

Annual Report – Graduate School Academic Affairs

Reporting Year

AY 2025–2026

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Overview

The Graduate School Office of Academic Affairs (OAA) advances the University of Washington's commitment to excellence in graduate education by preparing the next generation of inclusive, collaborative, and adaptable scholars and leaders dedicated to serving the public good. In partnership with colleges and schools across the institution, OAA shapes, implements, and assesses the policies, practices, and curricular structures that foster innovation, integrity, and academic rigor while meeting institutional and state expectations. This work is organized across four operational areas: Academic Unit Review, Graduate Curriculum, Graduate School Council, and Graduate School Academic Policies, and is guided by three foundational principles: partnership, stewardship, and education.

Academic Year (AY) 2025–26 coincided with a period of leadership transition within the unit. Accordingly, OAA's goals for the year were directed inward, with a deliberate focus on strengthening operational structures and processes to improve efficiency. These priorities included streamlining workflows, ensuring compliance with ADA guidelines, relocating interdisciplinary master's programs, reducing the cost of Academic Unit Review, migrating programs into the Kuali curriculum management system, and revising policy on international student admissions and teaching assistant language requirements.

In addition to these goals, OAA undertook several special initiatives to further advance operational effectiveness. A comprehensive review of Graduate School policies was conducted to ensure they reflect current practice, are clearly written, and are accessible to the communities they serve; supplementary guidelines were developed where existing policy language warranted additional clarification. A budget analysis of the Academic Unit Review process was also completed to identify opportunities for cost savings.

OAA also began a process of assessing the Academic Unit Review process itself as an update to the 2016 report that analyzed trends, strengths, and challenges of academic unit reviews. Specifically, OAA is interested in understanding if the current process and its outcomes continue to fulfill their original purpose: to provide programs with a structured opportunity to reflect on progress since their previous review and to engage in forward-looking planning. Central to this inquiry was the question of practical utility and whether review findings serve as actionable guides for program development or remain largely unused following completion.

Finally, the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence has had a tangible effect on graduate programming, evidenced by a notable increase in AI-related curriculum and program proposals. In March 2026, Dean Williamson-Lott charged OAA with convening a faculty working group to develop a shared vision for AI-related graduate program development at the University of Washington. This effort is intended to ensure that emerging proposals in this area are thoughtfully designed, avoid unnecessary redundancy, and are informed by diverse disciplinary perspectives.

The work undertaken across each of OAA's operational areas during AY 2025–26 is detailed in the sections that follow.

Academic Unit Review

OAA coordinates comprehensive reviews of all academic units offering graduate and undergraduate programs on a ten-year cycle. In addition, OAA coordinates interim reports from units as needed, and five-year reports for all newly approved academic programs.

Key Activities and Initiatives

In AY 2025–26, OAA managed a substantial review portfolio. Carried over from AY 2024–25 were 4 full reviews, 1 interim report, and 2 five-year reports. During the current year, OAA initiated and led an additional 9 full reviews, 4 interim reports, and 8 five-year reports. In addition, OAA launched the preparatory process for 10 full reviews scheduled for AY 2026–27. In total, 33 full reviews, 5 interim reports, and 10 five-year reports were actively in progress at some point during the academic year.

To support units undertaking self-study, OAA developed and distributed comprehensive data packets tailored to each unit under review for the first time. These packets included enrollment and degree-completion data, student demographic profiles, faculty FTE, time schedule and course data, and comparative degree-completion figures from peer institutions. While the preparation of these materials is resource-intensive, OAA views this support as a meaningful investment in the quality and coherence of the review process. Feedback from units has been consistently and strongly positive, and OAA will continue providing this service in the coming year.

As part of its commitment to continuous quality improvement, OAA also developed an internal rubric to use after each review and a budget framework. The rubric evaluated each review on its standardization, adaptability, flexibility, and efficiency. This process identified opportunities to better calibrate standard processes with the distinct needs of individual units and review committee requests. Driven by the imperative to cut costs, OAA created its first detailed budget framework to track and more precisely identify areas for cost savings. Using this framework, we were able to decrease the cost of reviews by approximately 9.8% on a per-review basis.

Academic Unit Review Assessment Initiative

Recognizing that the core structure of the Academic Unit Review process had not been substantively revisited since 2016, OAA undertook a formal assessment to evaluate whether the current process continues to fulfill its intended purposes effectively and efficiently. The initiative was designed to examine the experiences of both review committee members and the academic units under review; assess whether the process and its outcomes serve as genuinely useful guides for programs and units; explore whether alternative delivery modalities such as virtual formats could achieve comparable results; and benchmark UW's approach against peer institutions.

To gather empirical data, OAA administered two surveys: one to faculty who had served on a review committee in academic years 2023-24 and 2024-25 (86 invited, 45 responses), and one to faculty leaders whose units had previously undergone academic unit review between 2021-22 and 2024-25 (53 invited, 21 responses). These data, and the insights they provided on what programs and reviewers found valuable (and less valuable) about the process were presented at the Western Association of Graduate Schools (WAGS) virtual conference. In parallel, OAA conducted a comparative analysis of review practices at all Big Ten universities and several additional R1 institutions, identifying both areas of alignment and opportunities for revision. A full report of findings and recommendations from this initiative is expected to be completed by September 2026.

Curriculum

OAA oversees the development and approval of new graduate degrees, certificates, courses, and significant program changes across the University of Washington. In partnership with academic units and institutional stakeholders, OAA supports the development of innovative, high-quality graduate programming that aligns with institutional priorities and state requirements.

Key Activities and Initiatives

In AY 2025–26, OAA processed a record number of graduate curriculum proposals and program changes. The curriculum team coordinated the review and approval of 6 traditional degree programs, 2 exit master’s degrees, 2 stacked master’s degrees, and 9 graduate certificates. In addition, OAA processed 31 significant change proposals, 11 suspensions of admission, and 3 degree option terminations across the UW system. The team also approved 178 new courses and 280 changes to 500-level courses.

To strengthen internal operations and improve consistency in proposal review, OAA conducted a review of its curriculum processes and guidance materials. This work included the development or revision of procedures related to duplicative program review, market research expectations for new program proposals, and guidance for advanced standing degree options and exit master’s degrees. Throughout these efforts, OAA continued to work closely with key institutional partners, including the Office of the University Registrar, Office of the Provost, Continuum College, Graduate Enrollment Management Services (GEMS), and the Office of Community, Access, and Institutional Research (CAIR, Computing and Information Resources in the Graduate School).

AY 2025–26 also saw continued growth in new graduate program proposals, particularly in areas related to artificial intelligence. At the same time, OAA observed increased interest in fee-based programs and a rise in requests for suspension of admissions, trends likely influenced by broader shifts in the federal funding and graduate education landscape. Academic units also continued to engage with curricular innovations introduced in recent years, including stacked master’s degrees and exit/en route master’s degree pathways.

Consistent with the University's commitment to interdisciplinarity, collaboration, and innovation, OAA advanced the development of cross-college stacked degree pathways. OAA convened stakeholders from across the Graduate School, GEMS, and CAIR to review and refine existing structures and to establish new processes supporting the implementation of cross-college stacked degrees. Much of this work focused on clarifying how these pathways are operationalized within our current systems, streamlining collaborative processes between units, and developing guidance related to inter-unit memoranda of understanding. OAA formally invited units to submit proposals for cross-college stacked degrees in April 2026.

Taken together, the curricular activity of AY 2025–26 reflected a graduate education landscape in active transition: programs responding to shifting funding conditions, growing institutional appetite for interdisciplinary pathways, and the rapid emergence of AI as both a subject of study and a challenge for program design. OAA's work this year focused not only on processing proposals efficiently, but on building the guidance structures and cross-unit relationships that position the institution to respond thoughtfully to these trends.

Policy

OAA leads the interpretation, evaluation, development, and implementation of Graduate School policies spanning all aspects of graduate education—program requirements, admissions, enrollment status, academic progress, academic grievance, and faculty and program responsibilities. This work is carried out in partnership with working groups across The Graduate School and academic units to ensure policies are applicable and implementable across our 300+ programs, including through the Policies, Practices, and Procedures group (P3), a collaboration of Graduate School and GEMS staff; the Policy Implementation Response Team (PIRT), comprising staff in academic units; and the Graduate School Council Policy Subcommittee, a sub-set of the elected Council members. Schools and colleges are also actively engaged to support problem-solving in alignment with Graduate School policies, including matters of student progress and grievance.

Key Activities and Initiatives

This year, OAA's policy work was organized around a comprehensive review of the Graduate School's policy framework to ensure that policies are cohesive, feasible, and aligned with the UW's mission and values.

Driven by the shifting federal policy landscape, OAA addressed several urgent policy needs, including those on qualifying international bachelor's degrees for admission and English language proficiency for both admission and TAships. OAA developed policies to define responsibilities and establish clear processes when students lose their supervisory committee chair, to clarify the use of AI in graduate admissions and to close gaps in summer student status.

OAA initiated its comprehensive review and revision of Graduate School policies, with the goal of completing the project by the start of 2027. To date, work has been completed on 14 policies, with development of accompanying guidance documents. Finally, in partnership with

the director of Graduate Student Equity and Excellence (GSEE), OAA reviewed the academic grievance procedures of all 27 schools and colleges across our tri-campus university and provided feedback to ensure policy compliance and improve clarity for students and staff navigating each step. This work was an extension of this shift of academic grievance procedures from the Graduate School to the academic unit, placing cases in the hands of those most familiar with each unit's disciplinary norms, practices, and policies.

Throughout the year, policy revisions were communicated to stakeholders through multiple channels: direct outreach from the Director of Academic Affairs and Policy, quarterly GEMS Forums, the Graduate School memo, targeted Zoom Q&A sessions, and presentations at various forums across the university.

Graduate School Council

The Graduate Council, an elected body of graduate faculty advisory to the Dean of The Graduate School, reviews academic unit evaluations, graduate program proposals, and matters related to graduate education prior to consideration by the Dean and Board of Regents. Through its Policy Subcommittee, the Council also shapes Graduate School policy development and review. The Council annually confers the Graduate School Medal, informally known as the “citizen-scholar” award, which recognizes a doctoral candidate whose academic achievement and commitment to public engagement exemplify the mission and values of the University.

Key Activities and Initiatives

During AY 2025–26, the Graduate School Council met regularly and participated in the review of 10 full academic unit reviews, 6 five-year reports, and 5 interim reports, for a total of 21 academic unit reviews. The Council also evaluated and approved 11 graduate degree and certificate proposals. As noted in the Policy section of this report, the Policy Subcommittee played a significant role in the revision of 14 Graduate School policies.

The continued increase in degree, certificate, and program proposals increased both the volume and complexity of materials Council members review as part of their faculty service responsibilities. In response, OAA began exploring strategies to improve administrative efficiency while preserving the rigor and integrity of the review process. In May 2026, OAA piloted the use of executive summaries for program proposals to support Council review. Initial feedback from faculty members was positive; however, OAA also recognized the need to mitigate the potential for unintended bias introduced through summary preparation. As a result, OAA will continue examining alternative approaches to streamline the review process while maintaining transparency and fidelity to faculty governance principles. As part of this effort, OAA will review proposal documentation requirements during summer 2026 to identify opportunities to reduce unnecessary complexity, clarify expectations, and better target required components of program proposals.

OAA also piloted a revised meeting structure in AY 2025–26, shifting the Council from a twice-monthly to a once-monthly schedule. Due to the sustained increase in proposal and review

activity, the Council will return to a twice-monthly meeting schedule beginning in AY 2026–27. OAA remains deeply appreciative of the faculty and ex officio members whose time, expertise, and service are essential to the work of the Graduate Council and the broader mission of the Graduate School.

Recurring themes across Council discussions included the sustainability of programs amid resource constraints, the governance challenges particular to interdisciplinary programs, and how best to manage the influx of AI-focused proposals. Taken together, these discussions reflected a faculty body engaged in active, systems-level thinking about the structures, resources, and institutional conditions that shape the quality and accessibility of graduate education at UW.

Operational Activities

Operational Excellence and Organizational Development

AY 2025–26 was a period of significant internal development for the Office of Academic Affairs. In conjunction with a leadership transition and increasing demands across all operational areas, OAA focused on strengthening compliance and risk management, improving administrative efficiency, modernizing infrastructure and systems, and enhancing regulatory compliance. These efforts were intended not only to support current operations but also to build a more sustainable and adaptable foundation for future growth.

Strengthening Compliance and Risk Management

OAA undertook a comprehensive review of its policies, communications, guidance documents, and web content to ensure alignment with evolving federal accessibility requirements and University standards. Working in consultation with the UW Civil Rights Compliance Office, the unit revised Academic Unit Review materials, webpages, proposal guidelines, and training resources to improve accessibility and ensure consistency with institutional compliance expectations.

As part of this effort, OAA also reviewed Academic Unit Review self-study materials and review committee reports for language that could create compliance concerns as well as as updated reviewer guidance to clarify responsibilities when concerns involving harassment, discrimination, or misconduct arise during the review process. These efforts strengthened OAA's ability to support academic units while reducing institutional risk and promoting greater consistency across review activities.

Improving Administrative Efficiency

Throughout the year, OAA continued to examine internal processes with the goal of improving efficiency, reducing administrative burden, and increasing operational consistency. Efforts included streamlining document management practices, reducing redundancies in workflows and documentation, and standardizing internal procedures across operational areas.

OAA also expanded its use of project tracking and budget management tools to support more systematic assessment of workload, resource allocation, and process effectiveness. Particular attention was given to the Academic Unit Review process, where a detailed budget framework helped identify opportunities for cost savings while preserving review quality and integrity. These efforts contributed to measurable reductions in review-related expenses and provided a foundation for ongoing process assessment and continuous improvement.

Modernizing Infrastructure and Systems

OAA continued several multi-year initiatives designed to modernize the systems supporting graduate education administration. In partnership with UW Information Technology and the Office of the University Registrar, OAA advanced implementation of Kuali Curriculum Management, a new platform intended to streamline graduate curriculum proposal review and approval workflows. During AY 2025–26, significant progress was made in refining proposal forms and aligning review processes in preparation for anticipated implementation during late summer or early Fall 2026.

OAA also continued the planned move of interdisciplinary master's programs housed in the Graduate School to academic units within the College of Arts and Sciences. Work remained on schedule throughout the year, with substantial effort invested in clarifying operational processes and responsibilities for all stakeholders. These moves support long-term program sustainability and position both programs for continued growth and success.

Enhancing Communication and Stakeholder Engagement

Recognizing the importance of clear and consistent communication in a decentralized institution, OAA implemented several initiatives to improve information sharing within the Graduate School and across the broader University community. OAA established formal timelines for content development and review and secured standing space in Graduate School newsletters to provide regular updates on academic unit review, curriculum, policy, and Council activities.

In addition, OAA developed more structured systems for communication planning, content development, and dissemination. This work included establishing standing communication channels, integrating OAA activities into regular Graduate School communications, and creating internal processes to support more coordinated and timely outreach. Together, these efforts strengthened OAA's communication infrastructure, improved coordination across operational areas, and increased the visibility of OAA initiatives among graduate program leaders, faculty, and campus partners. By creating more consistent and sustainable communication practices, OAA positioned itself to better support a growing portfolio of work during a period of leadership transition and organizational change.

Collectively, these efforts strengthened OAA's operational capacity during a period of transition and growth. While many initiatives will continue into AY 2026–27, the work completed this year established stronger systems, clearer processes, and a more sustainable foundation for supporting graduate education across the University.