GRIP REPORT – SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

1 Introduction

The Graduate Review and Improvement Process [GRIP], grounded in developmental evaluation and action research methodologies, began in September 2012. GRIP’s goal is to “put review and program improvement in the hands of students, faculty, and staff. It is designed to generate meaningful information that can be readily used to the benefit of programs, students and faculty.” During the 2013-2014 academic year, graduate schools were selected competitively to participate in a shortened GRIP program to take place in the 2014 Spring Semester. This report summarizes the process, objective and outcomes of the Spring 2014 GRIP program in the School of Architecture Master of Architecture Program.

GRIP Participating Program Objectives

1. Examining and formulating the goals of the graduate program and for the graduates, and deciding what kinds of evidence the program will need to answer the question: “Is what we’re doing aligned with our goals?”
2. Engaging with qualitative and quantitative evidence to answer how the program is doing in key areas, using existing institutional data (e.g. the doctoral exit survey), and other targeted evaluation methods selected together with a team of external consultants (e.g., focus groups, interviews, student survey, etc.).
3. Creating an internal “state of the program” report available to faculty, staff, and students, and a focused plan for improvement in two or three selected aspects of the programs.

School of Architecture Evaluation Objectives

The objective of the evaluation is to assess the Master of Architecture program holistically from the student perspective in preparation for the upcoming accreditation of the Master of Architecture program in the School of Architecture by the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB). The Master of Architecture Program had a major revision to the curriculum structure in 2008 and has had several adjustments since then. Additionally, the MS programs were launched in 2005-2013 and have been revised. Student feedback on the recent changes is very useful as the program continues to adjust. The School of Architecture has seen very volatile enrollment in the Graduate programs which may be economic, but perceptions of current students may also offer insight. Due to these circumstances and the need to continually assess the program, the GRIP team focused the survey on students in all levels of the Master of Architecture program. The survey covered a wide range of topics related to the student’s experience in the program.

Survey Topics

- Courses
- Program Faculty and Staff
- Finances
- Social / Health
- Team Issues
- Culture
2 Methods

Methods Description:

The GRIP team wrote and administered an electronic survey sent to all students in the Master of Architecture program (GD1, 2 and 3). Along with these methods, the GRIP team, which consisted of one GRIP evaluation consultant (Michelle Gensinger), Head of the School of Architecture (Renee Cheng), Director of the Master of Architecture program (Marc Swackhamer), Master of Architecture Graduate Student Representative (Christina Stark), gathered on a bi-weekly basis. Throughout the spring 2014 semester, the GRIP team members attended GRIP meetings which included teams from other graduate programs where they gained and applied evaluation skills while working with GRIP consultants. The activities summarized below report on the work accomplished during the Spring 2014 semester through the collaboration between GRIP and the School of Architecture.

Summary of Methods:

- Multiple choice survey sent to M. Arch students digitally using Qualtrics
- Incentives: $20 gift cards were awarded to 5 respondents
- The survey was announced to students during a film screening and panel discussion event
- The survey was sent out with a letter from the program director
- Student class representatives encouraged students to complete the survey

3 Student Survey Results

The ultimate goal of this survey was to understand students’ experience at the UMN holistically. Addressing this wide range of topics will aid in the upcoming NAAB accreditation process. The results will also provide a tool to continue to evolve the program as the school transitions to new leadership this year. The response rate was 37%; 44 of the 120 students completed the survey.

Courses

This section assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the distinctive fall and spring program structure. Unique to the UMN M.Arch program, the fall is intended to provide "strengths" training while the Spring structure focuses on "aerobic" training. The survey asked students their thoughts about the strengths and weaknesses between the semesters as well as questions about elective options.

Strengths

Overall, the Fall and Spring semesters meets students’ needs for structure in the program and they are aware of the distinctions between semesters. Students also appreciate the variety and change of pace that the distinctions between semesters offers. Open-ended responses indicate that students feel that the distinctive semesters provide a realistic experience that will help to prepare them for professional practice.
Weaknesses

Many students felt that the spring courses did not address their areas of interest. Additionally, this structure creates difficulty in scheduling classes in the spring semester. Many courses overlap with each other and with assigned TA opportunities, making it difficult for students to take the classes they are interested in.

Program Faculty and Staff

This section focused on the student’s perspective on faculty and staff advising as well as student’s experience with teaching faculty. Because the university surveys students at the end of each semester for specific courses, this survey asked questions that are not found on regular course evaluations.

Strengths

Students gave positive feedback for teaching faculty for amount of time spent on desk crits, spending time explaining assignments and concepts to students, helping students understand progress in coursework, and assessing performance. Overall students seem very satisfied with the thoroughness of teaching faculty.

Weaknesses

On the topic of advising, results of the survey found that staff advisers are known but not very helpful, while the faculty advisors are not known, and as such, not perceived as helpful. Further research is needed about students’ needs from advisors and the usefulness of assigning faculty advisors. Based on the needs of both students and the school, the department will need to determine who is best suited to communicate with students regarding academic advising.

The survey showed that students did not know how to find out about faculty research interests or adjunct faculty practice interests. Survey results indicated that students would attend weekly talks to learn about faculty/adjunct interests.

Finances

The finance section covered the topics of fellowships awards (awareness of opportunities, reasons for applying or not applying and the benefits of these awards), hiring process of teaching and research assistants, amount of loans students accrue during graduate school, financial counseling, as well as work and school balance.

Strengths

The survey indicates that many of the students who are employed during the school year work either at architectural offices or as TAs or RAs and most find that this complements their school work. Additionally, of the students that are employed during the school year, most work less than 10 hours per week. (75% at firms, 50% as TA/RA). Students find that fellowships are helpful not only as financial assistance, but also for honors and as a resume builder.
Weaknesses

Better communication is needed for informing students about fellowships and scholarships, students are not aware of fellowship opportunities. Additionally, the process for hiring TAs and RAs needs to be addressed. Students would prefer to get TA/RA positions through a program process that matches students with faculty based on interests or based on an open application followed by interviews. Majority of students will graduate with over $30,000 of debt (some with over $80,000). Students would like financial planning/counseling information before the first day of classes. Most students don't know or haven't used any of the financial services listed.

Social / Health

This section focused on school/life balance. Students were asked about the amount of time spent engaging in activities outside of school and if outside obligations detract from school work. Students were also asked if their mental health, physical health, and overall well being is better or worse since starting the M.Arch program. Additionally the survey asked how the program and university could promote better health and well-being.

Strengths

Open-ended responses asking how the program and university can promote better health and well-being acknowledge that most issues related to health can be managed by the student, showing that the program, for the most part has realistic expectations related to workload. Some responses suggest that by simply coordinating deadlines between classes or giving advance notice about deadlines, students will have more control to plan accordingly.

Weaknesses

Some open-ended responses ask that the school be more culturally sensitive to international students. Health in all categories; physical, mental, overall well-being, are perceived to be worse since starting the graduate program. This is common not only in architecture school, but in graduate school overall. The school can make a greater effort to let students know about university services available. A majority of students showed interest in having a “survival guide” and expressed that this would be best as electronic document found online. The majority of students have not heard of many of the available campus services and if they had, do not use or need them. Developing a survival guide would help alert students to available services and activities for dealing with health issues, and could help international students adjust to the school and culture.

Team Issues

The section asked students about the amount of time spent working with teams in their classes, and their preference for how much time should be spent in working in teams. Students were also asked how teams should be formed and factors that create the most effective teams.
Strengths

According to students, amount of time spent working in teams should be between 30% and 50%. This seems on par with current reporting on the time spent working in teams. Students feel that teams are most effective if they formed by choice, have a clear mission, and have clearly defined roles. This should be kept in mind and reported to professors for class planning purposes.

Weaknesses

Some of the open ended responses mentioned collaboration with other classes (GD1 & GD2) in the spring design modules. While some enjoyed the mix of class levels, others felt that the knowledge gap between the classes negatively impacts their learning experience.

Culture

This section focused on the perceived culture of the school. Architecture programs are often defined by their culture. A strong and distinctive school culture can be extremely important to attracting students to apply to the school. Students were asked if the school has a distinct culture and were also asked to define the culture.

Strengths

The survey results both in open-ended responses and multiple-choice questions indicate that students feel welcome at the school, and that this is a key aspect of the school’s culture. According to students, the culture of the program is less competitive (“cut-throat”) than other programs students’ have experienced, creating a collaborative environment. Additionally, students feel that the program strives to address many areas of interest and the diversity in faculty provides support for these interests. The culture in the school was most commonly identified as supportive and collaborative.

Weaknesses

Although 69% of students believe the school has a distinct culture, some of the open-ended responses indicate that the diversity of school’s interests detracts from the ability to have a distinct culture.

Key Challenges

Due to the shortened time frame of the GRIP program, the survey was distributed at the end of the semester when students are busy with final reviews which resulted in a low response rate. Additionally, because of the diversity of classes, topics, and faculty and the diversity of student’s background, a student’s experience can vary dramatically based on classes they have taken and relationships with faculty and administration. This will make it difficult to identify solutions that will have a positive impact on a the majority of students.
4 Summary of Evaluation Themes and Recommendations

Over the summer the School of Architecture GRIP team assessed the evaluation findings and major emerging themes. During a series of meetings, action items, next steps and recommendations were established by the Director of the Master of Architecture Program / Incoming Head of the School of Architecture (Marc Swackhamer).

Results from GRIP evaluation methods indicate that improving communication between students, faculty and staff will address many areas of concern found in the survey including:

- Alignment of course topics and student interests
- Student’s limited knowledge of faculty/adjunct interests
- Advising (this may need more information than our survey provided)
- TA/RA recruitment/hiring process - this varies between classes and professors
- Lack of awareness of campus resources (Boynton, UCCS, etc.)

The following section outlines the school’s plan to address the areas of concern.

5 Conclusion and Priority Items

Quick Wins

1. Form a student-led communications committee tasked with getting the word out about events, scholarships and fellowships, skills training workshops and social events. Many of the issues identified in the survey could be solved through better communication between faculty, staff and students.
2. Assign faculty advisors (based on interests or student choice).
3. Organize a get to know faculty event - faculty could present their research and have an opportunity to meet new students.
4. Define the process for choosing TA and RA positions and implement for Spring TA Assignments.
5. Create an online survival guide.

Must Do’s

1. Create a master’s final project preparation event series in the fall semester.
2. Create a survey or form a committee to assess student’s interests for Spring electives and modules.

Transformational

1. Address weak areas of the M.Arch curriculum: clarify the building technology sequence, add a required history course, strengthen the program introduction experience.
2. Empower students and make curricular decisions more transparent; involve student representatives in the studio curation process (especially spring semester modules).
3. Improve communication: report state of the program regularly to graduate students, check in regularly with graduate student representatives, and empower the communications committee to be an active and visible element of the School.

4. Share faculty research and creative practice more broadly: create promotional booklets (digital and print) of full-time and adjunct faculty work for broad dissemination.

5. Develop a long-term strategy for advising based on student and faculty interests.

6 Evaluation (GRIP) Sustainability Plan

In order to sustain the GRIP initiative, the team plans to edit the survey for continued use. The GRIP team within the school will define deadlines for implementing planned improvements and will schedule a meeting to check in on the status of the planned improvements at the end of the fall 2014 semester. The team is also considering surveying alumni, faculty, staff to gain their perspective on similar topics.
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