The Graduate Council reviewed the WASC Standards, Criteria for Review, and Guidelines, specifically 2.2b, related to a graduate academic culture: "Institutions offering graduate-level programs employ at least one full-time faculty member for each graduate program offered and demonstrate sufficient resources and structures to sustain these programs and create a graduate-level academic culture."

The following are questions related to a graduate-level academic culture and the responses by the Graduate Council.

1. **What is our definition of a graduate-level academic culture?**

   The dictionary definition of culture includes … "the action of developing the intellectual and moral faculties through education … enlightenment and excellence acquired by intellectual and aesthetic training… pattern of human behavior that transmits knowledge to succeeding generations; the set of shared values and practices that characterizes an institution…" (Merriam-Webster, 2008).

   The research literature defines graduate-level academic culture generally as a unique and distinct environment that differs from undergraduate education. The graduate environment is introduced and reinforced through rituals, traditions, norms, structures, mores, and symbols. At CSU Stanislaus, the Graduate Council discussed the characteristics of a graduate-level academic culture as defined in the literature and explored the extent to which we promote and inculcate the achievement of this culture:
   - Communicates clear expectations for high academic achievement as conveyed to prospective and current students.
   - Sets high expectations for all students to aspire and stretch for higher levels of cognitive development.
   - Focuses on research and scholarly contributions to the discipline; plans and structures ongoing opportunities for faculty and student collaboration on research and scholarly endeavors.
   - Insists that students take an active role in learning and assume a large share of the responsibility for their learning.
   - Expects students to explore diverse ideas and think critically about their own values and perspectives.
   - Champions infusion of diversity experiences, cross-cultural elements, and diverse perspectives into the graduate curriculum.
   - Displays an egalitarian, not authoritarian, approach toward instruction.
   - Expects intellectual passion from faculty and students.
   - Builds a community of scholars searching for new knowledge and quest for higher learning.
2. Exemplifies and transmits a core value system for the responsible conduct of research -- honesty, accuracy, efficiency, and objectivity. (Council of Graduate Schools, Best Practices in Graduate Education for the Responsible Conduct of Research, 2008.)

The challenge for CSU Stanislaus in promoting and sustaining a graduate culture is to do so within the context of a regional campus in which most students are part-time, commuting, and working adults.

2. Is our definition of a graduate-level academic culture evident in campus publications at the university and individual program levels?

Graduate-level academic culture is reflected in various university publications and those of individual graduate programs. For example, in the Graduate Catalog, the graduate School’s mission statement and learning goals reflect the emphasis on scholarly achievement:

Mission: “The Graduate School is committed to the development of scholarly leaders through outstanding graduate and postbaccalaureate programs that require students to demonstrate critical thinking and analysis, the ability to integrate theory and practice, and creativity in scholarly endeavors. Students emerge equipped to face real-life challenges and contribute to the body of knowledge in their fields of study. The Graduate School develops plans, assesses, improves, and administers the policies and procedures established by the Graduate Council, the chief governance body for graduate and postbaccalaureate programs.” (University Graduate Catalog, 2008/09)

Graduate Learning Goals: In 2002, the Graduate Council established six student learning goals for graduate students, each of which conveys expectations for high intellectual achievement commensurate with graduate education. Graduate students are expected to demonstrate:

- Advanced knowledge, skills, and values appropriate to their discipline.
- Ability to be creative, analytical, and critical thinkers.
- Ability to work as individual researchers/scholars as well as in collaboration with others in contributing to the scholarship of their disciplines, as appropriate.
- Relevant knowledge of the global perspectives appropriate to their discipline.
- Knowledge of new and various methods and technologies as appropriate to their discipline.
- Advanced oral and written communication skills, complemented as appropriate to the discipline, by the ability to access and analyze information from a myriad of primary, print, and technological sources.

The Graduate Council continually assesses the achievement of these goals (University Graduate Catalog, 2008/09).

3. What are examples of the specific ways in which graduate program faculty currently promote and sustain a graduate-level academic culture?
Graduate program faculty promote and sustain a graduate-level academic culture in many ways:

- Orientation programs for new graduate students with an emphasis placed on the unique and distinct culture from that of undergraduate education.
- Engagement of students by building strong student/student interactions and strong faculty/student interactions – in and outside of classroom through planned group work, social activities, collaborative learning opportunities, thesis support.
- Cohort model for building learning community.
- Rigorous academic standards are expected, communicated, and achieved -- readings, assignments, writing, research, and grading -- requiring high cognitive performance (analysis, synthesis, evaluation).
- Student learning goals are established and evaluated, with emphasis on critical, analytical, and creative thinking.
- Research, scholarship, and creative activity permeate course work.
- Co-creation of knowledge with students through collaborative research.
- Opportunities provided for students to participate in professional/disciplinary organizations.
- Mentoring students.
- Culminating activity (thesis, project, comprehensive examination) paramount for demonstrating academic achievement.
- Awards for outstanding student achievement in each graduate program.

4. What institutional structures do we have for supporting a graduate-level academic culture?

Institutional structures that have been put in place to support a graduate-level academic culture are the Graduate Council and the Graduate School. The Graduate Council as a formal governance committee of the Academic Senate provides essential leadership and advocacy for graduate education; establishes and evaluates graduate curriculum policies and procedures; and applies standards for course rigor/academic quality of course syllabi, program proposals, and academic program reviews. The structure of the Graduate Council allows for a coherence of effort and builds strong alliances among the graduate programs for a common good. It communicates – symbolically and operationally – to the external community the role of graduate studies in the university’s mission.

Likewise, the Graduate School is a comprehensive, integrative infrastructure in operational support for graduate education. At the heart of the Graduate School is a formal display (symbol) of the centrality of graduate education, giving visibility to the contributions of graduate students and supporting the faculty in its core value of rigorous advanced academic study. The Graduate School has a designated room for formal and informal meetings and special functions in support of graduate students and faculty.

Further institutional structures to promote high intellectual engagement of graduate students include the following: graduate-level library resources, subscriptions to
research databases, graduate student research funds, graduate student orientations, department graduation celebrations, graduate student awards, recognition at commencement ceremonies, scholastic honor societies, and increases in financial support systems.

Other key offices for supporting graduate culture include the Offices of the Deans of the six colleges and of Library Services, the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, the Office of Assessment and Quality Assurance, and the Office of Institutional Research.

5. **What methods do we use to evaluate/assess a graduate-level academic culture?**

In 1997 the Graduate Council began to evaluate graduate education by developing and implementing a graduate assessment plan. This plan complemented the assessment conducted by each of the graduate programs, taking a holistic view of graduate education at CSU Stanislaus. This plan was updated in 2002 and again in 2008. Various methods are used, some of which contain elements that provide evaluative information about graduate-level academic culture. These methods and overall findings related to graduate culture are discussed by the Graduate Council and reported in the annual *Graduate Assessment Report*.

6. **What are additional ideas for enhancing a graduate-level academic culture at the program and/or institutional levels?**

   **Fee Waivers and Graduate Assistantships**
   - Increase the number of fully funded fee waivers.
   - Increase internal and extra-mural funding for paid graduate assistantships.

   **Diversity**
   - Explore strategies for promoting a more inclusive graduate community (e.g., possibly a grant proposal to the Council of Graduate Schools).

   **Services**
   - Increase the number of services in evenings (especially food services).

   **Library Collections and Facilities**
   - Increase funding for library collections; add private study carrels in library for graduate students.

   **Recognition/Awards**
   - Conduct graduate hooding ceremony as part of graduation ceremonies or commencement celebrations.
   - Establish awards for outstanding theses, project, and comprehensive examinations for each program (and overall).

7. **What barriers do we put up that prevent a graduate-level academic culture?**
Fiscal constraints and student profile (primarily part-time graduate students/working professionals) are the primary elements that require increased creativity for creating and sustaining a graduate culture.

For Continued Discussion by the Graduate Council

8. How much of the responsibility for creating/sustaining a graduate culture is descended to a particular program or the Graduate School as a whole?

9. What are effective strategies for the active involvement of graduate students in departmental governance structures and the assessment of program quality?

10. Do the methods used to sustain a graduate culture within the individual graduate programs include consideration of demographic characteristics of students (especially those historically underrepresented by higher education) that may impact student success?

11. Do sub-populations of graduate students experience and benefit from graduate-level academic culture in the same way?

12. Does the research environment place a demonstrated value on the responsible and ethical conduct of research? How is this evidenced in the university’s communications, policies, procedures, and response to any deviations?

13. What applications does the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) have for graduate education?

NSSE’s conceptual framework captures important student behaviors and institutional factors related to collegiate student achievement. While designed for baccalaureate education, NSSE’s five cluster categories/benchmarks of effective educational practice may be helpful for graduate education. Quotes below are extracted from NSSE, 2009:

* **Academic Challenge** – “Challenging intellectual and creative work is central to student learning and collegiate quality… emphasizing the importance of academic achievement and setting high expectations for student performance.”

* **Active and Collaborative Learning** – “Students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and are asked to think about and apply… learning in different settings. Collaboration with others in solving problems or mastering difficult materials…”

* **Student-faculty Interaction** – “Students see first-hand how experts think about and solve … problems by interacting with faculty… inside and outside classroom… teachers become role models, mentors, and guides…”

* **Enriching Educational Experiences** -- “Students perform better and are more satisfied at colleges that are committed to their success and cultivate positive working and social relations among different groups on campus.”
* Supportive Campus Environment – "Complementary learning opportunities inside and outside classroom augment the academic program. Experiencing diversity teaches students about themselves and other cultures...technology facilitates learning and promotes collaboration... internships, community service...provide students with opportunities to synthesize, integrate, and apply their knowledge...."