

## Debate over Continuous Enrollment Continues

To the Editor:

The *Chronicle of Higher Education* continues to be an important venue for discussing factors contributing to graduate student success. We believe the current debate about graduate education at the University of Michigan- Ann Arbor contributes to a broader conversation linking education policy and quality.

The Rackham Graduate School at the University of Michigan is pushing a new Continuous Enrollment policy, now framed as an initiative to facilitate graduate degree attainment (initially framed as decreasing time-to-degree). However, we find no compelling evidence that Continuous Enrollment policies benefit graduate student education. Moreover, as graduate students, we fear the policy will actually *impede* our progress.

Under the current policy, students may apply to Rackham for tuition-free “detached study,” a temporary status that allows us to make progress toward our degrees while maintaining access to email and library services. This option has been a crucial resource for students conducting research away from campus, who have spousal and family obligations outside of Michigan, or who require flexibility for health or personal reasons. Women – who disproportionately bear some of these burdens – will be particularly affected if detached study ends.

Rackham argues that Continuous Enrollment will foster closer connections with our departments and grant us increased access to limited university services. Although we agree that communication with departments is critical to quality graduate education, biannual tuition fellowship applications do not accomplish this goal. As for university services, most are already available to students under detached study, and any additional benefits do not apply to students working away from campus.

Rackham claims the new tuition burdens on students will be offset by decreased candidate tuition and with tuition fellowships for candidates making “satisfactory progress.” However, departments will have a perverse incentive to eliminate funding for students who are slowed by ambitious research agendas, family responsibilities, or other personal constraints. Without funding, these students will be forced to withdraw. Worse yet, departments will be discouraged from admitting graduate students with diverse needs who may require more flexible programs to succeed.

Continuous Enrollment will disproportionately harm social science and humanities students who engage in field and archival research more frequently. As a result, the university will lose intellectual diversity by privileging less time-intensive methodologies and research topics over others.

Finally, graduate students and department administrators were never systematically included in the policy-making process before the Rackham Executive Board approved it

in December 2008. This lack of transparency has left students and departments scrambling to learn about the policy before the Board of Regents votes on it in June.

Rackham's unresponsiveness and shifting justifications suggest that it has no clear plan for implementing the policy in a way that is sensitive to student and departmental needs. Rackham still needs to justify how Continuous Enrollment will benefit graduate students.

We are engaging Rackham administrators and organizing locally, but we believe the controversy is relevant to programs beyond the University of Michigan. We encourage healthy dialogue and more substantive research on the policy's consequences. In the mean time, we hope the fast-tracked Continuous Enrollment implementation slows enough for these considerations, as occurred recently at the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill in light of similar concerns.

We hope that the *Chronicle of Higher Education* will facilitate further engagement with this issue across campuses, particularly as it relates to matters of intellectual diversity and the ability of graduate students to complete their programs.

Very sincerely,

The Continuous Enrollment Working Group at the University of Michigan - Ann Arbor