



EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES



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Strategic Plan

School of Graduate Studies

East Tennessee State University

2018-2026



Strategic Planning at East Tennessee State University:

The university plan is intended to be the guiding document for academic and administrative units when developing and prioritizing their strategies for achieving the strategic goals of the university and to guide budgeting and resource allocation decisions. The hope is that decision-making will become a more decentralized process that will encourage innovation among the units, and this template is an extension of that process.

VISION

Developing a world-class environment to enhance student success and improve the quality of life in the region and beyond.

MISSION

ETSU provides a student-centered community of learning, reflecting high standards and promoting a balance of liberal arts and professional preparation, and continuous improvement. The university conducts a wide array of educational and research programs and clinical services including a comprehensive Academic Health Sciences Center. Education is the university's highest priority, and the institution is committed to increasing the level of educational attainment in the state and region based on core values where:

PEOPLE come first, are treated with dignity and respect, and are encouraged to achieve their full potential; **RELATIONSHIPS** are built on honesty, integrity, and trust; **DIVERSITY** of people and thought is respected; **EXCELLENCE** is achieved through teamwork, leadership, creativity, and a strong work ethic; **EFFICIENCY** is achieved through wise use of human and financial resources; and **COMMITMENT** to intellectual achievement is embraced.

VALUES

ETSU endorses the value of a liberal education and provides enriching experiences in honors education, student research and creative activity, study abroad, service-learning, and community-based education.

ETSU honors and preserves the rich heritage of Southern Appalachia through distinctive education, research, and service programs and is actively engaged in regional stewardship.

ETSU affirms the contributions of diverse people, cultures, and thought to intellectual, social, and economic development.

ETSU offers students a total university experience that includes cultural and artistic programs, diverse student activities, a variety of residential opportunities, and outstanding recreational and intercollegiate athletic programs.

ETSU awards degrees in over one hundred baccalaureate, master, and doctoral programs, including distinctive interdisciplinary programs and distance education offerings that serve students from the region and beyond.



CORE GOALS

Six institution-wide areas of focus are fundamental to the University's vision, mission and future success:

- 1. Supporting a strategic growth agenda that maximizes the student experience both inside and outside the classroom.**
- 2. Ensuring the diversity and inclusion of people and ideas.**
- 3. Empowering employees to make ETSU a great place to learn, work, and grow.**
- 4. Supporting Excellence in Teaching.**
- 5. Expanding the foundation for scholarly (research and creative activity) excellence and innovation in all disciplines.**
- 6. Leading the region forward through community engagement and service.**

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Letter from the Dean

East Tennessee State University has a thriving graduate education environment, supported by many in the university community. Its breadth of programs and reputation for excellence has resulted in near continuous growth over the past ten years. Still, it is important that the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) work to continuously improve its programming and services to the graduate student and campus community.

This strategic plan is the culmination of efforts of assessing where we are and where we want to go in the next several years. Input influencing this plan came from the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) program review from 2016 using consultants from the national Council of Graduate Schools, input from annual meetings of faculty serving as graduate program coordinators as well as a request for additional input in spring 2018, information gleaned from graduate student exit surveys over the past few years as well as input from the Graduate and Professional Student Association, input from the ETSU Graduate Council, and a SWOT/C analysis from the SGS staff. We are greatly appreciative of this input.

Several themes emerged including many things that are points of excellence and several others that have risen to the top for priorities in the years to come. We present in this plan an analysis of the opportunities and challenges inherent in our internal and external environments along with specific strategic plans that contribute to ETSU's institution-wide priorities. We are looking forward to the future and an increasing vibrant presence in graduate education in the regional, national, and global environments.

Sincerely,
Cecilia A. McIntosh, Dean
School of Graduate Studies

College/Unit Overview

The mission of the School of Graduate Studies is to foster post-baccalaureate programs of scholarship that are recognized for their excellence and contributions to society. The School of Graduate Studies will provide an environment that stimulates:

- Advanced understanding of the concepts, issues and practices of a discipline;
- Independent thought and the ability to generate new knowledge;
- The ability to contribute significantly to the academic community, professions and society;
- Diversity among ideas, programs and people.

The charge of the School of Graduate Studies is to oversee all aspects of graduate education at ETSU including but not limited to program marketing, recruitment, application, admission, matriculation, graduation, professional development (graduate students and faculty), appeals, retention, student services, curriculum development, reporting and assessment, graduate assistantships/fellowships/scholarships, and assuring compliance with ETSU policies related to graduate education.

The School of Graduate Studies has enjoyed nearly 70 years of leadership in Tennessee and in the South, producing quality graduates who go on to serve their communities and employers as well-trained professionals. Since 1949, when the State Board of Education authorized the then East Tennessee State College to offer graduate instruction, the Graduate School has grown from one Master of Arts degree in education to over 30 graduate certificate programs and over 70 degree programs and concentrations resulting in more than 130 different program of study choices across 11 schools and colleges.

The variety and excellence of the graduate programs at ETSU have resulted in over a 50% increase in the number of applications for admission to graduate studies over the past 7 years with enrollment increasing by 11% to nearly 2500 graduate students in fall of 2017. The number of degrees and certificates earned has increased by over 22% with a record number (906) awarded during 2017. A dedicated staff of 15 along with 3 deans/associate deans support the mission and charge of the School of Graduate Studies at ETSU.



Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities and Threats/Challenges

The External Environment

One of our strengths in the external environment is ETSU's reputation in the region for quality graduate programs and strong faculty. Several programs receive state and/or national recognition for their strength and opportunities. Additionally, the professional development opportunities supported by the SGS have received regional and national recognition through invitations to present at the national Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) and the regional Conference of Southern Graduate Schools (CSGS) annual meetings.

There is a national call for graduate education to provide programs that meet workforce demands, especially graduate certificates and master's degree programs. Certainly most students entering graduate programs have a career goal in mind. The challenge is to identify regional opportunities and needs and to act swiftly to offer appropriate programs. It is also true that, with respect to graduate education, programs that meet national needs are feasible depending on faculty expertise. Another national imperative is for increasing interdisciplinary programming so that graduates have expertise in complementary areas and thus are prepared to adapt to a changing work environment. Again, the ability to act swiftly to earn approval of quality curricula is a challenge. This is described further in the Internal Environment section below.

The higher education environment, including graduate education, is increasingly competitive. With implementation of the Focus Act, there is a tendency for former Tennessee Board of Regents universities to propose new programs that may directly compete with each other. Counter to that, there are some examples of the universities cooperating on programming. One recent example is the ETSU-TTU Joint Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program, just completing its first year. Graduates of this program will have both universities listed on their diplomas. Private colleges and universities are also more willing to directly compete with nearby state institutions in the current environment. For-profit institutions are yet another



source of competition, usually in high demand programs such as business, education, and nursing. They may or may not have external accreditation and graduation rates tend to be significantly lower than that in public universities. The focused and aggressive marketing campaigns of these institutions result in significant enrollments.

An opportunity for ETSU is to increase our marketing of graduate programming to get the word out about the quality programs, graduation rates, and, if we can obtain these data, career placement after graduation. Those areas that require licensing exams for practice can share the highly successful pass rates of ETSU graduates on the licensing exams. The ETSU SGS has an extremely modest marketing budget but if we consider what programs can do themselves this provides opportunities for complementary marketing. Another strength is the University Relations initiative to provide support and expertise to units for preparing short, timed, marketing campaigns.

The Internal Environment

One of ETSU's significant strengths is the quality of the faculty and the breadth of their expertise. The caring nature of faculty and staff are often mentioned in graduate student exit surveys and it is clear that we are able to provide a breadth of programming more akin to a much larger university while still maintaining the helpful environment of a smaller institutions. ETSU has a can-do attitude with respect to innovation and a healthy interest in new and/or interdisciplinary programming. The SGS is a partner in supporting program proposal development and, in some cases, fostering novel interdisciplinary or other innovative programming. The doctoral degree in Global Sport Leadership is a good example of an innovative approach to interdisciplinary graduate programming from the funding model for the program, the use of academically and professionally qualified faculty, to the requirement of a sophisticated electronic portfolio. Another example is the ETSU-TTU Joint DNP program that is the first graduate program of its kind in Tennessee.



In spite of these and other successes, there are some key opportunities that have been missed in the past. Because of difficulty of some critical parties to recognize the national call for professional masters degrees and opportunities for professional science master's programs and other professional masters programs that combine major-specific graduate education combined with basic business education, ETSU missed out on start-up fund opportunities for these programs. CGS still actively encourages such programs, now expanding to non-science majors, as being key programs to meet current and emerging workforce needs. ETSU should revisit this opportunity. Another missed opportunity was implementing a Physician Assistant graduate program; an idea that was not realized due to internal opposition. This was a significant missed opportunity for a university with an Academic Health Science Center to be a regional leader in this programming. With nearby colleges now in the implementation phase, it is possible that this is no longer feasible for ETSU.

One sincere concern is that with implementation of the new budget model for the university, we may see a tendency to create more silos thus making the opportunity for new interdisciplinary programs much more difficult to realize. The SGS, along with Vice Presidents, Deans, and Department Chairs will need to take a proactive role to mitigate this threat to new, innovative graduate programming. This is critical to the growth agenda of ETSU. The primary drivers of growth in graduate student enrollment are; 1) new graduate programs that provide a new opportunity for students, 2) offering existing programs at new sites or online thus making graduate education more accessible, 3) increasing capacity in existing programs, and 4) updating curriculum and remarketing existing programs. Thus, it is imperative that units are diligent and timely in proposing new and innovative programs.

Another challenge is in the proposal and timely approval of new programs. The university should continue to evaluate this process and look for efficiencies that will enable the campus part of the process to go more smoothly.

ETSU is implementing a new application system with Constituent Relationship Management (CRM) system that will benefit the campus as a whole as well as relieving a significant pain point in graduate admissions. The current online application and self-programmed data store do not have capability for the instant feedback that everyone has come to expect in an online



environment. This new system will provide immediate feedback to the applicant, provide the applicant with the opportunity to track what materials have been uploaded, provide the faculty serving as graduate program coordinators access to pending applications for earlier interaction with prospective applicants, and provide efficiencies for SGS graduate program specialists. The CRM system will provide many other features and capabilities that will serve the SGS as well as other units at ETSU. While the application/admission

function will be implemented first and likely completed in 2018, implementation and optimization for full use and functionality of this system for other purposes will be ongoing.

The School of Graduate Studies strategic plan includes activities that touch on almost all of the university core goals:

- 1. Supporting a strategic growth agenda that maximizes the student experience both inside and outside the classroom.**
- 2. Ensuring the diversity and inclusion of people and ideas.**
- 3. Empowering employees to make ETSU a great place to learn, work, and grow.**
- 4. Supporting Excellence in Teaching.**
- 5. Expanding the foundation for scholarly (research and creative activity) excellence and innovation in all disciplines.**
- 6. Leading the region forward through community engagement and service.**

Succeeding in Our Strategic Focus Areas

This strategic plan has been informed by the Council of Graduate Schools review of ETSU SGS in 2016, interactions with and input from faculty serving as graduate program coordinators, input from the ETSU Graduate Council, graduate student exit surveys, SWOT/C analysis with SGS staff, and emerging opportunities/challenges in graduate education as identified by CSGS and CGS. The reputation and visibility of ETSU graduate education and initiatives are achieved, in part, through active engagement and leadership in the Tennessee Conference of Graduate Schools (TCGS), CSGS, and CGS both in service to and in giving presentations at annual conferences of these groups. Awarding of accreditation for those programs with outside accrediting bodies is another factor that contributes to recognition of excellence in graduate education at ETSU.

1. Supporting a strategic growth agenda that maximizes the student experience both inside and outside the classroom.

While the SGS strategic plan touches on almost all of the university goals, by far the area that has the major focus is in supporting the growth agenda and enriching the student experience. Assessment of graduate student applications/admission/enrollment/graduation data show that there are 4 main strategies that have been effective in growing enrollment. They are: 1) developing new graduate programs that attract new students, 2) offering programs in new sites to meet demand, 3) updating and remarketing existing programs, and 4) increasing student retention to graduation. In addition, a clear opportunity for improvement in the application/admission process has led to an initiative in that area. Retention initiatives implemented in the past five years have been shown to be effective as have professional development activities sponsored by the SGS. These aspects, as well as other opportunities, are included in the strategic plan.

Strategic focus area: Grow Enrollment

- Take a proactive role to support and provide leadership in high quality graduate program development with special emphases in interdisciplinary programs that support careers and workforce demands, providing educational

opportunities through creative program delivery, and revision/updating of existing programs to enhance current relevance and marketability. Included in the conversations with units will be national data on trends in graduate education and regional workforce needs.

- Work with other Deans to expand a pilot and assess strategy to increase capacity in programs where the limiting factor is the cost of supporting graduate research through directing a portion of revenue from tuition toward research expenses for graduate students.

Strategic focus area: Recruitment (see also strategic goal #2)

- Continue to explore and assess new marketing strategies for graduate programs such as the EAB initiative, Google ads, other social media strategies, web pages, and other innovations as they arise. These are done in addition to marketing that individual programs do on their own.
- Strongly advocate for continued increase in graduate assistant stipends in order to reach levels that are at least average with respect to being competitive. The current estimate is that a \$2000 across the board increase is what is needed to become moderately competitive. Continue to support stipends for new programs to begin at competitive rates for the discipline.
- Take advantage of the ability of the new CRM to track potential applicant interactions and increase effectiveness of follow-up communication. Annual reports from all recruiters will be analyzed for efficacy of practices.
- One important strategy for increasing enrollment in graduate certificate programs is obtaining federal certification of financial aid eligibility for the current ones that do not yet have this, and seeking this for new certificates as their curriculum is approved. The SGS will work with the programs and the Office of Financial Aid to help with this process.

Strategic focus area: Maximize student experience from application through graduation.

- The major focus over the next few years is implementation (16 weeks) and optimization of the new application/CRM system. The features of this system will alleviate several pain points in the application and admission process by allowing customization of look and requirements for each program while maintaining an overall common base application. Applicants can see, in real time, the status of their application and what materials still need to be uploaded, graduate program coordinators can see the status of an application before it is completed, and graduate program specialists will be able to focus on completed applications for processing. Email communication can be automated and tracked within the system. This will greatly enhance efficiency of the application/admission process. All forms and benchmarks will be captured in this system and will include graduation processes. Efficiency of operations using this system will be compared to benchmark data from 2015-2018.
- Take a proactive role in assessing current professional development activities and identifying new initiatives. There is anecdotal evidence that the breadth of professional development activities offered by the SGS (research grants, teaching awards, service awards, outstanding thesis/dissertation/capstone awards, workshops, courses, and more) have been an important factor in students choosing to attend ETSU for graduate study. Several new GRAD courses were developed in response to student exit



surveys. Participation in these courses will be tracked and in the near future the idea of graduate certificates such as Preparing the Future Professorate and/or Preparing Future Professional will be considered.

- Implement within 2 years a “3 Minute Thesis” competition on campus and provide travel support for the overall campus winner to attend the CSGS annual conference to participate in that regional competition.



Strategic focus area: Retention and Student Services

- The SGS will actively seek to identify new opportunities to enhance student retention. Ideas for enhancing existing initiatives are below.
- Continue annual assessment of the Graduate Student Success Specialist initiative for providing case management and/or referral to campus and local services to help students through difficulties and help them remain in school. Grow the annual meeting with local providers as a means to enrich participation and engagement. Brainstorm on potential improvements and/or expansion of services.
- Assess staff assignments as the CRM increases the efficiency of application/admission/graduation processes and audit and reassign to duties related to student services such as catalog oversight, directing professional development activities, and other opportunities as they present themselves.



- Advocate with ETSU Career Services to increase services and delivery of same in a manner that provides significant benefit to graduate students.
- Engage the Thesis/Dissertation/Capstone Boot Camp advisory board in assessment and continuous improvement of the Boot Camp format and offerings. To date, this program has assisted more than 150 students to complete writing of their document and graduation from their program.



2. Ensuring the diversity and inclusion of people and ideas.**Strategic focus area: International Student Growth Initiative**

- Increase efficiencies and remove barriers to ELS recruited prospective applicants by streamlining and simplifying communication in ETSU's conditional letter of admission for ELS students
- Continuous improvement of recruitment strategies of the shared international recruiter to include additional social media platforms and increased visits to ELS centers in the U.S.
- Explore possibility of a bridge course, offered on an alternate term schedule, that can be taken by new international students as well as ELS students nearing the end of their program. The focus of this course would be strategies for success in graduate education in the U.S. in general, and ETSU in particular.

Strategic focus area: Diversity Student Growth Initiative

- While the overall number of diversity students (defined broadly to include racial and ethnic diversity as well as gender diversity in some programs) has grown, the overall percentage of students has remained static. We will conduct a thorough assessment of recruitment strategies and student services and consult with diversity specialists on campus to partner in new and/or revised approaches for recruitment and retention.



3. Empowering employees to make ETSU a great place to learn, work, and grow.

Strategic focus area: Professional Development for Faculty and Staff

- Work with the Center for Excellence in Teaching and other Centers to identify collaborative opportunities for faculty professional development in the area of teaching. There currently are three GRAD courses related to this initiative. There may be opportunity to redesign existing courses or to add additional ones.
- In addition to the GRAD course in mentoring student research, the SGS will be proactive in identifying other needs in the campus community and facilitate development and approval of courses to be offered under the GRAD rubric.

Strategic focus area: Annual Staff Retreat

- While the SGS staff have frequent staff meetings, these are typically 1 hour. We will re-implement an annual retreat for a more thorough SWOT/C analysis each year. This will complement the fall and spring graduate program coordinator meetings and provide opportunity to identify action areas to be included in the SGS 12-month plans.

Strategic focus area: Staffing Profile within the School of Graduate Studies

- Increase assessment of staffing profile from biannual to annual to take advantage of expected efficiencies provided by implementation of the commercial application/CRM. Some staff positions will be audited and/or reassigned to meet emerging initiatives as well as current unmet staffing needs. These activities will assure continued reputation for innovation and increase student services in areas identified in student exit surveys.

4. Supporting Excellence in Teaching. (see also #3)**Strategic focus area: Graduate Student Teaching**

- With the long standing success of GRAD 5110 Teaching Pedagogy for the Graduate Assistant and with the increasing number of doctoral programs offered by ETSU, we will explore in the next 2-3 years the possibility of offering a GRAD 6110 Teaching Pedagogy for the Future Professor with a different focus. This course could be included in a graduate certificate as mentioned in #1 above.

Strategic focus area: Faculty Teaching

- As stated in #3 above, we will work with the Center for Teaching Excellence to identify other opportunities for improvement and/or continuous improvement of teaching.

Strategic focus area: Higher Education in Region

- We will work with Centers on campus, especially the Center for Community College Leadership, to market and offer all of our professional development courses to faculty (or graduate students as appropriate) to other institutions of higher education in the immediate region. This could include technology centers, community colleges, and other universities.

5. Expanding the foundation for scholarly (research and creative activity) excellence and innovation in all disciplines.

Strategic focus area: Graduate Student Research

- Work with ETSU Advancement to fund raise so that we can offer more graduate student research grants and increase the level of funding from \$500-800 to \$500-1000 each. These research grants have enhanced the profile of graduate student research and provided much-needed resources to facilitate research completion.
- Aggressively pursue approaches to fund summer research fellowships for graduate students in order to support research and expedite degree completion.
- Be pro-active in discussions of what CGS calls “alternate dissertations” for professional degrees. This refers to alternate culminating experiences that can include an applied study and report, development of a professional portfolio, and more. Exit surveys and informal polling of some alumni have revealed that some of those in programs requiring a dissertation would have preferred a more applied project and formal report as this is what they needed to know for their position.
- Explore strategies for staffing that will allow expansion of *Illuminated*, the graduate student research magazine. This magazine features student research and their mentors. [Illuminated Magazine](#)

