

Enriching the culture, Educating the next generation

An interview with Andrew J. Szeri, Dean of the Graduate Division

By Lisa Harrington

Andrew Szeri savors his walk to work each day, winding through the scenic neighborhoods of Berkeley. He says the journey to Sproul Hall is peaceful and provides time to think before he dives into the emails and voicemails that await him.

A professor of mechanical engineering, Szeri has served the Graduate Division since 2005. As an associate dean, he led the Berkeley campus in collecting data for the upcoming national rankings of graduate programs, a peer review conducted once a decade by the National Research Council. (The new report is expected to be released in fall 2008.) He also participated in fundraising efforts, financial planning, and measures to ensure the security of graduate student records.

When Szeri was appointed Graduate Dean last year, Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost George W. Breslauer, who oversees the Graduate Division, noted that “Andrew Szeri has a distinguished career of engagement on issues surrounding graduate education, and interest in the welfare of graduate students. He has an impressive ability to build consensus and to deal effectively with delicate issues, and has a reputation for being an excellent listener who can respond quickly and cogently to issues in graduate education.”

Szeri's leadership on campus has involved various positions in the Academic Senate's Graduate Council, where he has served as chair and on key committees dealing with student services, enrollment balance, and graduate-student-instructor affairs. As Graduate Dean, he succeeds Mary Ann Mason, who stepped down in July 2007.

A specialist in fluid dynamics, Szeri will continue his research while serving as Dean. He currently guides the graduate work of seven doctoral students in mechanical engineering. Together they are conducting research that he hopes will lead to improvements in the medical treatment of patients with epilepsy, the prevention of HIV transmission, and several other areas.

A man of many interests, Szeri was born in England and spent time as a child living in Chile before his family moved to the United States. He earned his bachelor's degree at the University of Pittsburgh and his Ph.D. at Cornell. In his spare time, he enjoys hiking in the mountains, sailing on the Bay, and, on occasion, playing the ukulele.

Over the past few months, Szeri has met with deans on campus to assess student support gaps, and with focus groups of students to better plan for needed resources and services. He has also crisscrossed the globe to meet with deans of comparable graduate schools, policymakers, foundations, alumni, and friends of the University, trips he often shares in *eGrad*, the Graduate Division's electronic newsletter.

His own path to an academic career was, in some respects, following in the footsteps of his father, a professor (now emeritus) at the University of Delaware. “I find it very satisfying to help people achieve their goals,” says Szeri, who adds, “It's inspiring to me.”



Dick Coriën photo

Andrew J. Szeri, Dean of the Graduate Division

In February, he talked about his initial priorities as Dean.

Q: During your first year as Dean, you've met with faculty and graduate students across the campus. What have you learned about graduate education at Berkeley?

A: I've learned that there is a very high standard of excellence in graduate programs, from the tiniest of majors, like medical anthropology, to the largest departments, like molecular and cell biology. There's tremendous evidence in the number of graduate students who compete successfully for NSF fellowships, Fulbrights, and other major external awards and those who do well in our own campus fellowship competition.

Q: Let's talk about graduate students. Professor Y. T. Lee, who earned his Ph.D. from Berkeley in 1965 and later won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry, said, “I came to Berkeley as a graduate student to work with the world's greatest faculty. I came back to Berkeley as a professor to work with the world's greatest graduate students.” Are Berkeley's students unique?

A: Well, I've had experience with graduate

students at Cornell, Caltech, UC Santa Barbara and UC Irvine. I'd have to say that every graduate student I've met at Berkeley wants to change the world. They usually like to tell me why within seconds of meeting! That keen motivation sets Berkeley students apart.

Q: As Dean and the chief advocate for graduate students, what do you hope to achieve?

A: My primary goal is to try to diversify the sources of funding for graduate student support. The proposed budget cuts are a reinforcement of this goal — we really need to get out of the business of relying on the state for a great majority of funding for graduate students. For this reason, I've been involved in several foundation proposals, some of which I'm happy to say already were successful.

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My second priority is to encourage mentorship at all levels. For example, this fall for the first time we held a reception and orientation for faculty members who are new to the campus, to introduce them to the Graduate Division and teach them what there is to know about services available, to help them work with graduate students. I've also been involved in generating a proposal for mentorship of undergraduate research by graduate students, and I'm particularly excited about that.

Q: Over the past year, several gifts from foundations have included provisions for graduate education. Tell us about the Hewlett Foundation's \$113 million gift.

A: The Hewlett gift provides matching funds for the establishment of 100 faculty chairs. These will be uniformly distributed around campus. Most important is that the payout of the chair endowments will support graduate students in the chair-holder's discipline directly. This is a concrete acknowledgement of the synergism that exists at the foundation of Berkeley's excellence: great professors are attracted by great students. Great students are attracted by great faculty members. Professor Lee said it best!

Q: One of the newest gifts, \$6 million, comes from the Mellon Foundation. What will this mean for Berkeley?

A: The Mellon gift is a wonderful acknowledgment of our superb humanities doctoral programs. This gift establishes an endowment, which will be used to 'top off' the multi-year fellowships that humanities applicants win in our campus-wide fellowship competition. The fellowship recipients will receive stipends that are competitive with the best offered anywhere. After the initial ramp-up, there will be some 50 students supported in this way at any one time — forever, as this is an endowment. This is a terrific way to help recruit the best students in the humanities.

Q: How are private gifts making a difference?

A: Private endowments fund a large number of individual awards — including fellowships — and support about 30 percent of the funds we distribute to graduate programs around campus for graduate student support. Without private funds, Berkeley would simply not be the same place.

Q: Last year's Named Fund Initiative did quite a bit to boost fellowship support. Were you surprised by the large number of faculty who participated? What does it tell you about the potential for the Chancellor's Challenge, a program modeled on the NFI?

A: Through the NFI and the Chancellor's Challenge we have raised about \$4 million in new endowments for graduate fel-

lowships. As for potential, we made a calculation that if every tenured professor set up the minimum-sized named fund devoted to graduate student support, the campus would gain \$27 million in endowment — which is the size of the graduate fellowships part of the Hewlett gift! Of course, not everyone is in a position to give; balancing that, some are able to give more than the minimum.

Moreover, the pool of eligible donors in the Chancellor's Challenge includes not only current and retired faculty, but also staff and their spouses or partners. In this program, even gifts by current students are eligible. It's encouraging to see the campus community step forward to support what they truly believe in.

Q: You established a fund for international students. Getting at motivation, tell us about your own experience working with international graduate students.

A: Recently in my own research group I've had the pleasure of working with French, Korean, and Swedish students. They bring a wonderful richness to the group, sharing what they've learned during their academic preparation in different cultures. Domestic students benefit greatly from that. The mixing helps with the development of 'intercultural competence' about which Chancellor Birgeneau speaks so eloquently.

As for my fund, I am aware that international students are sometimes admitted and offered financial support, but have no resources to travel to Berkeley to start their studies. I saw that my own modest graduate student support fund could make a difference there, one student at a time.

Q: How have graduate students inspired your teaching and research?

A: The many ways in which graduate students contribute to the excellence of Berkeley, to the research and teaching, are immeasurable. My own graduate students are constantly pulling me into new fields. I do research into mesoscale models of the human cerebral cortex thanks to a couple of doctoral students whose dissertations I advised. I collaborate with researchers in the school of public health on social acceptability considerations of our research into anti-HIV microbicides — again because of a doctoral student who pulled me in that direction. Without such inspiring graduate students, I wouldn't have such interesting ways to engage in research.

Q: Why is graduate education so important to California?

A: Because graduate alumni enrich the culture, they support the social fabric of the state, educate the next generation, and make the discoveries that are the basis of new industries. We need all of those things to thrive.

Q: What makes Berkeley's programs so highly competitive with top private universities? For instance, why do students who get offers from Princeton, Harvard, and Yale decide to come to Berkeley?

A: I think it's the quality of the scholarship, the comprehensive excellence in research across the campus, the warm social climate of shared purpose — these are all aspects of Berkeley's attractiveness.

We do very well in our competition for the best students. When we offer a student who triumphs in the campus-wide fellowship competition one of our most competitive multi-year fellowships, that student accepts nearly 60 percent of the time. That's terrific, considering that the best students often have multiple offers. So we do find success when we have the resources. What will determine the long term prospects for the future of many distinguished graduate programs at Berkeley is: how many graduate fellowships of this kind will we be in a position to offer?

Q: Berkeley came out on top in the last survey by the National Research Council in 1995. Tell us about the soon-to-be-released NRC survey. And, what are your thoughts, in general, about rankings?

A: In the most recent round of the NRC Survey of Doctoral Programs, I was charged with organizing the data collection



Stepping up: The associate graduate deans (from top, left to right) Carlos Fernandez-Pello, Joseph J. Duggan, and Susan J. Muller join Dean Andrew J. Szeri on the steps of the Valley Life Sciences Building.

Peg Skorpiński photo

effort. I'm delighted to say our faculty rose to the challenge of answering their online surveys in great numbers. This was crucial because the NRC has significantly changed the way rankings will be done this time around; they will be based on quantitative measures of doctoral program quality and only indirectly on assessments of reputation.

In general, I think there's too much emphasis by prospective students on the fine detail in rankings. Rather than obsess over whether to attend a department receiving a ranking of 97 or 96 percent in *U.S. News & World Report*, I think it would be far more productive to look at the rankings of other programs they will likely depend on indirectly at the same institution. This is a better reflection of how students engage in graduate study now.

Q: Diversity is an important issue at the graduate level. What efforts are there to increase the number of underrepresented students?

A: Recent analysis shows that when underrepresented minority students apply to Berkeley for graduate study, they gain admission and accept offers of admission in the same proportion as majority students. That's excellent, as it shows where we need to concentrate our efforts: on increasing the numbers of high quality applicants.

For this reason, I've been working with the new Vice Chancellor for Equity & Inclusion, Gibor Basri, and Vice Provost Christina Maslach on a proposal for a large, structured undergraduate research program. In the program, doctoral students advanced to candidacy for the Ph.D. will mentor undergraduate research interns. Through the program, undergraduates will have a window into the life of a graduate student and, we hope, will see the way to graduate school as open and clear.

Q: If a terrific candidate for admission were torn between Berkeley and another first-rate graduate school, and you had only a few minutes to convince him or her to enroll here, what would you say?

A: I would say it's the quality of the research and teaching in every field at Berkeley that is its greatest asset. That means you can learn what you need to of other subjects to enrich your own research. You can't find that at universities that are best in just a handful of disciplines.