Five UA doctoral programs rank high in national survey

Michelle Lepianka Carter | Tuscaloosa News
University of Alabama doctoral student Jonathan Williamson makes a vanadyl sulfate solution in the Street Lab at Shelby Hall on Tuesday. Williamson is working on an analytical chemistry degree.
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TUSCALOOSA | Five doctoral programs at the University of Alabama held up well compared with similar programs at most of the nation's top universities, according to a ranking of doctoral programs released Tuesday.

UA's doctoral programs in mass communication, chemistry, mechanical engineering, physics and psychology all landed in the top half of similar programs in a complicated grouping of institutions published by the National Research Council, a nonprofit organization that advises the government on science, engineering and health through the U.S. National Academies.
All five placed in the top half of a ranking of their peers.

"We knew these were strong programs going in, but we didn't know how this was all going to play out," said David Franko, dean of UA's graduate school.

The rankings should help with graduate student recruitment, he said.

"People don't just show up on your doorstep. We've got to recruit them," Franko said. "People come for high quality, so any quality indicators you can point to will help."

The NRC published a ranking of doctoral programs once in 1982 and again in 1995, and this year's report was highly anticipated within higher education. The report looks at more than 5,000 doctoral programs in 62 fields at 212 institutions, sorting programs by discipline.

For UA, 18 of 42 doctoral programs were included in the study since NRC did not rank education and business among other disciplines.

Rather than ranking institutions in numerical order, the NRC reported a range of spots for each program in two different lists. One list ranks programs compared to what professors in the field believe the best program should look like. The other list ranks programs compared to what professors identified as the top institutions in the field.

The move was praised by many within the academic community because it forces an examination of the underlying data that make up a ranking, but makes it purposefully hard to draw a quick judgment of a school from the final tally.

"In the past, it was all about bragging rights," Franko said. "Now, it's about looking at a number of different indicators important to different audiences."

For Franko, the good news in the NRC report is that 12 UA programs performed well on the portion of the ranking derived from data and surveys supplied by the institutions, grouped into three broad categories of research activity, student support and outcome and academic diversity.

"If I were a student, that's the data I would look at," he said.

Of the five UA programs that ranked in the top half of their peers, psychology likely ranks the highest. Judged against what professors want in a program, UA's psychology program ranks between 67th and 121st out of 236 programs. Ranked against the programs professors said were at the top, UA's program ranked between 64th and 130th.

Other high ranking programs included:

- Chemistry ranked between 43-104 against ideal programs and 46-105 against supposed best programs, out of 178.
Communication ranked between 30-59 against ideal programs and 23-80 against supposed best programs, out of 83.

Mechanical engineering ranked between 52-104 against ideal programs and 33-79 against supposed best programs out of 127.

Physics ranked between 56-114 against ideal programs and 86-140 against supposed best programs out of 161.

Besides those, biological sciences, chemical engineering, civil and environmental engineering, computer science, English, political science, the joint materials science program with UA at Birmingham and UA in Huntsville and the joint materials/metallurgical engineering program with UAB ranked in the middle range of their peers.

Even for the lower ranking disciplines such as electrical and computer engineering, Franko said the rankings are not bad marks since so few institutions qualified to be ranked in each discipline.

“It means different things to different people at different institutions,” he said.

Plus, the data in the ranking come from 2006, and UA and its graduate programs have experienced tremendous growth in four years.

“We are a quantum level better research and doctoral institution than when that data was collected,” he said.

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**UA’s High Ranking Doctoral Programs**

IN THE TOP HALF

Mass communications

Chemistry

Mechanical engineering

Physics

Psychology

IN THE MIDDLE RANGE

Biological sciences

Chemical engineering
Civil and environmental engineering

Computer science

English

Political science

Joint materials science program with UAB and UAH

Joint materials/metallurgical engineering program with UAB