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THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

# Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

## Re-imagining the PhD: New forms and futures for graduate education

## Symposium Summary Report

Friday, June 6, 2014  
Liu Institute for Global Issues

### *Event at a glance*

#### *Attendees:*

##### *UBC Faculty*

*Applied Science - 7*

*Arts - 23*

*Dentistry - 1*

*Education - 10*

*G+PS - 3*

*Law - 2*

*Land & Food Systems - 3*

*Medicine - 11*

*Pharmaceutical Sciences - 1*

*Sauder School of Business - 3*

*Science - 5*

*UBC Staff - 15*

*Students - 11*

*Postdoctoral Fellows - 2*

*External to UBC - 11*

*Total participants: 108*

*Event Sponsors: Graduate + Postdoctoral Studies;  
Provost's Office*

*Key topics: Structure, content, purposes and outcomes of doctoral education; broadening doctoral education for diverse career paths*

*Guest speakers: Dr. Andrew Szeri, Vice-Provost of Graduate Studies and Dean of the Graduate Division at UC Berkeley, and Dr. Russel Berman, Professor of German Studies and Comparative Literature at Stanford University*

*Key suggested actions emerging from event: data collection and provision on career outcomes; department-based dialogues on reform of PhD programs; ongoing community dialogues; further student engagement in topic; review of specific relevant policies (supervisory committees, thesis composition, etc); Graduate Council engagement; enhancing fundraising for graduate student scholarships*



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## Event videos can be viewed online at: [Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies Graduate Symposium 2014](#)

Video #1: Opening remarks  
Dr. Susan Porter, Dean and Vice-Provost, UBC Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
*Why are we re-imagining the PhD?*

Video #2: Opening address  
Dr. Andrew Szeri, Vice Provost for Graduate Studies and Dean of the Graduate Division, UC Berkeley  
*PhD education at Berkeley - enrolment, funding and outcomes*

Video #3: Morning panel  
Moderator: Susan Porter  
Panel: Robert Annan, Kai Chan, David Helliwell, Moura Quayle, Anthony Shelton  
*The “New PhD” - Fresh approaches for facilitating necessary attributes for diverse outcomes*

Video #4: Lunch address  
Dr. Russell Berman, Walter A. Haas Professor in the Humanities, Stanford University  
and former President, Modern Language Association  
*Re-thinking the PhD in the Humanities and Beyond*

Video #5: Afternoon panel  
Moderator: Dr. Jenny Phelps, Assistant Dean,  
Student Administration and Strategic Initiatives, UBC Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
Panel: Ron Bowles, Michelle LeBaron, Frédéric Le Manach, Lorne Whitehead  
*Graduate education and the public good*

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# Event context and purpose

The symposium for Re-imagining the PhD, held at the Liu Institute for Global Issues on June 6th, 2014, was conceived as an “experiment in community dialogue,” an attempt to begin a critical conversation around the parameters, content, and purposes of doctoral education. Broadly speaking, the overall objective of the symposium was to re-evaluate what many stakeholders, including University leaders, faculty members, students, employers and government policymakers perceive as a PhD model that for many students is no longer fully suited to the current historical moment, a PhD that prepares students for work in an academy whose capacity is not keeping pace with the number of scholars being trained. Some of the primary questions guiding the conversation included:

- How many PhDs should we be educating?
- How long should doctoral education take?
- What are graduates doing when they leave?
- What should they be able to do, and to know?
- How might we re-imagine doctoral (and masters and postdoctoral) education to reflect the needs and reality of our changing global context?

The symposium was structured with no pre-determined outcomes in mind, and Dr. Susan Porter – Dean and Vice-Provost of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies – began the day articulating a wish primarily to re-ignite excitement and purposeful dialogue about graduate education. Acknowledging the employment issues facing PhD students head-on, Dr. Porter pointed out that while UBC is equipping its students with a quality education and an impressive skill-set, the traditional form of the PhD may be holding some students back from success in careers beyond the academy. “One could say that many of the ways PhD graduates could make contributions in the world have not even been envisioned, let alone prepared for,” she suggested. “If the scholarship our graduates could or will do in the world needs different competencies, knowledge, and perspectives than those that are needed in academia, are there ways we can help develop them better than we do now?” In addition to the focus on current strategies, such as internships and professional development programs, Dean Porter questioned whether we might consider a broader conceptualization of dissertation research for some, more relevant to the types of careers they will enter. This might involve external partners and orientation to real-world problems, or a deeper focus on pedagogical education and experience, all integral to the learning objectives of the degree. In other words, she queried, if we were to imagine the doctoral dissertation from scratch, what might that look like?

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do in the world needs different competencies,  
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# Learning from peer institutions



**Dr. Andrew Szeri,**  
Vice Provost for  
Graduate Studies and  
Dean of the Graduate  
Division,  
UC Berkeley

During the opening address, the scholars, staff, and students in attendance heard from Dr. Andrew Szeri, Vice Provost of Graduate Studies and Dean of the Graduate Division at UC Berkeley. Dr. Szeri outlined the overall shape of graduate studies at Berkeley, supplementing his address with a wealth of statistics that led many in attendance to call for additional UBC-specific data, especially in relation to alumni career paths and satisfaction. Dr. Szeri's address touched on matters of student funding, scholarship fundraising, and enrolment management, and presented details on student finances, funding sources, and the highly successful "Campaign for Berkeley," which netted more than \$250,000,000 for graduate support over six years.

A highlight of Dr. Szeri's talk – and a source of considerable discussion throughout the symposium – was an in-depth survey of doctoral alumni 5-40 years after graduation, reporting outcomes and opinions of their preparation at Berkeley. The survey yielded primarily positive results – most doctoral alumni felt that their studies had prepared them well for their future careers, and the great majority did not regret pursuing doctoral studies. Those that entered careers outside academia (42%) or were employed in academia in positions other than tenure track (14%), however, were consistently less satisfied with their preparation. This trend, more pronounced in the less applied disciplines, highlighted a need to focus some effort on the issue.

## Broad Career Choices

Tenure track (44%)	
2-Year College	28
4-Year College	839
Medical School	56
Research Institute	172
Total	1095
Non-tenure ed.* (14%)	
2-Year College	21
4-Year College	181
Medical School	42
Research Institute	70
Total	314

Non-academic (42%)	
For-profit company or organization	468
Incorporated business, professional practice, or farm	79
Non-incorporated business, professional practice, or farm	111
Non-profit organization	111
U.S. government (civilian employee)	100
State government	46
Local government	44
U.S. military service	3
Other	73
Total	1035

\*Non-tenured jobs in academe could include administrative staff, lecturers, postdocs, adjunct professors, or other contingent faculty members



# Re-imagining PhD education and desired attributes of graduates

Following the opening address the symposium transitioned to a panel format, followed by a robust and far-ranging discussion. Here, participants began collectively conceptualizing how PhD pathways might be re-imagined or modified to facilitate a broader array of career outcomes for students. The “New PhD,” the panelists argued, needs to be more integrated with the world beyond the bounds of the academy, furnishing doctoral students with the expertise and experience required to explore the multitudinous career paths they might pursue following graduation.

***The idea of bringing graduate students from a variety of disciplines into the messy mix with business folks and governments desperate for evidence-based policy – wow, that could be exciting!***

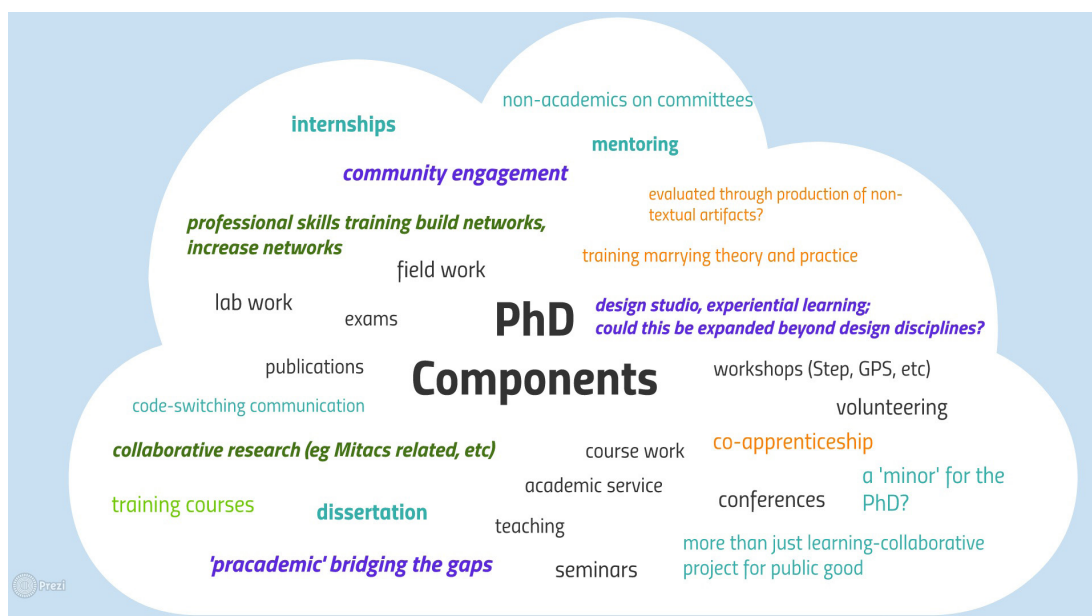
Panelist Dr. Robert Annan, Chief Research Officer at Mitacs, pointed out that Canada is producing fewer PhD graduates than many OECD countries, and reiterated that the traditional apprenticeship model of the academy is no longer feasible if we want to continue graduating significant numbers of PhD students, which he claimed we should. He envisioned PhD alumni “taking the skills, knowledge, and experience gained through a PhD out into the world, applying them in diverse areas, boosting innovation and productivity in culture, society, and the economy.” Apart from arguing for increased opportunities outside academia for graduate students, he suggested that a culture change in universities needs to occur in which more diverse career outcomes are accepted and a more integrated form of scholarship encouraged, without compromising academic excellence. He also urged PhD candidates to begin expanding their professional networks during graduate school.

The second panelist, Professor Moura Quayle of the Sauder School of Business, noted that intercultural fluency and a global perspective were becoming more and more valuable, and worried that graduate students live in a “culture of entitlement,” and as a result lack the ability to deal with adversity. She discussed a “studio” model of doctoral study stressing community engagement and interdisciplinarity, “bringing graduate students from a variety of disciplines into the messy mix with business folks and governments desperate for evidence-based policy.” Professor Quayle highlighted the need for connection between government and the university, advocating for a “pracademic” style of scholarship, meaning linking it more deliberately to professional practice in a variety of career settings which may straddle private, public, and academic worlds.

# Re-imagining PhD education and desired attributes of graduates

Dr. Kai Chan, Associate Professor at the UBC Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability, drove home that the dissertation was only a part of a PhD and argued for more professionalized programs, “minor” streams (such as Policy), and internships. He also called for more latitude in terms of committee selection and emphasized how vital mentorship that helps engage students in a range of professional activities is for doctoral students.

Following Dr. Chan, David Helliwell, Co-Founder and CEO at Pulse Energy, shared anecdotes about successful collaborative research and stressed how valuable PhDs can be outside of academia. He suggested that shorter programs would be ideal, since employers may be nervous about hiring doctoral alumni who took over five years to complete their degrees, and that starting students off early on “real world projects” may be useful. Dr. Anthony Shelton, Director of the Museum of Anthropology at UBC, shared some of his experiences as an academic who has “always had two jobs,” one at the university and one in museums. He emphasized the “commitment to curiosity” shared by museums and universities and helped to model one form of collaborative scholarship in which a PhD student or graduate might engage.



# Critical voices

Not all of the symposium attendees found the prospect of re-imagined PhD pathways appealing. Dissenting voices could be heard in the question period following the panel as well as in discussion groups later in the day, with several participants defending a more traditional form of scholarship and criticizing the emergent narrative around the crisis in graduate education. “Why are we trying to hijack a PhD into meaning something else?” one participant asked, wondering whether industry partnerships could detract from doing novel scholarly research. Some questions touched on the very purpose of the academy. A humanities professor argued that the idea of a PhD increasingly geared towards outside collaboration might reify a “shallow myth of the ivory tower,” entrenching a false dichotomy between universities and the so-called “real world” and so undercutting more serious issues facing the academy. “I’m a sufficiently conservative Kantian, if you like,” he asserted, “to think that the university is about critique rather than this slavish attempt to integrate with logic which really is alien to the university, or my understanding of what the university is about.” The question was also raised whether we should be supporting existing innovations in graduate education (internships, etc) rather than re-imagining traditional components. Others worried that increasing opportunities for outside partnership, while helping some students, might negatively impact those students who did want to pursue academic careers, or that a re-imagined PhD might contribute to credentialism – the already pervasive over-emphasis of employers on formal qualifications, specialized degrees, certificates, and professional licenses.

The panelists and other defenders of the New PhD pointed out that even a broader, more integrated PhD would have to prioritize scholarship, and cautioned against either/or thinking. Dr. Chan argued that integration can actually empower critique rather than undercut it, by placing scholars in positions to actually create positive change. “We don’t want the kind of integration where their objectives,” meaning those of industry or government, “determine what ours are,” he insisted. Dr. Annan suggested that “integration works both ways,” citing examples in which outside partners became more interested in academic research as a result of collaboration with scholars. “Scholarship and research excellence should be taken as an assumption,” he said.

***Why are we trying to hijack a PhD into meaning something else?***

# The humanities challenge and beyond

Dr. Russell Berman, former president of the MLA and professor of German Studies and Comparative Literature at Stanford, outlined some of the challenges facing PhD students in the humanities during the lunch-time talk, and highlighted the just-released MLA Report of the Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature, of which he was the lead author. Discussion around particular crises in the humanistic disciplines recurred throughout the day, with many pointing out that students in the humanities find transitioning out of academia more difficult than those in scientific and technical disciplines: a long history of industry partnership, and the obvious applicability of a great deal of scientific research outside of the university, has made post-PhD career planning somewhat easier for science PhDs. Dr. Berman's talk placed particular emphasis on the onerous time to degree many humanities PhD students (and graduate students in general) face in North America. Even with completion times approaching a decade or more, many students still lack sufficient opportunities to pursue professional training and experience over the course of their studies, and sometimes in seeking these opportunities, endure the scorn of unsympathetic supervisors who believe that only students intent on pursuing academic careers are worthy of mentorship. Dr. Berman also stressed the problems surrounding the casualization of labour endemic in the academy, a topic revisited frequently during break-out discussion groups and question periods. The narrative is bleakly familiar: starved of government dollars in an austere economic environment, universities have become increasingly reliant on a casualized academic workforce replenished by the worryingly steady supply of PhD recipients who have not secured tenure-track appointments. Ill-equipped or unwilling to seek work outside of the academy, or perhaps unaware of such opportunities, such beleaguered PhDs can spend years in the precarious limbo of sessional teaching, forming part of an easily exploitable intellectual proletariat.



Dr. Russell Berman,  
Walter A. Haas Professor in the Humanities,  
Stanford University,  
and former President, Modern Language Association

***In the MLA report we emphasized not only negative structural features, we also focused on opportunities in knowledge production – which is really what our business is – that make it even more incumbent for us to rethink what we're doing in doctoral education.***



# The humanities challenge and beyond

Dr. Berman's analysis reminds us of the powerful financial disincentives, from an institutional point of view, in decreasing the number of PhD students and graduates: shrinking cohort size would not only deprive universities of graduate student labour, it would diminish the ready supply of sessional instructors that many underfunded institutions has found especially convenient in the post-2008 economic climate. Yet as Dr. Berman pointed out, there are also social and ethical implications around shrinking cohort size. Admitting fewer PhD students necessarily diminishes access to higher education, an outcome strenuously objected to by Dr. Berman, and could potentially stall initiatives to diversify the demographics of PhD recipients. While admissions procedures may need reform, perhaps embracing more open dialogue about applicants' real career interests and transparency about actual career outcomes, simply slashing the number of PhDs being produced seems a drastic and ethically problematic solution.

Despite the grim academic landscape his talk may have seemed to paint, Dr. Berman remained optimistic about the future of PhD programs. "In the MLA report we emphasized not only negative structural features," he said, "we also focused on opportunities in knowledge production – which is really what our business is – that make it even more incumbent for us to rethink what we're doing in doctoral education." He envisioned a re-designed doctoral degree simultaneously sleeker and richer: a five year program (post-Bachelor's degree) replete with opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration, community engagement, technology training, and non-academic partnerships, oriented towards a broad array of possible careers from the outset and culminating in a flexible final project more variform than the traditional book-like dissertation. This vision of a re-imagined PhD, a degree more attuned to non-academic career opportunities and the realities of the job market, persisted in the subsequent panel on graduate education and the public good.

## Linking doctoral education to the "public good(s)"

*The question arises, are we doing everything we could be doing to facilitate this desire that graduate students have to contribute to the public good?*

At the panel's outset Dr. Jenny Phelps, Assistant Dean of the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, noted that her research has shown that most doctoral students see their education as a means to a particular end – making a positive social contribution to the world in some manner—through research, teaching, industrial innovation, policy work and other avenues.

**cont'd**

# Linking doctoral education to the “public good(s)”

“The question arises, are we doing everything we could be doing to facilitate this desire that graduate students have to contribute to the public good?” Dr. Phelps queried. “My sense... is that a lack of connection for doctoral students between what they’re doing (during their PhD) and their desire to make a positive social contribution is an unacknowledged aspect of doctoral attrition, balky completion times, and general malaise of doctoral students.” Attendants then heard from panelists ranging from PhD candidate Frédéric Le Manach from the UBC Fisheries Centre and French Research Institute for Development to Dr. Ron Bowles, Associate Dean of Applied Research at the Justice Institute of BC, who used their own career paths to speak to the possibilities publically-oriented PhD scholarship might engender. UBC Law professor Michelle LeBaron, a Peter Wall Distinguished Scholar in Residence, shared stories about interdisciplinary and public-oriented graduate scholarship and argued that non-traditional approaches to research can yield richer results for both scholars and the public. She argued that greater attention to the process of collaboration is necessary to avoid the problem of “multiple solitudes” in which individual scholars become estranged from one another due to disciplinary differences. Dr. Lorne Whitehead, UBC Special Advisor on Entrepreneurship, Innovation and Research, contended that while there was nothing wrong with commitments to directly impacting the public good, they needed to supplement rather than replace traditional research excellence. Even in a new model, scholars need to hold themselves to “a higher standard of good” than, for example, that supplied by the profit motive.

Echoing others throughout the symposium, he called for a culture change, and a shift in attitude in the university. He considered the choice to focus on more applied emphases of scholarship as integral to the tenet of academic freedom associated with the professoriate.

The subsequent discussion was oriented around different conceptions of the public good and broke attendees into three distinct groups (humanities, social sciences and interdisciplinary scholarship, and STEM and health disciplines). Perhaps unsurprisingly, those in the humanities discussion group began questioning some of the foundational assumptions informing conceptions of the public good, with participants pointing out that academic teaching already constitutes a significant though undervalued contribution to the public good – as an English professor put it, “students are part of the public,” and the dichotomous representation of the academy on the one hand and the “real world” on the other can be misleading.

Some critics of the re-imagined PhD reiterated the feeling that the model of outside partnership and public scholarship under discussion was being forcibly and condescendingly imposed on non-scientific disciplines. Those in the social sciences/interdisciplinary group made the point that instead of public service per se we should be focusing on new forms of scholarly activity and broadening the scope of doctoral research. Pointing out that definitions of the public good vary considerably between communities, disciplines, and even individuals, they grappled with the problem of incorporating conflicting and contradictory conceptions of the public good into a re-imagined doctoral degree. The STEM breakout group focused more on logistical concerns, particularly those around funding, given the traditional models and sources of student support; if universities want their doctoral students to pursue more public-oriented scholarship, they will need to find additional funding models to give students additional autonomy and support. The importance of student and postdoctoral fellow agency in exploring options was noted, as was the value of querying prospective students’ interests in a graduate career more deeply, to help determine their fit and identify appropriate mentors and resources.

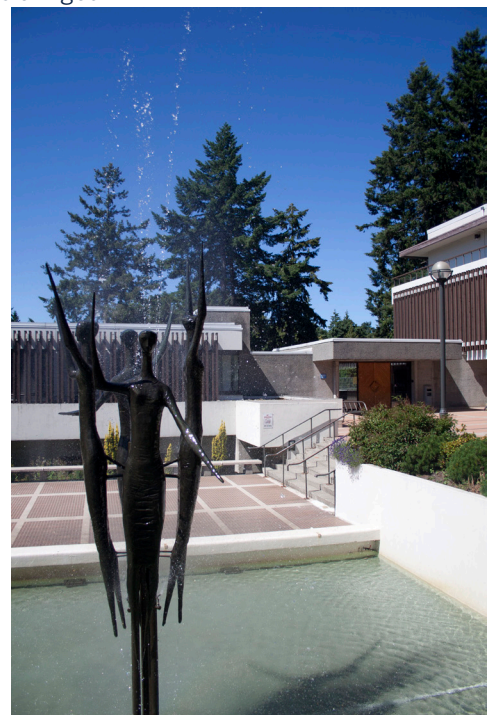
# Real challenges, potential solutions

The final activities of the symposium were mostly pragmatic in nature, as participants rotated through a series of stations focused on different dilemmas inherent in re-imagining the PhD: maintaining academic rigour in new forms of doctoral scholarship, developing students ready for the academy while also broadening education for non-academic careers, expanding connections between the academy and external partners, and the potential conflict between publication mandates, academic reward systems and an alternative doctoral model. Throughout these activities, the importance of collaboration was mentioned frequently: collaboration between faculty members and between departments, and with other university units and external partners – to build expertise in community-partnered research, to form connections, to create networks to guide student career development, and to supervise students' research. Interdisciplinarity and flexibility were common themes: contributors argued that students should be encouraged to borrow professional expertise from other departments and from those outside the academy.

One of the recurring problems identified related to the length of the PhD and its contents. If a new or re-imagined doctoral degree has to include more – more training in diverse skill-sets, more opportunities for community engagement, more internships and work-learn programs, more teaching – without giving up on the traditional modes of doctoral scholarship and publication, then either time to degree needs to further increase or some other element of the program, such as coursework or the qualification process, needs to be removed or dramatically streamlined. A counter-argument was that rather than simply supplementing the student experience with additional opportunities, doctoral programs need to re-think their pedagogical aims and methods at the most fundamental level.

Re-imagining the PhD may have less to do with simply adding in more elements and more about re-orienting the goals, objectives, and forms of doctoral scholarship.

Other recurring problems cited related to research funding (considering potential shifts of faculty and students towards different forms of scholarship) and the reward system of academia. Many called for a shift in the criteria by which faculty scholarship was assessed in the academy for hiring and tenure and promotion, and by granting councils to place a higher value on the impact of research beyond the traditional modes of academic publication. Some expressed concern that the “brand” of the PhD may be undermined by some of these changes, and wondered about creating professional doctorates instead. The issue of equity was also raised; if programs allow diverse ways to meet the requirements for the same degree, how can we ensure that students are evaluated equitably on coherent criteria that uphold equivalent standards of rigour?





# Emerging recommendations and next steps

Consensus about the exact shape of revised PhD pathways – or even if the PhD is the best target for reform – proved elusive, and frankly wasn't anticipated. However, by the symposium's end, there was substantial interest in continuing the discussion, and potential paths forward began to be delineated. A refrain of "more data" echoed throughout the room, with many in attendance calling for increased consultation with current graduate students and with doctoral alumni. The importance of maintaining an ongoing community dialogue amongst faculty and administrators, including Graduate Council, was recognized, with some calling for reviews of policies around thesis composition, supervisory committees, and other aspects of the PhD. Additional fundraising for graduate students was discussed with an eye towards empowering student choices and options for scholarly activity, such as pilot programs for alternate PhD paths. It was argued that the Master's degree needs to become part of the conversation around re-imagining both the particulars of graduate education and its broader purposes. A consensus was that changes to the PhD must be re-imagined multifariously and from the ground up within Faculties and programs, with the specific shapes and qualities of PhD pathways informed by departmental particularities and disciplinary perspectives. On the other hand, as many expressed how much they have valued engaging with colleagues across campus during the day, continuing discourse at the broadest level was encouraged. Drs. Porter and Phelps promised to summarize the day's findings for distribution, to keep the dialogue active, and to propose possible tangible steps going forward.

