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Our University - Graduate School

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Our University - Graduate School

At this time of the year, it is hard not to reflect on graduate education and its rising importance to many students in colleges and universities. We send students to some of the best graduate schools in the United States: Columbia, Penn, Rice, Cornell, Virginia Tech, Colorado, Georgia Tech, and Michigan, to name just a few that come to mind. And this is only from our School of Architecture.

And it happens all over campus.

One of the measures of success for our university is where our undergraduates go to graduate school. It demonstrates our students can compete on the international stage and win contests for admission in places where the acceptance rates are often only as high as 10 percent.

I am happy for our students who go to these institutions. I even find myself recommending them to places that will give yet another view of our profession, challenge students in a new environment, and provide an expanded set of conditions through which to assess their world.

But I cringe at the “trade deficit” that is being created. These very good schools are taking our best students. This is good, but we are not getting our share back.

Graduate schools play a significant role in the reputation of a research university. They are all there is. We have excellent undergraduate programs. The ability of our students to effectively compete for limited spots in the best graduate programs proves that. In order to move to the next level, our university must improve its graduate programs and eliminate the trade deficit that exits.

This is accomplished in only one way.

There is no shortcut, no secret formula, and no silver bullet. We must seek out and hire the very best faculty who teach with passion because they teach ideas, concepts, approaches, and methods that they have discovered or invented themselves. They energize students and peers alike, and bring power to the reputation of the university. The heat comes from teaching, but the fuel for the fire is discovery and research.

This is why our students go to the best universities for graduate study, and in order for our university to address the trade deficit there is no shortcut.

In addition, if the economic impact of a university on a region is measured, the money students and staff spend on food, housing and entertainment is significant, but pales in comparison to the long term sustainable impact of new

knowledge on new business and general employment, albeit with a longer gestation period.

There is never a convenient time to seek and hire the faculty excellence that breeds a strong research reputation. Sometimes this kind of hiring creates internal strife over salaries. In order to bring the very best, you may have to break salary scales. Current faculty members may bristle at a new hire, as yet unproven, who comes in at a rate that is twice the norm.

There is great risk too because, sometimes, you will bet on a horse that won't run.

But without that boldness, the university will languish as a research institution. That does not mean that we cannot "grow our own", but sometimes the seed corn for that growth must be imported and developed with determination. The importance of this strategy to increase the quality of our university cannot be overstated.

And this focus on research and graduate education creates enviable problems of burgeoning enrollment at all levels because people relentlessly seek out quality.