation research enables students to achieve their professional goals sooner while reducing the personal and economic costs associated with prolonged enrollment. Internal discussions and resources related to doctoral student success emphasize the importance of timely progression and effective mentoring practices.

Improving access and equity. Students from historically underrepresented or economically disadvantaged backgrounds may be disproportionately affected by lengthy degree programs because of financial obligations, caregiving responsibilities, or limited funding horizons. Reducing barriers that contribute to extended time to degree can promote more equitable outcomes and improve retention and completion rates across diverse student populations.

Strengthening workforce development. Society increasingly depends on doctoral graduates to contribute to research, innovation, teaching, public service, and industry leadership. More efficient degree completion allows graduates to enter the workforce sooner, accelerating their contributions to scientific discovery, economic development, and societal problem-solving. This is particularly important in fields facing growing demand for highly trained researchers and professionals.

Increasing institutional effectiveness and resource stewardship. Doctoral education represents a substantial investment of faculty time, research support, assistantship funding, laboratory resources, and institutional infrastructure. When students progress efficiently through their programs, institutions can allocate resources more effectively, support a greater number of students, and improve overall program capacity without compromising quality.

Promoting focused mentoring and academic planning. Efforts to reduce time to degree often encourage clearer expectations, better advising practices, earlier research engagement, structured milestone reviews, and proactive intervention when students face obstacles. These practices enhance the educational experience and improve doctoral outcomes independent of program length.

Maintaining excellence while increasing efficiency. The goal of reducing time to degree is not to accelerate students through programs at the expense of scholarly rigor. Rather, it is to identify and remove unnecessary delays, administrative barriers, and programmatic inefficiencies so that students can achieve the same high standards of research excellence in a timelier and more predictable manner.

Implementation Plan / Milestones *(Due dates and durations)*

Workgroup convenes: The kickoff meeting on **November 25, 2026,** will charge the workgroup, outline expectations and set the timeline for which deliverables will be made. The Task Force will meet monthly for two hours. Tools such as Box Folder access, institutional data access, and email list serve will be introduced to aid in the performance of the project.

Mid-point check-in: **December 18, 2026**. The workgroup will deliver a memo to the executive sponsors indicating midpoint progress.

Workgroup completes its charge and dissolves by: **March 19, 2027,** at which point a report indicating the strengths and weaknesses of the current state of PhD programs along with recommendations for transformative change that address the main questions of the charge.

Change Management/Issue Management *(How decisions will be made? How changes will be made?)*

The workgroup will use a consensus process – a participatory model of decision making that reflects multiple perspectives and that could result in a unanimous decision (100% agreement), agreement by a supermajority (2/3 or more agree), or agreement by

a simple majority (more than half agree). To assure a respectful majority, the team commits to explore and record concerns that are raised, and to document the degree of agreement for decisions reached. The recommendations will be made to the executive sponsors who will then engage campus leadership (deans of the participating Schools/Colleges as well as senior University leadership) in a second step of consultation and engagement to effect changes that will position UW-Madison to attract and educate the best PhD students. It is expected that the task for findings will result in a modern, innovative PhD program design that can be adopted by current PhD programs willing to pilot transformative change that can in turn be rolled out across the institution's PhD program array.

Task Force Roles and Responsibilities

Members	**Campus Roles**
Lisa Abler	Science and Engineering Librarian
Laura Albert	Professor of Industrial Systems Engineering; CoE
Sarah Beckham	Associate Director, Center for South Asia
Janet Branchaw	Professor of Kinesiology; SoE
Mark Connolly	Graduate Program Coordinator-Botany; L&S
Sigan Hartley	Professor of Human Development and Family Studies; SoHE
Meghana Kalluri	Biomedical Engineering PhD Student; GSDAB
Laura Knoll	Professor of Medical Microbiology and Immunology; SMPH
Bob Mathieu	Professor of Astronomy; L&S and University Committee
Junko Mori	Professor of Asian Languages and Cultures; L&S, GFEC
Jeremy Morris	Professor of Communication Arts; L&S
William Murphy	Professor of Biomedical Engineering; Professor of Orthopedics & Rehabilitation; CoE/SMPH
Grant Nelsestuen	Professor of Classical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies; L&S
Parmesh Ramanathan	Professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering; CoE
Kristi Schaeve	Industry Liaison, Biohealth & Clinical Research; SMPH
Sissel Schroeder	Professor of Anthropology; L&S
Ananth Seshadri	Professor of Economics; L&S
William Karpus	Dean, Graduate School and Vice Provost for Postdoctoral Affairs
Jacob Hahn	Strategic Consulting