

The Pennsylvania State University Department of
Communication Arts and Sciences
Advising and Mentoring Plan
for Graduate Students
2011

The provisions of this document are an outgrowth of an initiative relating to the involvement of the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences at The Pennsylvania State University in The Council of Graduate Schools Ph.D. Completion Project (2007 -2010). The document presents an approach to, as opposed to a policy governing, the advising and mentoring of graduate students and having the express purpose of contributing to the successful completion of their Ph. D. programs.

Background

In Fall 2009, the Department of Communication Arts and Science received a small grant from the Graduate School's Council of Graduate Schools Ph.D. Completion Project funds to develop an advising and mentoring plan for its graduate students, which was to be the final component in a three-pronged initiative to improve its performance in the contributing to the achievement of the University's diversity goals with regard to graduate education. The other two components of the initiative involved the cultivation of pipeline relationships with institutions having larger than average numbers of students from historically underrepresented populations and new approaches to the recruitment and retention of such students for doctoral-level study.

The plan for advising and mentoring that emerged is the product of nearly a year's effort by members of the Graduate Committee to develop and an approach to the dual activities of interest that would contribute to the goal of the Ph.D. Completion Project. The Committee's consideration was informed by input from two external consultants (Dawna Ballard, Associate Professor of Communication Studies at the University Texas, and Leroy Dorsey, Associate Professor of Communication at Texas A& M University) and a research specialist in academic advising and mentoring (Kimberly Griffin, Assistant Professor of Higher Education at The Pennsylvania State University). All three individuals have considerable experience with graduate students from historically underrepresented populations.

Efforts to identify formal advising and mentoring plans from peer institutions yielded no result, but a document from The University of Minnesota to which the Committee had access and focusing on best practices in mentoring was of use. Handbook materials outlining expectations of graduate students at Michigan State University also were of help. Further helpful is a list of advising and mentoring practices posted by the Ohio State Graduate School in 2007 (see <http://www.gradsch.ohio-state.edu/DEPO/PDF/MentoringAdvisingGradStudents.pdf>) that ostensibly contribute to productive working relationships of members of the Graduate Faculty and graduate students. Finally, the Council of Graduate Schools' discussion of the importance of mentoring as a key to Ph.D. completion (see <http://www.phdcompletion.org/promising/mentoring.asp>) and its perceived relative absence among many graduate students served as a foundation for some of the ideas presented herein.

Fundamental Principles

Underlying the advising and mentoring plan that follows are several principles that give coherence to the practices that members of the Graduate Committee feel will both improve the quality

of advising graduate students in Communication Arts and Sciences receive and give greater prominence to mentoring as an aspect of the graduate-student experience.

1. Effective advising and mentoring are both important contributors to the effective academic performance of graduate students.
2. Adopting different approaches for groups of students differing in their demographic profiles is inadvisable, in that the implicit message can be that some are in much greater need of advising and mentoring than others, when, in fact, within-group variability may be much greater than variation across groups.
3. Advising and mentoring are conceptually distinct activities. Whereas advising pertains to assistance that a member of the faculty provides to a graduate student with the aim of assuring that the student satisfies his or her program and degree requirements, as well as develops the competencies necessary to do so, mentoring focuses more centrally on acculturation of the protégé to the discipline, related aspects of professional development, and to some extent constructively coping with the rigors of academic life.
4. Mentoring is not a substitute for psychological counseling; provision of that is available via a separate set of services Penn State makes available to its graduate students.
5. Although one can, and often does in fact, act as both faculty adviser and mentor to the same graduate student(s), there is no necessary reason that a single individual should or must enact both roles, nor does such a presumption appear to have any intellectual warrant.
6. Having a faculty adviser is a requirement for a graduate student. Having a mentor is not. Members of the faculty should avoid giving prospective protégés the impression that a mentor is obligatory if they are to progress in pursuit of their degree objectives. A mentoring relationship, should one develop, should be informal, as well as mutually voluntary.
7. Being a protégé to more than one faculty mentor is both an understandable circumstance in the academic life of a graduate student, inasmuch as different mentors can contribute more effectively to some aspects of a graduate student's acculturation and professional development, if not ability to cope, than to others. If having more than one mentor can be of value to a graduate student's acculturation, professional development, and ability to cope with academic life, it is person's best interests to do so.

Elements of the CAS Advising and Mentoring Plan

Since this document has as its central concern the ways in which both advising and mentoring can aid in graduate students' successful completion of Ph.D. programs, and since the two forms of activity differ in important respects, it addresses approaches to each separately.

Advising

The formal procedures for identifying an adviser receive adequate attention in the *Graduate Handbook* for the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences (see <http://cas.la.psu.edu/grad/advising.htm>). In addition, once the student has selected a permanent

adviser, the chronology for moving through either the M.A. or Ph.D. Program is explicit in the *Handbook* and the *Graduate School Bulletin*. Problems in completion traceable to advising, therefore, would appear not to be procedural in nature. When such problems arise, they are apt to have more to do with how advisers discharge their responsibilities in respect to policies and related procedures. The following practices would be desirable for advisers to observe consistently.

1. Although it is appropriate to let new students know of one's interests and scholarly agenda, prospective advisers should refrain from aggressive recruitment and encouragement of new graduate students to select them as advisers and to supervise their programs of study. This places the graduate student in an awkward position and could result in his or her pursuing a line of work in which the person may not be interested, that he or she is not equipped to undertake, and that might eventuate in a decision to discontinue graduate study. Advisees who are interested in working with members of the faculty should explicitly indicate that and initiate the discussion
2. Members of the faculty serving as academic advisers need to become familiar with all Departmental, College, and Graduate School policies applicable to one's progress toward a graduate degree objective. Misadvising a graduate student as a result of a lack of familiarity with relevant policies and procedures is at best an inconvenience to others and can affect the advisee's progress in ways that can prove to be costly both in a material and psychological sense. By the same token, graduate students need to become familiar with the policies applicable to one's progress toward a graduate degree objective. The graduate degree is the objective of an advisee, and he or she should feel ownership for progress and success. In this connection, they should take responsibility for identifying courses in other academic units that may be applicable to their specific academic interests, as well as internally, rather than rely on the adviser to specify the relevant coursework.
3. Academic advising should be between the designated adviser and advisee, not between the advisee and other members of the Faculty and/or fellow graduate students serving as surrogate advisers, either presumptively or at a graduate student's request. The Graduate Officer is available to advisers and advisees to interpret and, where appropriate, administer the policies of the graduate program.
4. Graduate students are assigned "temporary" advisers in their first semester in residence. Even though the temporary adviser may become the permanent adviser, both the temporary adviser and graduate student should understand that the pairing is not intended to persist indefinitely. Should a graduate student elect to work with a different permanent adviser, this is completely acceptable. The temporary adviser should assume responsibility for explaining to the advisee that he or she is at liberty to ask someone else to serve as the permanent adviser and that it would be good to talk with prospective permanent advisers as part of the process. Graduate students and prospective advisers alike need to understand that no member of the faculty probably can or should advise every student who may wish to work with him or her.
5. Advising should be consultative to the extent possible; however, the adviser needs to avoid abdicating responsibility for assisting advisees with such matters as the selection of appropriate coursework, thesis possibilities, and members of their advisory committees. Advisees are welcome to seek information from multiple sources and are encouraged to review the course

offerings outside CAS regularly, but they should turn to their advisers for the ultimate guidance and decision-making on these matters.

6. Advisers and advisees need to be able to recognize when the adviser/advisee relationship is not functioning in ways that are contributing to the advisee's academic progress and take steps to alter the situation along positive lines. Emphasis should be on improving the relationship, if possible. If improvement is not forthcoming, the adviser should assist the advisee in how to go about identifying another adviser with whom he or she may be able to function more effectively.

7. Advisers should have frequent, but not excessive, contact with advisees to assess whether or not their degree progress is satisfactory and, if not, to determine how best to reverse the situation. Graduate students likewise should take responsibility for regular contact with their advisers to ensure that they are making suitable progress and to reduce the need for the advisers from always having to initiate contact.

8. On the assumption that effective advising is an imperfectable art, those serving as academic advisers for graduate students when possible should take advantage of opportunities to participate in workshops and seminars concerning advising that the University and their professional organizations may sponsor. Since advising is a significant aspect of teaching, moreover, the Department should actively encourage such involvement, not merely pay lip service to it. Inasmuch as advisees are likely to become advisers in the future, advisees are also encouraged to attend such meetings to gain the most from their current advisory relationship and to be as well prepared for their future responsibilities.

Mentoring

Mentoring is an activity in which various members of the faculty in Communication Arts and Sciences have long been, and continue to be, involved. What precisely they do in enacting the role and how they see the activity differing from advising, however, are not altogether clear. If the two species of activity vary in focus, as specified in the second "fundamental principle" above, or at least should, then what the Department should do to foster effective mentoring entails different considerations. The outcomes of interest should be clear. That is, mentoring ostensibly would be effective to the extent that protégés become suitably acculturated to the discipline, exhibit a high degree of professional development, and are able to cope with the rigors of academic life more constructively than they likely would in the absence of good mentoring. Following are some practices that, in principle, can have such consequences.

1. Members of the faculty in Communication Arts and Sciences routinely should make clear their willingness to serve in a mentoring capacity, as related to the three categories of activity above, along with any limitations they would pose. For instance, a member of the faculty in a short bio or as part of a profile accessible to graduate students might include something along the following lines: "I am willing to read and provide feedback for manuscripts graduate students are considering submitting for publication or presentation at meetings of professional organizations. I also am willing to offer advice concerning job searches and how to become active in the work of professional organizations. Finally, I am willing to explore possibilities for collaborative research with graduate students, as well conduct observations of them in teaching situations. I do not serve as a confidante for one's relational difficulties."

2. Those willing to enact some sort of mentoring role should studiously avoid offering advice concerning a thesis or dissertation project under someone else's direction or intruding in an extant advising relationship in a way that could prove to be a source of conflict. Protégé should be aware that asking mentors for such advice places them in an awkward position.
3. A faculty mentor should be willing to help graduate students become acquainted with individuals in the profession they conceivably would be reluctant to approach on their own but whose acquaintance could well be of value to their professional development. Such assistance can be an important contributor to the students' acculturation as well.
4. A good faculty mentor makes an effort to learn about graduate students who may not have similar scholarly interests and with whom he or she may not be working. Offering to provide transportation to graduate students to a conference in driving distance that both the mentor and graduate student may be attending, for instance, could be a good way of expanding the faculty member and graduate students' knowledge of one another, not to mention helping to ease expenses of the graduate students.
5. In addition to the kind of interest one might display by such gestures as the example in Item #4, faculty members can show possibly even greater interest and concern by attending presentations of graduate students at the Departmental Colloquium or who are presenting papers as members of panels on conference programs, reacting to them as a member of the audience, carrying on a conversation after the event, sending a congratulatory note, and the like. As a dyadic activity, positive reinforcement for mentoring activities is welcome, but by no means required.
6. Letting students know of conference programs they might find to be interest, encouraging them to submit papers and/or proposals, and suggesting journals for which work they have in progress might be worth considering for submission can be the sort of expression of confidence that can lead one to see him or herself in a more positive light than otherwise might be the case.
7. Inviting graduate students to take part in collaborations with a member of the faculty and other graduate students is a good way to foster acculturation to norms of the discipline and professional development. In so doing, however, as in the case of Item#2, the mentor should take care not to intrude in the adviser/advisee relationship. Protégés interested in collaborating with members of the faculty would be well advised to discuss the matter with their advisers.
8. Letting students know of one's willingness to talk about particular teaching assignments and what they can do both to secure, as well as perform, them can be of benefit to them and serve to discourage them from unduly and prematurely restricting their range. Such recognition represents both a form of acculturation and professional development.

Note: Mentoring, as described above, is distinct from that related to the Graduate Assistant Training Program, as delivered in CAS 602: Supervised Experience in College Teaching

Implementation

Implementation of the provisions of this advising and mentoring plan does not require a policy, nor does the document represent one. The document instead offers two sets of guidelines that derive from the set of underlying principles enumerated above. Implementation, then, will consist primarily of

individual observance of the guidelines by those to whom they pertain. Such observance, however, is more likely if the faculty as a whole is willing to endorse them.

Endorsed by the Faculty of the Department Communication Arts and Sciences
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