

## Promising Practices

### Mentoring and Advising

Success in achieving a PhD depends upon a close and effective working relationship with one's advisor and mentor. And yet, while virtually every doctoral student has a research advisor, survey data from the PhD Completion Project and other studies show that not every student has access in their doctoral program to someone they consider a mentor [1].

Though mentoring is often cited as among the most influential factors on degree completion, that influence is difficult to assess. Student differences in cultural background and field, or discipline, may result in differing perceptions of effective mentoring. For some students, the mentoring that is valued most may be guidance on dissertation research; for others, it may be advice about how to navigate a career path after completing the degree; and for others, it may mean providing support and counsel when students are experiencing tough times, including such common obstacles as writer's block, complications in the relationship with one's research advisor or committee, or discouraging experiences on an academic job market.

Mentoring is also an area that can pose unique challenges to universities seeking to implement program-level or university-wide improvements. For example, while research supervision is a formal responsibility of graduate faculty, and is recognized as such within the administrative structure and tenure and promotion processes for faculty career advancement, often universities do not have similar formal structures to require and encourage "mentoring," which is sometimes thought of as going above and beyond the call of research supervision duties [2]. Indeed, some faculty may cling to notions that the qualities of good mentoring are either inborn character traits or else habits that are best acquired and instilled informally (e.g. by example) rather than through professional development.

Because mentoring is practiced and valued unevenly in doctoral programs, and because student expectations of mentors differ, it is not surprising that students report having unequal access to quality mentors as they pursue their PhDs. Some students describe their having access to good mentors in terms of "good luck" [3], by contrast to access to their research advisors which is an expectation and understood to be required for degree completion. Some students may have an advisor who effectively doubles as a good mentor, while others may find a faculty member aside from their advisor who can provide additional guidance on research, career, and other topics. Students also report receiving valuable mentoring from their peers in the program as well as from persons outside their department.

Because effective mentoring of PhD students takes such different forms, the promising practices that universities have developed as participants in the PhD Completion Project are varied. Nevertheless, there are themes that cut across these activities, including: improvements in the structures of support between research advisors and doctoral candidates; encouraging more collective responsibility within the

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program for the success of doctoral candidates; increased clarity and transparency about expectations; and enhancing conflict management processes when conflicts arise between students and advisors.

Improvements in mentoring outnumber improvements in any other area of activity and innovation in the PhD Completion Project. Overall, the activities below represent the recognition of participating universities that improvements in the quality, frequency, and uniformity of interaction between students and program faculty are among the most promising steps that programs and universities can undertake to increase PhD completion.

#### References

[1] Council of Graduate Schools. [2004]. Ph.D. Completion and Attrition: Numbers, Leadership, and Next Steps, Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools summarizes the research literature on doctoral attrition and completion that has informed this project. For a full bibliography, including important contributions published since 2004, see [www.phdcompletion.org/resources](http://www.phdcompletion.org/resources).

[2] King, M. [2003] On the Right Track: A Manual for Research Mentors. Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools.

[3] Walker, G; C. Golde; L. Jones, A.C. Bueschel, P. Hutchings. [forthcoming 2008]. The Formation of Scholars: Rethinking Doctoral Education for the Twenty-First Century. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

#### *Promising Practices*

Promising practices identified by participating universities in the area of mentoring and advising include:

#### **Orientation**

#### **The Development or Revision of Graduate Student Handbooks**

#### **The Development of Online Student Progress Mechanisms**

#### **Regularity and Uniformity of Progress Review**

#### **Early Advising**

#### **Transparency about Expectations and Requirements**

#### **Mentor/Advisor Selection and Quality**

#### **Professional Development**

#### **Dissertation Stage**

#### **Orientation**

- Initiate comprehensive orientation program
- Review and revise current department/program new student orientation activities to promote collaboration with the Office of Graduate Studies and continue orientation activities throughout the first year
- Design and pilot test a three-to-five day summer program aimed at preparing incoming underrepresented doctoral students for graduate study and their programs
- Graduate Student Information Fair
- Continue workshop series to define requirements and reinforce information critical to degree outcomes
- Review and revamp orientation programs based on feedback from evaluations and exit interviews

#### **The Development or Revision of Graduate Student Handbooks**

- ...for the university that address academic, social, and orientation needs

- ...for each program that convey information that is program-specific
- ...for various stages of the PhD process, e.g. first-year doctoral student handbook

### **The Development of Online Student Progress Mechanisms**

- Online milestone tracking systems, “dissertation checklists,” electronic portfolios, and annual progress report systems that integrate graduate school records, student input, and evaluative comments from faculty

Such online mechanisms create a framework for greater communication between the graduate school, faculty, and students on student progress in meeting the goals set each year and clarification of goals for the following year. These online resources may also enhance identification of potentially critical times when intervention or communication is needed. Such systems have been tailored to include coursework, annual reviews, teaching materials, thesis proposals, research products, contact information for prospective employers, and file sharing and chat rooms that promote communication with peers and advisors.

### **Regularity and Uniformity of Progress Review**

- Implement regular advisor/advisee meetings and progress reports
- Encourage programs to set up annual student performance review systems
- Develop “best practices” for tracking student progress in relation to the amount and type of student financial aid
- Institute a modified report on students’ plans for the remainder of the academic year to be completed immediately upon their advancement to candidacy
- Develop a post-admissions grid that describes each newly admitted student according to a set of criteria pertinent to graduate school persistence including four common elements across all programs and up to two program-specific predictors

### **Early Advising**

- Require each first-year student to have an advisor or advisory structure; conduct regular evaluations of progress
- Require faculty advisors to be on campus during advisees’ first-year as graduate students
- Encourage the participation of graduate students of color and women in the “Bouchet Fellows”
- Initiate the “Navigating the System” seminar program to address the theme of inclusion and diversity
- Establish administrative structures for the early identification of, and interventions aimed at retaining, “at-risk” students
- Create ombud position to support first-year students

### **Transparency about Expectations and Requirements**

- Develop and review the content of departmental web sites
- Clearly articulate program expectations/academic milestones, requiring completion of all pre-dissertation milestones before year 4
- “Thesis Deposit Workshop” (for students submitting master’s theses)

## **Mentor/Advisor Selection and Quality**

- Monitor the process of advisor/mentor selection, especially for minorities and women
- Increase faculty contact with students
- Implement a compact that outlines the expectations for students and for their advisors
- Hold mentoring and graduate student supervision workshops for faculty, including discussion of the differences between mentoring and advising
- Host workshops and other programming on building excellent mentoring relationships for faculty and students
- Evaluate departmental and graduate school-based TA training and plan for implementation of new programs and resources in the graduate school as needed
- Share information about “Mentornet,” an award-winning national program that uses the internet to link mentors and mentees, to complement university’s existing supplemental campus-wide mentoring
- Collaborate with the Center for Teaching and Learning to enhance faculty programming on mentoring.
- Find ways to “pair” mentors so junior professors can work with senior professors who are successfully mentoring students
- Facilitate discussions on mutual expectations for teaching and mentoring with graduate students and faculty in years 1 and 3
- Continue to enhance mentoring materials
- Continue the dean’s address on mentoring graduate students at the annual provost’s orientation for new faculty
- Reward faculty for their performance as outstanding student mentors
- Establish peer mentoring programs for new students, especially women and underrepresented groups
- Develop alumni mentor opportunities
- Emphasize mentoring and community building programs
- Problem-solving services

## **Professional Development**

- Analyze career and professional development needs of graduate students
- Increase the number of students participating in the Preparing the Professoriate (PTP) program
- Enhance the “[Griffiths Leadership Society](#)” that links prominent professional and graduate women with current doctoral students
- Expand a “Professional Development Workshop” series for graduate and postdoctoral students to incorporate the specific norms of the research disciplines; to clarify processes and procedures for students advancing from candidacy to degree; and to illuminate support, networking, and mentoring opportunities available to graduate students
- Hold a “Grants and Fellowships Proposal” Workshop
- Host “Nonacademic & Academic Job Search” workshops and resources
- Develop a Graduate Writing Consultants (GWC) program that trains graduate assistants to help students in their discipline improve their writing skills
- Hold open “crosstalk” meetings for graduate students in OPT-ED (NSF sponsored Minority Graduate Education programs)
- Launch annual symposium on “Succeeding in Graduate School and Achieving a Faculty Career”

- Enhance the Professional Development Learning Community (PDLC) activities and resources
- Communicate and train faculty and staff on a Professional Development Learning Community services and resources
- Develop Graduate Student Leadership Forum
- Assess career and professional development programs and looking at the transferability of skills and knowledge across disciplines
- Consolidate teaching preparation and create cross-disciplinary teaching and learning communities

## **Dissertation Stage**

- Work with the graduate writing consultant to craft writing programs
- Host dissertation “Boot Camps,” residencies, and retreats to provide students with focused activities that may include up to a week-long residential immersion experiences to assist their progress and practical strategies for completing their dissertation
- Provide workshops for students to help them get the most out of the dissertation advising process, including selecting a dissertation advisor, configuring a committee, and related topics
- Expand counseling groups that deal with general issues and issues specific to dissertation completion
- Develop dissertation writing institutes, e.g. in collaboration with university-wide writing institutes, to provide “intervention” assistance to students in need
- Discuss characteristics of outstanding dissertations to inform students about what is expected and required
- Provide departmental and university-level recognition for one or two “superior” dissertations each year
- Promote “Quality Circle Reviews” among four dissertation students external and internal to the candidate’s field who meet with the candidate to review and strengthen the candidate’s dissertation work
- Enhance writing consultancy through additional writing workshops and one-to-one support