

**Cratis D. Williams School of Graduate Studies**

**Strategic Plan and Priorities**

## **Mission**

The Cratis D. Williams School of Graduate Studies supports the academic and professional development of graduate students by offering a challenging intellectual environment that promotes shared learning and discovery. A supportive graduate faculty advances graduate students' curiosity, passion, and knowledge, engaging students as colleagues and guiding students to become active contributors to knowledge, creativity, and innovation in their disciplines.

## **Vision**

With an emphasis on graduate education as a fundamental part of the University's strategic priorities, the School of Graduate Studies aspires to be recognized for innovative and responsive graduate programs that provide relevant academic and professional experiences for its students, preparing them for rewarding careers in the increasingly diverse communities of North Carolina, the nation, and the world.

## **Overview**

Appalachian State University was founded on the mission to expand educational access to a historically underserved region and since has grown into a nationally recognized institution that prepares students to serve as engaged stewards of their communities. Rooted in service, scholarship, and a profound sense of place, Appalachian State continues to shape the lives and communities throughout the High Country.

Named in honor of Cratis D. Williams, a significant figure in the university's history and one of the nation's leading scholars of Appalachian culture, the graduate school reflects his lifelong commitment to academic excellence, regional studies, and humanistic inquiry. A beloved teacher and mentor, Williams championed graduate education as a transformative force in both personal and societal advancement. His legacy of scholarship and service provides the moral and intellectual foundation upon which this strategic plan is built.

The Cratis D. Williams School of Graduate Studies is committed to advancing the mission of Appalachian State University by fostering a dynamic and inclusive environment that prepares graduate students to lead, innovate, and contribute meaningfully to their disciplines and communities. Guided by our mission to provide transformative graduate education that balances academic rigor with real-world application, we envision a graduate school that serves as a catalyst for research, creative endeavors, and professional excellence.

This strategic plan is a product of a collaborative process developed through extensive engagement with faculty, staff, and students, and reflects a collective commitment to strengthening graduate education in alignment with Appalachian State University's mission, the current Academic Affairs Strategic Priorities and the Strategic Plan for Research and Creative Activities. It is a bold path forward that articulates a shared commitment to graduate education that is relevant and impactful.

## **Looking Forward**

This strategic plan represents a shared vision for the future of graduate education at Appalachian State University. By investing in student success, academic excellence, and research innovation, we will cultivate a graduate school that empowers students to become leaders in their fields and make a lasting impact on society.

As we implement this plan, we will remain adaptive to emerging needs, committed to continuous improvement, and focused on upholding the values of Appalachian State University. Together, we will strengthen the Cratis D. Williams School of Graduate Studies as a hub for knowledge creation, professional development, and transformative learning experiences.

## **Strategic Priorities & Action Items**

To achieve the mission and vision of the Cratis D. Williams School of Graduate Studies, the following strategic priorities will guide our initiatives:

### **Strategic Priority 1. Enhance Educational Accessibility and Graduate Student Support**

- Goal 1. Expand Financial Support for Graduate Students:
  - Secure additional graduate assistantships and tuition remissions, scholarships, and fellowships.
  - Implement a biennial review of all graduate student funding to identify gaps and need for adjustments or enhancements.
  - Perform biennial stipend reviews to ensure the base pay rate remains competitive and addresses cost of living increases.
  - Advocate for additional funding to increase stipends to ensure competitive financial support for graduate students.
- Goal 2. Increase Research and Professional Development Funding for Graduate Students:
  - Expand internal grant funding options to support graduate student research, creative endeavors, and conference participation.
  - Expand travel grants to facilitate professional networking and knowledge exchange.
- Goal 3. Strengthen Graduate Student Recruitment Strategies:
  - Establish dedicated recruitment teams for targeted outreach based on program need.
  - Utilize data-driven recruitment strategies, leveraging our customer relationship management (CRM) platforms and market analytics.
  - Develop pipeline programs with undergraduate institutions to increase enrollment in graduate programs.
- Goal 4. Improve Admissions and Onboarding Processes:

- Streamline application procedures and develop a graduate admissions college liaison structure to support applicants through the process.
- Engage prospective students through the current virtual information sessions and utilize other interactive admissions tools to recruit prospective students.

### **Strategic Priority 2. Create Focused Communication and Collaborative Engagement**

- Goal 1. Enhance Graduate Student Community and Engagement:
  - Establish graduate student mentorship programs, pairing incoming students with experienced peers, faculty, and alumni.
  - Create learning groups to improve interdisciplinary networking opportunities.
  - Increase professional development workshops in leadership, research, and industry-specific skills.
- Goal 2. Improve Transparency and Accessibility of Information:
  - Develop a centralized online information hub for graduate students, faculty, and staff.
  - Implement a biannual town hall to address student, faculty, and staff concerns and communicate policy changes.
  - Regularly publish a Graduate School Newsletter to all faculty and staff featuring funding opportunities, events, and success stories.
- Goal 3. Strengthen Alumni Engagement:
  - Engage with alumni to identify continuous improvement opportunities for effective communication strategies.
  - Create an Alumni Advisory Council to support graduate student networking and career development.

### **Strategic Priority 3. Invest in Faculty and Staff Development**

- Goal 1. Enhance Professional Development Opportunities:
  - Implement a Graduate Faculty Professional Development Workshop Series to support best practices in graduate education.
  - Provide workshops for staff to support their role in graduate education including mentorship and policy requirements.
- Goal 2. Address Faculty Workload and Evaluate Recognition Process:
  - Explore course release options and/or workload adjustments for faculty heavily involved in graduate education, including serving as a graduate program director and graduate student supervision and mentorship.
  - Establish an institutional recognition process to assess faculty engagement in graduate education, including serving as a program director, mentoring graduate assistants, and thesis and dissertation advising.

- Goal 3. Automate and Streamline Administrative Processes:
  - Implement digital workflow systems to track student progress, funding applications, and assistantship allocations.
  - Reduce administrative burden through automated approvals and centralized student records management.
- Goal 4. Improve Recruitment Support for Faculty and Programs:
  - Develop marketing and recruitment toolkits for faculty to enhance program visibility and attract high-quality students.
  - Advocate to provide recruitment grants to departments to support targeted outreach efforts.

#### **Strategic Priority 4. Foster Innovative and Engaging Learning Experiences**

- Goal 1. Expand Access to High-Quality Learning Modalities:
  - Promote the development of hybrid and online program offerings that maintain academic rigor and engagement.
  - Collaborate with programs to prioritize the increase of flexible course scheduling to accommodate working professionals and part-time students.
  - Enhance virtual academic support services for online and hybrid students.
- Goal 2. Enhance Student Awareness of Campus Resources:
  - Develop a Graduate Student Resource Guide to clearly communicate available benefits and services.
  - Improve orientation programming to highlight library access, career services, wellness resources, and funding opportunities.
- Goal 3. Increase Career Preparation for Graduate Students:
  - Strengthen career development services with dedicated staff for graduate student advising.
  - Expand non-academic career preparation programs, including industry-specific job fairs and resume workshops.
- Goal 4. Support Interdisciplinary Research and Collaboration:
  - Collaborate with the Office of Research and Innovation to create and support graduate student inclusion in cross-disciplinary research groups and seed funding for joint faculty-student projects.
  - Establish interdisciplinary coursework and certificates that integrate expertise from multiple fields.
  - Build on convergence and interdisciplinary research expertise across campus by creating mentorship and teaching guidance for faculty advising graduate students in boundary-spanning projects

- Promote faculty-student research collaborations through the expansion of competitive funding and recognition awards.

### **Strategic Priority 5. Promote Program Sustainability and Responsive Program Development**

- Goal 1. Regularly Assess and Optimize Graduate Programs:
  - Conduct biennial program reviews to evaluate enrollment trends, student outcomes, and financial sustainability.
  - Utilize data analytics to identify areas for program enhancement and development.
- Goal 2. Diversify Funding and Strengthen Financial Sustainability:
  - Expand external grant opportunities for graduate student research and assistantships.
  - Increase alumni giving and philanthropic support through targeted fundraising campaigns.
- Goal 3. Strengthen External Partnerships and Engage with Advisory Boards:
  - Engage our academic college partners to foster improved relationships with industry professionals, alumni, and faculty to ensure curriculum alignment with evolving job markets.
  - Foster community and industry partnerships to enhance applied learning and service-learning opportunities.
- Goal 4. Strengthen Data-Driven Decision Making:
  - Identify the types of data, in collaboration with program directors, needed to support the administration of graduate programs.
  - Collaborate with programs and the Office of Institutional Research, Assessment & Planning (IRAP) to create graduate student success dashboards to track retention, time to degree, and career outcomes.