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THE ROLE OF GRADUATE STUDENTS IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN NATURAL RESOURCES: A VIEW FROM WITHIN

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ABSTRACT: Concern has recently arisen on the changing role graduate students play in natural resources education at the university level. For example, there is the perception that an M.S. degree is little more than a preliminary step towards a Ph.D., rather than having its own quantifiable merits. Questions have also been raised about the degree of professionalism exhibited by graduate students, the expectations faculty have of students and the expectations students have of faculty.

We hope to address concerns we as doctoral students in the Department of Forest Resources at Utah State University have regarding our academic and professional environment. With this as a context for discussion, we plan to evaluate possible changes to be made to the educational surroundings to create an environment more conducive to academic and intellectual intercourse between graduate students, faculty and other professionals. The graduate students of today are the faculty and resource/policy managers of tomorrow, so their academic success and satisfaction is essential to the success of future generations.

A re-evaluation of the roles graduate students play within educational constructs may be in order. We feel that graduate students should be more involved in the decisions affecting their education, the personal and professional development of undergraduate students and other graduate students and demonstrate greater interest in treating graduate work more professionally. In addition, we believe faculty should show more leadership in developing a dynamic and challenging graduate curriculum, should facilitate greater contacts with other students across disciplines and provide an environment conducive to the professional development of graduate students.

Encouraging and sustaining social and academic interactions is the responsibility of all members of the department. Without such interactions a fundamental aspect of graduate education and personal development is sorely lacking. This deficiency could have cascading detrimental effects, including less effective natural resource and policy decisions, communication failures and misunderstandings and, potentially, a disintegration of our academic system. We hope the themes arising from our presentation will be further developed at a later round-table discussion in this conference.