Mission Statement  The mission of the Department of Political Science PhD program at Iowa is to successfully recruit the very best students and provide them with the knowledge and skills to excel in academia and other careers. To pursue this mission, we offer a rich program of graduate study that has as its foundation a community of scholars committed to first-rate research and teaching. Our students receive the benefits of our renowned faculty through small and interactive graduate training seminars, ample collaborative research opportunities, and daily informal interactions. They also receive significant classroom teaching experience. Given our program’s focus on producing nationally competitive researchers and teachers, we contribute to the University’s core goals of excellence in scholarship and education of graduate and undergraduate students.

Admission Processes and Criteria  Our incoming graduate students are of high quality, with verbal and quantitative GRE scores totaling 1347 on average (from 2004 to 2007), 147 points above the average for the social sciences and 214 points above the national social science average. The total number of MA and PhD applications to the program increased in the first half of the past decade, from 47 in 2000 to 79 in 2004 (a 68% increase), and has fluctuated between 70 and 106 through 2009. The percentage of PhD applicants who were accepted and enrolled has varied over time, ranging from 7.5% (2004) to 21% (2007). We prefer to enroll 10 to 13 students per year, which allows us to meet our goal of 3 to 4 PhD placements per year. However, in 2004, 2008 and 2009, budget constraints coupled with high retention rates among students already in the program caused us to admit classes of 6 or 7 students. We employ several criteria for admittance and funding decisions, including GRE scores, TOEFL scores, undergraduate and graduate GPAs, letters of recommendation, personal statements, and writing samples. After the first year, we make annual funding decisions based on academic performance and research promise.

We have been very successful in enrolling the highest quality students. Last spring (2009), we accepted 31 students into our graduate program (selectivity of 44% for MA and PhD combined) ¹ and made 1 partial departmental funding offer, which was accepted. Two of the 6 students nominated for Presidential fellowships received the award, with 1 of those accepting. No applicant was nominated for the Dean’s Graduate Fellowship, although we normally are able to nominate 1 or 2. The 2009 incoming class therefore consists of 2 unfunded MA students, 1 Presidential Scholar, 1 PhD student funded by the U.S. Air Force, 1 PhD student on partial funding from the department, and 2 unfunded PhD students. Our recruitment success rate in the previous year (2008) was similarly strong in some ways, but problematic in others. We accepted 19 of 69 (27.5% selectivity) PhD applicants, enrolling 2 Dean’s Fellows and 1 Presidential Scholar. The 3 remaining incoming students received no departmental funding. This year, we have managed to fund or partially fund 3 of these students, and we are pleased that all 6 students entering in 2008 are still here in the fall of 2009.

Women constitute 17 of the 48 (35%) students currently enrolled in our doctoral program. This percentage is higher than the female membership rate (30%) in the American Political Science Association (APSA) and has been steady over the last several years. In addition to our efforts to recruit female students, our department has a long and proud tradition of recruiting minority PhD candidates. We granted the first doctorate in political science to an African American woman in 1954 (Jewell Prestage), and our department has produced a significant number of African American PhDs in the last few decades. Four minority students (two African American, two Latino/a) are currently enrolled in our program (8.3%), putting our percentage just above the membership rate for African Americans and Latinos in the discipline (8%). We have been very active in minority recruitment efforts, working with AGEP and APSA’s Minority Identification Project, and these efforts appear to be paying off. In addition, our retention rate of minority students has been virtually perfect. This has been due, in large part, to our concerted efforts to provide mentoring opportunities such as: a) the parallel recruitment and retention of faculty members of color over the last several years, b) Jewel Prestage’s 2008 visit to the department, during which she led two workshops for the graduate students, and c) the pairing of Dean’s Fellows with summer faculty mentors. International students currently comprise 27% of our graduate students, well above the Iowa Promise’s target of 9%. These students are from South Korea, Pakistan, and Ukraine, and 1 of them has earned a Fulbright.

¹ We only occasionally admit MA students, and many of the MA applicants are PhD applicants who have inadvertently checked the MA on the application, so it is sometimes difficult to accurately distinguish acceptance rates on the MA applications from those for the PhD.
The bulk of our funding for graduate students comes from the CLAS’s allocation of TA lines, which has ranged between 19 and 22 50% lines in recent years. This is insufficient for funding the 35-40 active graduate students who are eligible for funding in any year (e.g., students past their 5th year and those not in residence are ineligible). We have had some recent success supplementing these lines with a few TA lines in Rhetoric, an RA line for our Journeys Workshop from the SIF (Strategic Initiative Fund), a technology TA from Student Computing Fees, and a TA line for our growing Distance Learning course offerings. We are also hoping to secure at least partial TA support from International Program in exchange for offering the gateway course for their undergraduate major, Introduction to International Studies. And several faculty members participated in a summer grant-writing workshop in 2009 resulting in 3 NSF grant proposals, which, if successful, would provide some RA lines.

Nonetheless, we cannot currently fund all students who are eligible. For the first time, we have offered some students only partial funding (25% or 37.5% lines), and a few receive none. As a result, we have lost some current and prospective students to peer institutions (e.g., other Big Ten programs) and recently, even to some programs ranked below us (e.g., Kansas State). Many of our peer programs provide first-year students with fellowships, but with the demise of the block fund our first-year students serve as TAs or part-time TAs or arrive unfunded.

Program Outcomes Most of our graduate students are extremely successful in the program, receiving many honors and awards for their research and teaching activities. For 2004-2008, we are at or above the CLAS’s social sciences mean for the percentage of Presidential nominations awarded, of Presidential nominations accepted, of Ballard Seashore Fellow nominations awarded, and of Cleary nominations awarded. We are just below the CLAS social science means for nominees receiving the Dean’s Fellowships and their rates of accepting the award. Many of our students compete successfully for various sources of money for travel and research assistance on campus (e.g., Graduate Student Senate, International Programs, and the Graduate College). Since 1989, 17 of our doctoral students have received outstanding teaching assistant awards from the Council on Teaching. Many of our currently enrolled students have been recipients of disciplinary awards including the APSA’s minority fellowships, APSA travel grants, and best paper awards at regional and specialty conferences.

Our well-designed curriculum allows graduate students to complete their PhD in 5 years (although many take longer for professional and personal reasons). As a result, completion and time-to-degree (TTD) statistics for our department are generally quite good. For the 1996-2000 incoming classes, 78% of our students left with an MA or PhD, almost identical to the college’s social science average. If we look at only PhD completion, our rate is 30%, which is below the CLAS comparison group’s average (43%), but we are improving. For the 2001-2005 incoming classes, the completion rate is already at 31% (including one person who recently turned in her final thesis draft), and many students in the 2005 class will be finishing this year. We anticipate that our completion rate for 2001-2005 will top 50%. Much of this progress has been due to instituting informal departmental workshops in which the graduate students have frequent opportunities to present their work and solicit feedback. The median TTD for the 1996-2000 classes was at 5.9 years, almost exactly on the median for our CLAS peer group. We do not yet have the 2001-2005 data on TTD, but expect it to be slightly lower. A few students have completed the PhD in 4 year or are on track to do so.

While our PhDs secure employment in a wide variety of academic and non-academic settings, we especially value job placement in highly ranked research universities and teaching colleges. Our department has an outstanding placement record. In the last 7 years, all graduating students seeking academic positions found jobs. Our most recent placements include tenure-track positions at institutions such as the University of Exeter, Virginia Military Institute, Texas Tech, West Virginia University, the University of Kentucky (2 students), the University of Kansas (2 students), the University of Mississippi, the University of Florida, and San Diego State University. Also of note is that our graduates were ranked 3rd among graduates of all programs in terms of the number of publications per capita in 5 of the discipline’s leading journals (McCormick and Rice 2001). This publication success means that many of our graduates use their Iowa training to build distinguished research records that allow them to move to some of the nation’s top institutions. For example, we have alumni on the faculty at Stanford University, UCSD, University of Illinois, UCLA, Ohio State University, and Texas A&M University. In short, we prepare our students well for academic careers and they are almost always hired by excellent universities and colleges.

Program Characteristics Given our small faculty size (FTE 25, among the smallest in the Big Ten), the appropriate size for our doctoral program is about 40-50 total graduate students. A program of this size gives us a comfortable faculty/student ratio (2:1), smaller than most of our peer programs, and allows us to maintain sufficient class sizes for graduate seminars. Since the fall of 2001, our program size has steadily been in the target range. We
do, however, have heavy undergraduate teaching responsibilities that require substantial time from our faculty and graduate teaching assistants. Our department currently has about 670 undergraduate majors (6th largest in CLAS), for an average of almost 27 undergraduate students per faculty member. Serving this large number of majors with only two dozen faculty members and about the same number of TAs means large classes and substantial work loads.

Our faculty members devote a great deal of time and resources to mentoring graduate students. At least 15 of our current students are co-authoring papers with faculty and several students are also working on co-authored papers with their peers. In the past, collaborations like these have been extremely successful, producing publications in the top political science journals and helping many students land good academic jobs. As already noted, we have regular workshops that create interaction opportunities between faculty and students. We also hold a number of specialized workshops throughout the year for our students, such grant workshops, hands-on statistical methods workshops, and TA training. A number of other events foster additional interactions between students and faculty, including conferences and a visiting speaker series.

We have very little tangible data on our peer institutions in the Big Ten and elsewhere. What we do know is that our graduates go on to do more publishing per capita in the major disciplinary journals during their careers than the graduates of our peer institutions, which suggests that we do a good job training our students. We also know that our program is smaller than most other top programs, which is probably one reason we are able to offer such good training. We also know that most of our peers offer first year students fellowships, something we also used to do before the end of block funding.

Several opportunities for growth present themselves. First, we are considering selectively admitting 1 or 2 terminal MA students per year, focusing on those with concrete career goals for whom an Iowa MA makes good sense. We are experimenting with this initiative this year—admitting 1 who is interested in public health policy and intends to go to medical school, and 1 who is a submarine lieutenant with the South Korean navy and seeks an MA focusing on international politics—and will make an assessment when they finish. This might allow us to sustain a graduate program as funding difficulties yield smaller numbers of incoming PhD students. Another opportunity might be to seek students funded by their government’s military. Currently, we have 2 South Koreans and 1 American funded in this way. This may be a natural fit, given our department’s growing strength in the politics of international conflict. Last, the department runs the Hawkeye Poll, a phone survey that has been recently re-organized as a cooperative of graduate students supervised by faculty members. The Poll offers us a chance to offer unique hands-on training in survey research, with the potential of producing students with promising publication trajectories.

We would like to ask the Task Force to consider two issues related to coordinating graduate student support across different University sources. First, how can departments get earlier notice of funding from other University offices in these tough financial times? Our funding offers must be made by April 15 to be competitive, but economic uncertainties have made it difficult for the CLAS and the Graduate College to make all of their various funding determinations by that date. Second, how might the University help departments and the CLAS solve space problems? Currently, we barely have enough room for our TAs, so students on Presidential and Dean’s Fellowships in their non-assistantship years, Ballard Seashore recipients, students TAing in other departments, and RAs working on faculty grants often go without desks in Schaeffer Hall. Far from trivial, this situation undercuts the intellectual environment, treats writing dissertations and conducting research as second-class activities, and leads to inefficiencies and barriers to faculty pursuing joint work with graduate students and seeking outside funding. If the Provost’s office can help the CLAS to find more room for graduate students in close proximity to departmental faculty offices, it would greatly enhance the excellence in research and teaching missions.

**Summary and Conclusion** The Political Science graduate program has a long history of excellence. For over a half century the department has ranked among the nation’s best and our graduate training is one of the major reasons why. Comparative studies have consistently found that our graduates are among the top researchers in the field. We take great pride in these students and we are constantly striving to further improve our program so that the next generation of graduates will enjoy even greater success. At present, our program faces some serious challenges because of economic woes and the demise of the Graduate College’s Block Fund, but we are working hard to overcome these difficulties. With targeted strategic assistance from the CLAS and the Graduate College and our new efforts to secure additional internal and external funding, we are confident that this can be accomplished.