1 Introduction

The department’s VIGRE proposal represents an attempt at a significant shift in culture. Its goals are exciting and we hope it will succeed. At the same time, we are anxious about the details of its implementation and its potential unintended consequences. The obstacles to its success seem for the most part to be political rather than academic or financial, and the department can do much to ensure success by actively, intentionally communicating with all its members.

As graduate students, we have responsibilities as teachers, students, researchers, and professionals. The VIGRE proposal envisions major changes in all four areas. In each, we join the department’s call for improvement, while urging the department not to fix the things that aren’t broken. We’re very satisfied with our experience at the University, and we hope the VIGRE program, if implemented, will not endanger the department’s other accomplishments.

To succeed, the VIGRE program will require significant "buy-in" from the graduate students who are already in the department, not only those who will be admitted as VIGRE trainees. To this end, two principles are vital. The new opportunities offered through VIGRE must not increase students’ already-significant time commitment to the graduate program, and participation must be truly voluntary for non-VIGRE students. Adherence to these principles will require intentional and ongoing vigilance. We foresee several potential problems in these areas.

2 The graduate program

At the time of their appointment, students must be made aware of the significant difference between VIGRE traineeships and traditional graduate assistantships. The department should recognize that some students will prefer traditional appointments to VIGRE traineeships and allowance should be made for this. Such students would likely object to the requirements imposed by a VIGRE traineeship and their dissatisfaction may endanger the program’s success. Practical details should be clear to everyone in advance: for example, would a VIGRE student who accepted a research assistantship forfeit future VIGRE funding?
We are pleased that the department intends to make VIGRE-related opportunities available to all graduate students. However, we are very concerned that faculty will, by comparison with VIGRE trainees, come to expect non-VIGRE graduate assistants to participate actively in many of these activities. This would represent an increased time commitment to the graduate program and is undesirable.

We are particularly concerned about the impact of VIGRE on international students. There currently exists a considerable social divide between domestic and international students, and certain aspects of the proposed VIGRE program might exacerbate this problem. For example, the proposed expanded new-student orientation would conflict with the University-mandated International Student Orientation Program (ISOP). We hope that some compromise can be reached so that new international students do not miss any key parts of either orientation.

We encourage the department’s efforts to reduce the current average of 6.25 years to degree. We find it striking that this average is actually longer than the six years of support guaranteed to all students who are making “significant progress” towards the degree. But we oppose any enforced increase in the time commitment of students to the program. We would also consider unacceptable any proposal to reduce the average time to degree which might also reduce our graduation rate or weaken our preparation.

3 Grad students as teachers

As teaching assistants, we welcome the invitation to greater responsibility. The opportunity to develop and supervise courses is an exciting one which will leave us much better prepared for academic employment. It will be vital that the department prepare us to accept this responsibility: by expanded TA training, evaluation and mentoring, by practical experience in a variety of contexts, and by ongoing departmental recognition of the value and significance of our teaching mission.

Many new TAs enter the classroom for their first 50-minute discussion with less than 50 minutes of practice. We must improve the orientation – a project which has been in progress, informally, for over a year. Since new TAs aren’t in a position to identify the information they most need, the department should offer on-demand resources for new teachers, both on the web and in the form of designated faculty advisors.

TA training should not be a one-time event. The current system of faculty evaluations and written student evaluations is sufficient to identify unacceptable teaching, but should be expanded to ensure that every TA is evaluated every semester. Evaluators should make every effort to promote excellence in teaching and to help even good teachers to continue to improve.

With their reduced teaching loads, VIGRE trainees will actually be less experienced as TAs than traditional graduate assistants of equal seniority. It is especially important that care should be taken to ensure breadth of experience
for VIGRE trainees – for example, the DUGS should find ways for VIGRE trainees, appointed to teach one slot per semester, to teach courses worth more than one slot per section (e.g. 2373, 2374, 3283W).

4 Grad students as researchers

The VIGRE grant proposal offers several benefits to future graduate students as researchers. In particular, the guarantee of financial support for attendance at research meetings and the opportunity to interact with prominent Ordway lecturers are exciting proposals.

We would like to hear more about the formation of new working seminars and REU programs. We’re concerned that time commitments of non-VIGRE graduate assistants may be inflated. For example, they may feel obligated to participate in REUs or working seminars in which their thesis advisors are involved.

We support the goal of involving graduate students in early-career research opportunities. We note the possibility, however, that students who have not chosen a field of specialization may be steered away from more abstract specialties if they’re required to begin research early.

5 Grad students as professionals

We expect to benefit greatly from formal training in speaking, grant writing, publication, and other topics. We think the department would do us a great service by documenting our participation and performance in these activities, as well as our teaching evaluations, for use in our eventual job search. We welcome formal training in writing papers, and we hope that training in submitting papers for publication will be included. Of course, it is of the utmost importance that all this training be well-organized and substantive. Student evaluation of these activities is desirable. We have similarly high expectations of the proposed summer mini-courses and Qualifying Exam Workshops. To take full advantage of these opportunities, students must be internally motivated, so we consider it important that participation be truly voluntary.

We think graduate students benefit from the experience of speaking in the Junior Colloquium, and we are flattered that the former ATaC has earned such a significant role in this VIGRE proposal. We hope that the participation required of VIGRE trainees, and requested of Ordway Visitors, will not prevent non-VIGRE graduate students from speaking. We’re concerned that too much faculty feedback to speakers could have a chilling effect on volunteerism. The present organizers feel that the speakers are already disproportionately white male U.S. citizens, and worry that requiring VIGRE trainees to speak will exacerbate the problem. We also hope the Department will formalize a procedure for selecting members of the Junior Colloquium organizing committee.
6 Conclusion: Pits, peaks, and passes

We thank the department for asking our opinion of the VIGRE grant proposal. Overall, we are impressed with the department’s bold vision, and in many ways wish that we were entering graduate school now rather than leaving it: with the combined effort of the entire community, the department is poised to rise to new heights.

However, any major change comes with risks and potential pitfalls. From the perspective of a graduate student, some risks are especially apparent. As the department communicates with the graduate student body, we hope it will acknowledge those risks openly, and show, by its words and deeds, its commitment to our best interests.

As graduate students, we are aware of our own importance to the success of the upcoming VIGRE site visit, and we expect to pass the test. We look forward to continued communication with the department through the remainder of the grant process and the implementation of a shared vision.