January 28, 2010

To: Dr. Sarah Larsen, Chair, Graduate Education Task Force  
Dr. John C. Keller, Dean, The Graduate College  
Fr: Dr. Ed Saunders, DEO School of Social Work  
Dr. Carol Coohey, Chair, School of Social Work Doctoral Studies Committee  
Re: Response to the Task Force Rating of the School of Social Work Doctoral Program

Thank you for the time and attention devoted to assessing the graduate programs and for recognizing our success in recruiting and retaining an ethnically diverse group of students, the majority of whom are women. Thank you also for recognizing the value of the seminars we provide to our students. We agree that doctoral students in other UI programs could benefit from these seminars, and we will collaborate with other departments and with the Graduate College to extend the reach of the seminars.

The Task Force identified room for improvement in our time-to-degree (TTD). We are actively working toward that end. Over the past year we revised our advancement and our appeals policies. All students are now reviewed formally twice a year, and, if students are not making adequate progress, the advancement policy is initiated and students are placed on probation. In addition, we have a mentoring guide for faculty and recently developed "Advisor-Advisee Guidelines" for students in an effort to further clarify our expectations for progress in years 1 - 4. These improvements are directed toward decreasing the TTD but should also improve completion rates. Please note that the TTD measure used by the UI puts the School of Social Work at a disadvantage vis-a-vis other programs because some of our students complete our MSW part-time (the terminal degree for clinical practice in social work) and then enter our PhD. That said, compared to our TTD for the first five years of the program, the TTD for the last five years has significantly improved; we are learning how to more efficiently navigate students through our program.

The Task Force report mentioned that "resources will be critical for future gains." We agree that we must do more to support our students. It should be noted, however, that the three years of support we provide is competitive within the field of social work, and exceeds many other fine social work doctoral programs. We will continue to actively pursue resources on behalf of our students and support them in their efforts to identify and apply for resources.

Two recent initiatives will help to increase our applicant pool and prepare culturally competent scholars: 1) the recently approved graduate certificate in multicultural competency and 2) the UI Aging Studies Program moved their administrative home to the School of Social Work. Both certificate programs underscore the need to prepare more students to work with an increasingly diverse population.

As we continue building a high quality doctoral program, we feel fortunate that the doctoral program benefits from the full support of the faculty and staff at the School of Social Work, and that our students have consistently secured academic and research positions upon graduation. Thank you for your suggestions on ways to further strengthen the program.