THE GA/LA/RA/TA ACTION TEAM  
Charged by Academic Affairs September 2006

Respectfully Submitted to:

Dr. William Radke, Provost and Vice-President of Academic Affairs

Composition of the Action Team:

Co-facilitators  
Dr. Gary Steward, Jr.  
Dr. Cheryl Frech

Team Members  
Ms. Jean Benson  
Dr. John Camey  
Dr. Donna Cobb  
Dr. John Garic  
Dr. Ron Howell  
Ms. Marian Spears  
Dr. Wayne Stein  
Dr. Mary Sweet-Darter  
Dr. Weldon Wilson

The Charge:

The selection, utilization and management of graduate student assistantships (including GAs, RAs, LAs and TAs) at UCO must be handled more systematically. Issues in this regard include (but are not limited to): qualifications, the appointment process, budgetary issues, stipend disbursement issues, time-keeping accountability issues, monitoring of work issues, tuition waiver issues, standardization and centralization issues, as well as the roles of the Graduate College, the academic colleges, and the academic departments.

This Action Team will:

1. Review the current assistantship model.  
2. Determine the effectiveness of the current model in meeting the needs of and fostering growth in UCO’s graduate programs.  
3. Benchmark other successful assistantship models, including the issue identified above.  
4. Make recommendations for improving the current assistantship model.  
5. Gather input from Graduate Program Coordinators.
History:

The GA/TA/LA/RA Action Team (hereafter referred to as Action Team) met six times during the fall 2006 semester and three times in January 2007.

The first meeting focused on identifying issues that were deemed problematic to the respective Action Team members. The items were noted and grouped into loosely defined categories. The categories served as a means to systematically discuss items listed by team members, especially those relevant to the charge.

Each team member was tasked with investigating other programs (see Appendix C) and tabulating benchmarks cogent to our charge. Dr. Frech crafted an online survey for the directors of graduate programs across campus while Dr. Steward created a survey for graduate assistants. A few revisions were made after garnering feedback from team members (see Appendix B). We intended to administer both online surveys on Monday, November 27, 2006. However, Information Technology was delayed by other responsibilities and as a result the surveys were not administered until the second week in December.

After our second meeting, Dr. Garic proffered a model that essentially strengthened the centralization of current practices, especially with regard to the assignment and management of graduate assistants. In sum, the central feature of his model was two-fold. First, the assignment of any assistant to a given unit must be determined by a “demonstrable need.” The second included a high level of accountability based on the argument that graduate assistants were compensated by taxpayers.

Dr. Garic’s model was met with mixed reviews. While most of the Action Team concurred with some of the elements in the proposal (including the goal of accountability, work performed by graduates, categories of assistants), most opposed the overly centralized feature of the model.

The remainder of the meetings during the fall semester addressed a quodlebet of issues, including quality of life, the type of work performed by graduate assistants, time-cards, teaching assistants, qualifications, and enrollment requirements.

The Action Team reconvened in January 2007 and dedicated discussion to more substantive issues such as management of graduate assistants, time-cards, tuition waivers, accountability, and appointment (assignment). Dr. Steward crafted an apercu of a decentralized model. The construction of the model was predicated upon the comments, observations, and sentiments of the majority of the Action Team.

The model stood in stark contrast to the centralized model presented by Dr. Garic. It was presented as a means to encourage dialogue on important
issues raised in our initial meeting. Some of the team members suggested modifications to the decentralized model, specifically in the assignment process of graduate assistants. Ultimately, the Action Team supported (not by vote) a decentralized approach. Dr. Garic was the only member to oppose the decentralized model and wished to be counted in full dissent.

In writing the details of the Action Team's work, we have endeavored to accurately convey the thoughts and sentiments of the members' irrespective of their positions on any of the issues. For clarification, we abbreviate when possible. Finally, we often used the term “graduate assistant” in the generic sense, rather than the specific position as noted in the graduate catalog.
Executive Summary

The Action Team submits the following question to readers of this report:

“Is the University of Central Oklahoma committed to growing and increasing the quality of its graduate programs?”

If the answer to this question is “no,” the Action Team believes that the graduate programs will continue to languish at their current, somewhat unsatisfactory, levels. If the answer to this question is “yes,” the Action Team recommends changes to the current structure and practices of the assistantship program.

Members of the Action Team are well aware of UCO’s unique position in the state of Oklahoma as a large regional/metropolitan university situated between the state’s two Research I (and graduate intensive) universities. While there is no need to duplicate strong graduate programs already in place at other schools, UCO has successful graduate programs in every college that are worth cultivating. What became apparent to the Action Team in our initial meetings is the diversity of UCO’s graduate programs. Some programs attract local graduate students who are employed in the area and enjoy the convenience and personal attention of our small programs. Other programs are unique in the state and region and are capable of drawing students from across the nation and beyond. All solutions and improvements to the graduate programs, including assistantships, must function for this diverse array of programs with varying needs.

Supporting and recruiting outstanding graduate students with graduate assistantships is an important and integral component of the success and improvement of the state of graduate education at UCO. To achieve these ends, the Action Team makes the following general recommendations.

**Quality of Life:** Commit resources to improve the quality of life for all graduate students, especially for graduate students with assistantships. (Item I, page X)

**Assistantship Designations:** Two categories of Research Assistant (RA) and Teaching Assistant (TA) suffice to describe the duties of all assistantships. (Item II, page X)

**Flexibility in Enrollment Status:** Allow colleges to set the minimum full-time enrollment status for graduate assistants in their programs. (Item III, page X)

**College Involvement in Assignment of Assistantships:** Assignment of assistantships is initiated by a faculty member and vetted by department chair and dean. Colleges annually review blocks of assistantships to ascertain alignment with strategic plans. (Item IV, page X)
Teaching Assistant Role: University clarifies role of TAs relative to the academic mission and vision. (Item V, page X)

Management of Assistants: Decentralize the supervision of graduate assistants by developing a simple supervisory form to be signed by faculty member, confirmed by the department chair, and verified and filed with the college dean. A copy of the form would be sent to the Graduate College. (Item VI, page X)

Disbursement of Stipends: Eliminate the time card system and pay assistantship stipends on a monthly basis. (Item VII, page X)

Maximize the Amount and Flexibility of Tuition Waivers: Allow colleges to disburse tuition waivers in order to benefit programs with varying needs. Encourage colleges to reserve some tuition waiver monies for use in recruitment. (Item VIII, page X)

Details about each of these areas are found in the body of the Action Team’s report.
I. Quality of Life

Background:

A myriad of topics were discussed through the course of our meetings that we labeled as "quality of life" issues. Although this congeries is not explicit in our charge, the inclusion of this subject in our report is justified under the caveat "but not limited to" in the charge.

To date, the university has not purposively addressed the graduate assistants (GAs) quality of life issues in a holistic, systematic fashion. The Action Team identified numerous areas that involve GAs quality of life (See Appendix A).

Quality of life issues were divided into “amenities” and “status” categories. The former includes areas such as stipends, insurance benefits, parking, and discounts on the Wellness Center, to name of few. The latter focuses on the improvement or increase of status (prestige). This category encompasses issues related to the professionalization of the GAs. Among other things, it might include a new identification card and faculty parking. To that end, it is the recognition by the university that the GA status is that of a paraprofessional.

Here are a few comments from our GAs (see appendix C) in the survey that we administered in December 2006 (Please note, the following quotes may be partial comments to a particular question).

I feel that graduate and teaching assistant are used to teach the same information that a full-time or part-time faculty, or adjunct do, and the students paying the same tuition either way. But yet we don’t get compensated the sameâ??less pay, no benefits, student parking, etc.

Satisfied with the work, not necessarily with compensation for a bright student.

Lack of helpfulness when most university offices find out you’re a TA (parking, ID, financial aid). Aforementioned issues with financial aid. Lack of communication with graduate college (would much prefer to have the TA program centralized within my particular college).

Would be nice to have our parking passes back ans well as some kind of benefits package even if just with the UCO clinic. In addition, a little more money never hurts.

I felt that the pay could be increased because it is the only income that I was receiving. Edmond has become an expensive town to live in and I would spend my half of my months income on rent (excluding bills).

The amount of money that we are paid as TAs for the work we do is nothing short of insulting. I am outraged by the fact that we, who are responsible for teaching our own sections, are paid at the same rate as GAs and RAs, whose jobs are considerably less time- and labor-intensive

Unable to secure staff parking. Being treated like a step-child when I tried to get a parking pass as soon as I mentioned I was a TA. The whole process of not really
getting the scholarship for being a teacher. Ex: I have enrolled for Spring and my bill has changed several times without me doing anything else. There is no explanation as to why it went from $1000+ to over $1400 just from last week. Do they have people that just need jobs so they tell them, "Ok, this week I want you to change it to such-and-such."

Some sort of faculty privilege in the library wouldn't be remiss.

**Recommendation:**

The Action Team strongly recommends the commitment of improving the quality of life among the university’s GAs. This recommendation was unanimously supported by the Action Team. In fulfilling this commitment, the following items are suggested:

1.1 Academic Affairs convenes a committee or tasks the Graduate College to identify areas that would improve the quality of life of GAs.

1.2 The body designated to identify quality of life issues would categorize and report to the Academic Affairs Leadership Team (AALT) improvements based on scale of economy, ranging from no cost to greater costs.

1.3 To demonstrate commitment to this ideal, AALT establishes benchmarks for implementation of improvements over the next five to ten years.

**Rationale:**

The University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) places an emphasis on valuing people. This value is crucial to its mission and organizational life. Improving the quality of life of all employees, including graduate assistants, is inextricably connected to the fulfillment of the institutional mission. We strongly urge Academic Affairs and the Graduate College to explore and adopt a plan to improve the quality of life of our graduate assistants.

We offer this recommendation as the first among many in our report to convey the real and symbolic importance of this issue. The benchmark component is crucial to our recommendation. It signals a commitment on the part of the university to graduate assistants as valued stake-holders.

A latent benefit in identifying and defining quality of life issues, especially related to the “status” of GAs (toward a paraprofessional), is minimizing the confusion of their place and role at UCO. The misprision of the status and role of the GA was evident after a few Action Team meetings. The issuance of keys to graduate assistants serves as one of several examples. One member was unaware that GAs could be issued keys to classrooms and buildings while another claimed that her GAs had little problem in securing keys.
Additionally, an incident was cited by one of the team members in which an assistant was removed (along with her class) by a DPS officer from a computer lab. This incident underscores the need to clearly define the status and roles of GAs.

A few thoughts from the student survey regarding the idea of graduate assistants as paraprofessionals.

- *This position has allowed me to work along with professional educators, allowing me to absorb their knowledge and experience in our field of work.*

- *This assistantship has given me a far greater appreciation for what my own professors deal with on a daily basis. It has also taught me that I can still surprise myself with what I can actually do. It’s helped me immensely in my own personal shyness, and it has made me a better learner.*

- *A huge chunk of Freshman Composition courses, without which the English Department would cease to exist, are taught by Teaching Assistants, yet we are systematically under-valued and under-appreciated.*

II. Graduate Assistant Designation

Background:

The 2006 – 2007 Graduate Catalog defines four categories of assistants. Previous graduate catalogs reveal two categories of assistants (see 2004 Graduate Catalog-Appendix D), graduate assistants (GA) and research assistants (RA). A Graduate Assistant Ad Hoc Committee submitted a report in June 2004 addressing the issues of graduate assistantships extant at that time.

Among other things, the committee recommended an expansion of assistantship designations. Under their proposal, the graduate assistant would burgeon into three discrete categories; teaching fellow, research fellow, and graduate fellow. The rationale for the proposal related to nomenclature hinged on two notable deficiencies. First, the clarification of function (*i.e.* what activities should assistants perform) and second, the sentiment to increase the prestige of graduate assistants (*i.e.* the term ‘fellow’ imputes a greater measure of prestige than the term assistant). Academic Affairs did not move to approve stated recommendations.

In January 2006, Dean Rao crafted a proposal to address on-going problems involving graduate assistants. The designations were defined and later approved unanimously by the Graduate Council (February 14, 2006). The new categories included; graduate research assistants (GRA), graduate assistantships (GA), graduate teaching assistant (TA), and laboratory assistant (LA). The rationale for the proposal appears to align with the 2004 Graduate Assistant Ad Hoc Committee., Namely, the necessity to clarify the function, activities, or parameters of graduate assistants. Ostensibly, the
proposal proffered by Dean Rao prevailed, as it now serves as the current model in designating graduate assistants.

**Recommendation:**

The Action Team unanimously recommends a simplification of terminology to include two designations, *teaching assistants (TA)* and *research assistants (RA)*. The following definitions provide boundaries to each position:

- **II.1** A teaching assistant is defined as any graduate assistant whose primary duties involve students, either in a classroom or clinical setting. Under this recommendation, the current laboratory assistant (LA) is subsumed within this designation.

- **II.2** A research assistant is a graduate student whose primary duties involve research with one or more faculty. It may also include research that is more amorphous, such as for a department or program.

**Rationale:**

We recognize the effort of previous task forces, the Graduate Council, and Dean Rao, in their attempt to delineate the function of graduate assistants. However, the Action Team strongly opposes the current designations of assistants and unanimously favors a simpler designation.

We determined that there is no added-value to the current definition of assistants. The current designations are noted as cumbersome and unnecessarily complex, failing to produce the desired ends (*i.e.*, the legitimate activities of assistants). The attempt to clarify the function or activities of assistants by expanding designations has not rectified the problems or issues of legitimate function. The Garic model underscores this point by noting that the activities of graduate assistants remain problematic. In sum, the expansion of nomenclature had little or no effect on resolving the problems related to the function of graduate assistants.

The Action Team’s bifurcation of graduate assistants into teaching and research assistants should allow the deans and chairs the requisite flexibility for discipline-specific activity. The solution to the “legitimate activity” of TAs and RAs is not resolved in the nomenclature, but rather in the process of “assignment” and the mechanisms of “accountability” as described later in this document.

The Garic model denies the assignment of an RA to a department. Stated another way, the RA must be assigned to one or more faculty with a specific research project. The majority of the Action Team favored a model that promotes the flexibility in assigning an RA to a particular department with the
proviso that the work is academic in nature. For example, a department could assign an RA to gather information on departmental alumni. The focus of the project might utilize survey methodology, which grants the RA the opportunity to develop questionnaires, test for validity/reliability, address methodological issues related to response rates, tests of significance, or evaluate the utility of qualitative versus quantitative data. It is hard to imagine that an academic unit would view this as inappropriate academic research. This example reveals that the RA, department, and other possible stakeholders (e.g. alumni) would all be benefactors.

The Action Team unanimous in its opposition in using graduate assistants in anything but academic work. The following comment by a student (student survey) has many of us concerned about that activities of graduate assistants across campus. [I have taken the liberty to correct several grammar errors in this student’s response-see Appendix C]

*Faculty don’t always know how to properly use someone in my position. I see many departments turning their GA’s in to back up staff for the department secs.*

### III. Qualifications of Teaching Assistants and Research Assistants

#### Background:

The qualifications of all graduate assistants have changed over the past few years. As a point of discussion, the Action Team addressed each of the requirements of GAs/TAs/LAs/RAs as listed in the 2006-07 Graduate Catalog (see Appendix E).

The minimum number of hours enrolled to be considered for full-time status was fervently discussed. Dr. Garic explained that this requirement was a consequence of scarce resources (i.e., funding). Since financial resources were limited, it was determined that expediting graduate students through their respective programs was preferred to alternative models. Requiring nine hours of enrollment for full-time status ensured that funding commitments would cycle every two years (for most programs) as opposed to three years for a six-hour enrollment requirement.

#### Recommendation:

The Action Team unanimously endorsed all items pertaining to the qualification criterion as listed in the 2006-07 Graduate Catalog, save one. The lone item not supported by the team was the mandatory minimum enrollment of 9 hours per semester. This requirement was overwhelmingly rejected by all team members except Dr. Garic. The following points were approved by the majority of the team members.

#### III.1 All items pertaining to the qualifications of assistants as listed in the 2006 – 07 Graduate Catalog were supported by the Action
Team with the exception of the required enrollment of 9 hours per semester for full-time status (see III.3-4).

III.2 In addition to the above mentioned qualifications, graduate assistants would be required to attend a session during faculty enhancement week (fall). Faculty Enhancement Center would be tasked to create a tailor-made session focusing on issues such as, ethics, professionalism, responsibilities, etc. In cases of late-hires, FEC would offer a similar session the week prior to the spring semester. In such circumstances, a student would not be precluded from serving as an assistant, providing that he/she would attend the spring training session. If a student fails to attend the training session, he/she would be subject to termination of employment.

III.3 We recommend that the required enrollment of graduate credit for full-time status is determined by each college, with 6 hours per semester as the minimum threshold.

III.4 Funding commitments for full or part-time assistants will not exceed 3 years.

Rationale:

Training. The Action Team concurred with the suggestion for a formal training session of all current and future graduate assistants. We recommend that the training session is attached to FEC and conducted during Faculty Enhancement Day. This serves as an opportunity to impart information relative to professional ethics, expectations, and other general information. It also elevates the status of the graduate assistant, especially if it is fused with Faculty Enhancement Day. Our survey results revealed 100% (see item 11) of the graduate coordinators/directors in favor of training.

Several comments from the student survey point to the need for mandatory training, both general (ethics and other professional issues) as well as specific training.

Very little "hand-holding" was used by my supervisors. They said "teach...figure it out". This promotes fast growth and leads to strong self-competency.

Very little "hand-holding" was used by my supervisors. I was in the deep end of the pool - with no more swimming skill than "dog paddling".

Would like to have more professional training included as part of my job including preparation for becoming a faculty member and working in the field.

It would be nice to have some kind of RA/GA/TA training in the summer before school begins to better prepare students for the job. Including what we can and cannot do as well as how to access things on campus and who runs what, etc.
**Full-time Enrollment.** Dr. Garic offered a strong argument for maintaining the current enrollment requirements. The foci of his argument rested on “quantity” rather than “quality” of the experience. Stated another way, expediting graduate students through their programs translates into distributing scarce resources to more students over a long period of time.

As stated, team members opposed the current requirement and opted for a model that allows each college to make this determination. This provides colleges the flexibility to tailor their requirements to fit the design of their programs.

The current requirement has proven to be onerous to some assistants. Specifically, Dr. Stein noted that in addition to the 9 graduate hours, some TAs are obligated to fulfill a college language requirement. The additional language course (undergraduate credit) does not count as part of the 9 hours per semester required by the Graduate College. Dr. Sweet-Darter pointed out that most graduate assistants in the College of Education and Professional Studies would likely continue to enroll in 9 hours each semester to minimize the time invested in completing their degree requirements. Stated another way, the annual stipend of $7,000.00+ is not a sufficient incentive for the typical assistant to prolong his/her graduate career at UCO.

The following items were noted as sufficient justification for a change of the current minimum enrollment:

1) **RUSOs minimum graduate enrollment requirement is 3 hours.** (see Appendix G).

2) **Assistants are presumably the best students.** Keeping this cohort on campus and in classrooms for an additional year seems sensible.

3) **With respect to teaching assistants,** it is reasonable to conclude that he/she will improve with experience. In one sense, the university is reaping added-value in the third year of a TA in terms of classroom quality.

4) **The seasoned TA/RA is more apt in providing mentoring for first-year assistants.**

5) **The quality of the experience for those choosing a three-year program is likely to increase.** The Action Team believes that the institution is obligated to provide the best experience possible for our assistants.

6) **A survey of our peer institutions reveals that most programs obligate full-time assistants to enroll in a minimum of six hours**
per semester (see Appendix H). Our recommendation is consistent with other institutions.

7) Our survey results (see item 12) reveals that 70% of the graduate coordinators/directors favor the college role in the determination of full-time enrollment status.

8) Our graduate assistants stated the following regarding the minimum enrollment of 9 hours per semester.

   I would also like to have the option of a smaller assistantship without having the requirement of taking 9 credit hours.

   The requirement to take 9 graduate hours while teaching 6 hours of Freshman Composition is ridiculous.

   Coursework requirements - low income - 20 hours of work combined with the coursework and thesis is a little overwhelming.

   I wish it was not required that I enroll in 9 graduate hours to receive the GA, because I don't need the hours and I end up having to pay for several hours I don't need.

   I absolutely enjoy working with students but the UCO policy of 20 hours of work and 9 hours of coursework is too much when you are trying write a thesis proposal or a thesis. Additionally, the required coursework of a graduate student is somewhere between 25-30 hours. If you are a graduate assistant for three semesters you are essentially done with your coursework and the university has no policy to support you from there. Most masters in my department take approx 3 years, this means you still have 1.5 years to go when the university no longer supports your research.

IV. The Appointment Process

Background:

Dr. Garic reported that the current appointment of graduate assistants (hereafter referred to as 'assignment') across campus is the result of habit and available funding. To date, there are no clear criteria for the allocation or assignment of graduate assistants. Some team members voiced the opinion that the current practice has created a sense of entitlement among some units. In addition, it is reasonable that the status quo has eclipsed the growth of some programs, especially in those programs poised for growth but stymied by the lack of graduate assistants.

Recommendation:

The Action Team opposes the current practice of the assignment of assistants and strongly recommends a process that aligns with and is undergirded by a decentralized approach. The lone dissenting voice on this
issue was Dr. Garic, who favors a plan to strengthen centralization processes and current practices.

The following apercu is one possible scenario consistent with the spirit of the Action Team’s recommendation:

IV.1 A faculty member(s) or a department may initiate a request for a TA or RA (the criteria of the request form could be developed by AALT). We recommend that all units would be subject to stated criteria.

IV.2 The request would be accompanied with the signature of the chair of the department, signaling the legitimacy of the request.

IV.3 The dean, along with his/her chairs, would rank each request based on the departmental and college strategic plan. This approach elevates the colleges to the prominent role in determining the assignment of assistants.

IV.4 The colleges would receive a “block” of funding to be spent on the employment of TAs or RAs.

IV.5 Each dean would present his/her case for increasing, decreasing, or affirming their current block of funding for assistants during the annual AALT planning retreat. *Note: This process is congruent with the current practice of prioritizing programs and faculty lines, as well as other resources.*

IV.6 AALT would likely need to make a few decisions throughout the course of the fiscal year. For example, if new funds were added to the assistantship program, the deans and Provost would be required to make a determination on how the funds would be distributed among the colleges.

IV.7 If a position within the college becomes available through the course of the year, either by graduation, expiration of term, or the inability of a student to meet his/her academic/professional expectations, the college will retain the funding and could opt to fill the position with a suitable replacement or hold the position until the next hiring cycle.

**Rationale:**

The Action Team insists that all activity related to the graduate assistantship program meet high standards of efficiency, transparency, and equity. Additionally, the majority of the team members do not support a “one-size fits all” approach that is endemic to a centralized model. On the contrary, we
argue for the requisite flexibility in meeting the needs of our students and programs.

A centralized model dictates assignment of TAs/RAs from the furthest possible point relative to the program. It extricates the college deans and to some degree, the Provost from the assignment process. The majority of the Action Team envisions a model that relegates assignment of assistants to the local level, that is, the college.

This approach supports the broader goals and embedded processes of Academic Affairs. Namely, that the allocation of resources are based on planning, purpose, and the academic vision. It creates a mechanism for the Provost and college deans to align the assignment of assistants to the strategic plans of the colleges and broader goals of Academic Affairs.

This approach also supports faculty and a college-driven process, rooted in strategic planning at the department and college levels. We anticipate that a decentralized approach will foster favorable perceptions of an equitable process among faculty and college administration. The transparency of the process should help to diminish or limit faculty/departmental discontent.

A limitation to this process is the possibility of exacerbating competition between colleges. Although possible, it is difficult to imagine that this process would engender more competitiveness than the current practices of allocating faculty lines, resources, and prioritizing programs. Moreover, competition is not necessarily an undesirable outcome. The point at which it becomes debilitating in meeting the mission of Academic Affairs has yet to be determined. On this point, a centralized model does not provide any additional safeguards against the debilitating effects of unhealthy competition.

V. Teaching Assistants (TAs)

Background:

It is unclear what objective, if any, TAs (including LAs) meet relative to the larger academic vision. The lack of understanding among Action Team members as to the role of TAs underscores the need to clearly delineate their role at UCO.

Recommendation:

The Action Team unanimously recommends the following:

V.1 The Provost, and perhaps AALT, articulate the role and determine the density of TAs on campus. By density, we refer to the number (or percentage) of TAs allowed per college or the percentage of TAs to RAs campus-wide.
V.2 The Action Team strongly urges a model or an approved set of criteria to be followed by all units that utilize TAs. The English Department model was noted repeatedly by several team members as exemplary in regards to recruitment, training, and supervision of TAs. We envision that this model could be adapted to meet the objectives of other academic units across campus.

Rationale:

Team members unanimously support the notion that the role and density of TAs on campus resides solely with the Provost (and perhaps AALT) and his/their vision of the academic mission.

The Action Team noted several advantages of using TAs over adjunct/part-time faculty.

1) The appropriate use of TAs is an opportunity to inculcate graduates into the profession and equip them for a future career in higher education.

2) The return on dollars invested is arguably greater than the same compensation to adjunct faculty. For example, TAs will enroll in graduate courses, purchase books and other UCO materials. Team members also reported that assistants are more involved in campus functions, spend more time in and around the office than do most part-time faculty. Of course, this is not to disparage our part-time faculty, who fulfill a vital function to the academic mission.

3) TAs will become alumni of the university, which potentially involves lifelong loyalty. It stands to reason that funds invested in TAs will more likely be recycled into the institution.

VI. Supervision of Teaching and Research Assistants

Background:

To date, the Graduate College has deferred to the faculty for the supervision of assistants. Dr. Garic has argued that non-academic personnel should be precluded from engaging in any supervisory role of assistants. Simply put, since the activities of TAs and RAs are ostensibly academic in nature, only academicians are qualified to provide the requisite supervision.

Recommendation:

The Action Team unanimously affirms the current practice of faculty supervision of teaching and research assistants. We strongly voice our
opposition to the use of non-academic personnel in the supervision of assistants.

Rationale:

It makes little sense to grant supervisory power to individuals who lack the requisite expertise in academe. It follows that assistants who are engaged in academic work should be supervised by personnel (faculty) who are recognized as experts in the profession. This practice prevails at nearly every academic institution.

VII. Oversight of Teaching and Research Assistants

Background:

Currently, all graduate assistants are required to complete and send a monthly report to the Dean of the Graduate College. This is the lone checkpoint of accountability provided by the current model.

As one student (student survey) commented:

*I hate the assistantship reports! As if we don't have enough on our plates with school, working/assisting/teaching, families, etc. we have more work created for us by having to fill out useless reports! And then receive nasty email from the grad dept. if we don't get them in to their satisfaction.*

Recommendation:

The Action Team strongly recommends that we discontinue the current practice and create a system that remands oversight to the colleges. Dr. Garic respectfully voiced his dissent. The following outlines the key points in this recommendation.

VII.1 The deans and Provost approve an evaluative/report form(s) that would be completed by the faculty supervisor.

VII.2 The report would be signed by the chair to verify that such activities were performed by the TA/RA.

VII.3 The college dean would review and verify the report.

VII.4 The reports would be filed and maintained in the college dean's offices. As a matter of professional courtesy, a copy of the reports could be forwarded to the Dean of the Graduate College. See Appendix I for a first draft of such a form.

Rationale:
Oversight of TAs and RAs is inextricably connected to the broader concern of accountability. The goal of accountability and the efficacious use of public funds are critical components to the operation of a graduate assistantship program.

Team members, save one, claimed that this is consistent with most institutions. Many of the team members stated that this is congruent with their personal experience as a graduate assistant.

All team members (with one dissent) endorse a decentralized model of the oversight of TAs and RAs. To be sure, the Action Team unanimously supports strict oversight of TAs/RAs, but oppose the current practice and any proposed centralized model. The majority of the Action Team envisions three primary checkpoints that address accountability.

1) Oversight begins with the assignment of TAs/RAs. Such assignment is based on demonstrable need, underscored by a process that is transparent and equitable. The process is consistent with ideals of shared governance, cooperation among colleges, and supports the Provost’s academic vision.

An annual examination of the “block” of funding allocated to the colleges provides the opportunity for deans to justify current spending and argue for an increase, if warranted.

The current assignment of assistantships is in disrepair. According to some team members, the distribution of assistantships has nearly reached a state of entitlement. Our recommendation squarely places the onus of proving “need” on the faculty, department and dean of each college.

2) A second checkpoint involves the oversight by the colleges. Each college will be tasked with tabulating and evaluating faculty supervisory reports [In our survey, 47% of the graduate coordinators/directors agreed or strongly agreed with the monthly reporting system as a means of accountability while 42% disagreed or strongly disagreed].

A college dean’s office, at any time, could request clarification from a supervisor with regards to a submitted report. As part of this process, we recommend that the dean is granted the prerogative to interview, survey, or use any other appropriate method to assess the quality and quantity of the work performed by a TA/RA within a given semester.

3) A final checkpoint of accountability resides in the Dean of the Graduate College. Two types of inquiries are proposed. The first involves an inquiry based on the likelihood that inappropriate
use of a TA/RA has occurred. A second type of inquiry is more generalized, in which the dean initiates an inquiry with the goal of verifying reports, measuring satisfaction, or improving the TA/RA experience or quality of life. In such cases, the dean may appropriate any legitimate methodology to assess the health of the assistantship program.

The inquiry involving inappropriate use of a TA/RA presents a different set of concerns. In such cases, the dean would be obligated to first discuss the issue(s) with the dean of the college in question. After examining the case, if the concerns of the Dean of the Graduate College persist, the issue is remanded to the Provost.

The Action Team is concerned with graduate assistants working more than their allotted time. First, as a former teaching assistant, I realize that there are some weeks that required more than 20 hours per week, thus exceeding the Federal provision on such matters. However, this was mitigated by work weeks that required far fewer hours. It is important that graduate assistants work the prescribed number of hours, conversely, the deans of the colleges must also be certain that graduate assistants are not working in excess of their allotted time. The following comments from students (student survey) aptly address the concerns that we harbor.

I put in around 25 hours a week doing everything that entails being a good teacher, and I'm only compensated for 10. I understand that I signed a contract stipulating my pay, and I'm fine with that, but I wish that the people paying me had a better understanding of what it is that I actually do.

I am very happy with the pay rate, but I typically work many more hours than I am paid for. As a teaching assistant, I am wholly responsible for a class, which involves planning lessons, lecturing, and grading.

Also, the timecards that we have to fill out are a joke—we TAs work far more than 20 hours per week, and the timecards are just a constant reminder of that fact.

VIII. Disbursement of Stipends

Background:

For the past few years, the university has shown some equivocation in defining students and the nature of their assistantships. The definition of assistantships falls under two categories in terms of funding; students as employees or students with scholarships. This issue may be simplified by briefly discussing the effect of each designation.

If the assistantship is defined as a scholarship, then all monies received are deducted from the total allotment to the student based on his/her financial statement. The consequences proved to be onerous for graduate assistants.
To remedy the problems encountered by defining stipends as scholarships, the university redefined the graduate assistant as an hourly employee. This class of employee is required to complete a time-card. For the past two years, the university has opted to define graduate assistants as employees and effectively as hourly employees.

In spring 2006, a new web-based, online system was implemented for all hourly employees. To date, assistants are required to maintain an online “time-card” that is approved by his/her supervisor.

This system has spawned discontent among faculty and graduate assistants. Ms. Spears found and reported legislative policy that allows us to disburse stipends monthly, apart from the use of a time-card (see Appendix J). The language appears to cover all assistants with classroom ties (our proposed category of TA).

Some of the comments from graduate assistants include:

*If my supervisor does not approve my timesheet correctly, or punctually, I can miss the pay period. If the timesheet is lost in transition to payroll, I can miss a pay period. When this happens, I have to wait over 1 month between paychecks! As I'm a GA, I can not often afford to miss 1 weeks worth of salary, let alone 1 months worth.*

*we TAs work far more than 20 hours per week, and the timecards are just a constant reminder of that fact.*

**Recommendation:**

The Action Team recommends (by a vote of 7 to 3) the abolishment of the time-card and the adoption of monthly disbursement of stipends, divided into four or five equal parts for all TAs/RAs.

**Rationale:**

There was some dissent on this matter. The survey results also reveal some disagreement on this issue. Although 53% of the graduate coordinators/directors opposed the time-card requirement, 42% favored the use of the time-card. The majority of the Action Team tenders the following items as support for the stated recommendation.

1) The use of the time-card is antithetical to professional development. In part, we are inculcating assistants into the profession. Faculty and professional staff (*i.e.* deans, chairs, and faculty) are not required to maintain time-cards.

2) The time-card encourages students and faculty to misrepresent actual work. Specifically, the nature of graduate assistantships is such that the required time varies from week to week. The
assistant finds him/herself in a double-bind in attempting to report and match hours worked with hours allotted.

3) Abbreviated work weeks have proven problematic for assistants to work their allotted hours.

4) The current practice is cumbersome, time-consuming, and ineffective in protecting both assistants and the institution from legal infractions.

5) Other institutions do not emulate our current practice of stipend disbursement as noted in our benchmarking document (see Appendix K).

For the reasons stated, the time-card has proven to be problematic. The eradication of the time-card and implementation of monthly disbursement of stipends will advance our goals and help to professionalize our graduate program.

IX. Tuition Waivers

Background:

Tuition waivers have been a source of concern by many within the academic community. The scarcity of funds coupled with unclear goals has nurtured distrust and animosity among and between faculty and academic administration.

The recent trend of funding graduate assistants through college course fees has strained tuition waiver resources and obfuscated the broader issues of purpose and goals. Recent practices have demonstrated the university's uncertainty as well. In fall 2006, only graduate assistants funded by the Graduate College received tuition waivers. However, in spring 2007 all graduate assistants, irrespective of funding source, received tuition waivers.

Recommendation:

The Action Team strongly recommends that the colleges play the prominent role in the determination and allocation of tuition waivers. Dr. Garic voiced his disapproval and stands in opposition to this recommendation.

As an addendum to this recommendation, we strongly suggest that Academic Affairs, in conjunction with the Graduate College develop parameters regarding the disbursement and allocation of waivers. This approach provides the colleges to best fit the resources to the program demands within an agreed upon framework.

Rationale:
It became evident through the course of our meetings that the college representatives on the Action Team differed slightly in their views of tuition waiver disbursement. Conversely, it was ostensibly clear that the colleges require flexibility to best meet the needs of programs.

In a related matter, some voiced their support to use waivers and positions as a means of recruitment. Our survey indicates that 88% of the graduate coordinators/directors agreed or strongly agreed that assistantships should be used as a means to recruit the best students. Although some programs do not need to recruit GAs, others have indicated that recruitment is a focal concern. A noted advantage of a decentralized approach provides this flexibility to the colleges and programs.

While flexibility of allocation should be granted to the college, there was solid support for tempering such allocations with clear parameters of acceptable and unacceptable disbursement practices. The following comments from students (student survey, see Appendix C) should signal caution in crafting such parameters.

I did not receive a tuition waiver because I am not considered an Oklahoma resident even though I have been in Oklahoma for well over a year.

I wish the tuition waiver would be a little higher. If you are lucky and your department is wealthy, you can get six credit waiver. Unlucky GA students either get no credit or just three credit waiver. How fair is that? The waiver policy should be uniform to all GAs.

The Research stipend is relatively less, perhaps tuition waivers could cover up for 80% of the credits taken. In other universities, the scholarship to assistants is 100% + a stipend as well.

X. Centralized vs. Decentralized Structures

The scholarship from OB (organizational behavior) on this subject indicates the relative benefits and deficiencies of each structure. There are a myriad of examples that underscore the value of a centralized model as well as a decentralized model. To be sure, academicians will debate endlessly about the relative merits of each structure.

From our perspective, the decision to opt for one model over another is a matter of “best fit.” Stated another way, we do not ascribe to the belief that one model is inherently better than any other model. Rather, the majority of the Action Team embraces the notion that assignment, supervision, and oversight is best accomplished at UCO at the lowest levels of the organizational structure. This imputes significance to the accomplished at the department and college level.

One of the benefits of a centralized model involves the concept of uniformity. That is, policies and practices that strive to guarantee the homogeneity of all
subjects. This concept is extended to such issues as enrollment for full-time status, assignment, supervision, oversight, tuition waivers, etc. The appeal of homogeny is indeed enticing. At UCO, we value our stakeholders and endeavor to enrich the lives of every stakeholder. To accomplish such ends, we often subscribe to the merits of standardization, uniformity, and consistency in policy and practice.

The decision to recommend a structure or model that represents a significant departure of current practices was not committed to in haste. Team members carefully weighed the benefits and liabilities of competing ideas and proposals. The opposition to a more centralized model offered by Dr. Garic should not be viewed as a personal assault, but rather as a signal to the merit of a decentralized model.

The following points serve as the underpinnings of our recommendation to move toward a decentralized model with regard to graduate assistants.

1) Simplex organizations are characterized by one structure (centralized or decentralized- the former is more frequent in simplex organizations). As organizational complexity increases (i.e., by number of customers or employees, proliferation of specialization, or organizational strategy), the decentralization of all or parts of the organization is a notable historical outcome.

2) The practice of homogeny (centralized model) differs from “fair treatment.” As stated, the enticement of a centralized model is the feature of uniformity. The majority of the Action Team insists that each program and college is different in terms of function, needs, and stated outcomes. The “one-size fits all” mantra is a relic and counterproductive for our programs and graduate assistants.

3) The Action Team firmly supports the practice of “fair treatment” of graduate assistants, faculty, and programs. We argue that this end is achievable through a decentralized model, provided that appropriate checkpoints of accountability are embedded into the processes.

4) Our recommendations remove the management graduate assistants from the Dean of the JCGGR&S. Presently, the graduate Dean is mired in monthly reports, time-card verification, and paperwork that should be accomplished at much lower levels within the organizational structure. These are the tasks of personnel closer to the action. It is hard to imagine the President of UCO examining the Student Perceptions of Instructional Effectiveness of the 700+ full and part-time faculty.
5) Our recommendation imputes an elevated and grandeur status to the Dean of the JCGR&S. That is, extricating the Dean from the lowest level of managerial responsibility (e.g., examining time-cards, monthly activity reports, etc.) provides opportunity to address larger issues. For example, we envision the Dean as an advocate (both within the university and without) of our graduate programs, for funding programs, and most importantly, as the “face” of graduate research. We envision this person as the interlocutor to the business community, municipalities, and State of Oklahoma.

6) The Action Team supports a standing committee to evaluate the implementation of some or all of our recommendations. We recognize the impact and variability in changing the structure of an organization. We firmly believe that an oversight committee is a requisite to ensure that the “spirit” and stated ends of the recommendations are met. Ninety-four percent (94%) of the graduate coordinators/directors favored the creation of an oversight committee charged to monitor the progress of the assistantship program. [If the recommendations are approved and implemented, my personal feeling on this issue is a mandate from Academic Affairs to conduct focus groups and administer surveys through the transition period- perhaps once a semester for three years. Quality of experience is paramount for our assistants]

7) The Action Team acknowledges that the implementation of these recommendations will place us in “good company” with our peers and the two comprehensive universities in the state. Consistency with other institutions was an important component in our discussion of the issues. It is reasonable to expect that we will increase our competitive edge among our peers as we implement recommendations that align us with the comprehensives in the state.