

Event Synopsis from “Constructive Feedback as a Tool in Mentoring” A workshop for graduate faculty

Held on Thursday, January 13, 2011 and sponsored by the Graduate College

Receiving Feedback: What Students Want (and Need)

Andrea Golato and Anne Kopera (Graduate College)

From the Ph.D. Completion Project conducted by the Council of Graduate Schools and from research on our own campus, we know that the second most important factor contributing to a student’s ability to finish the degree is good mentoring/advising. (Financial support was identified as the most important.) The survey data from our campus also indicates good news about advising in that over 50% of our first-year graduate students on our campus are either very satisfied or extremely satisfied with their adviser. The satisfaction level of students beyond their first year of study is even higher. Those students who are not satisfied with their adviser list the following reasons:

- Advisers are not interested in spending time with their students
- Lack of availability and feedback from advisers
- Advisers and students have different styles
- Advisers are too busy with their own research
- Advisers have too many students
- Advisers and students have different research interests
- Insufficient communication
- Adviser plays favorites
- Adviser lacks management skills

For advisers it is important to remember that they play a very important role in their students’ academic lives, one that should not be underestimated, particularly given the power differential between students and faculty. At the same time, however, it is the students who are ultimately responsible for their own progress towards the degree. In general, the majority of our students are excellent. Where they differ is in terms of how they handle diversity and challenges – and here a good adviser can help to avoid problems and pitfalls. Further, we should not expect 100% retention or degree completion because, despite stringent admissions criteria, students may not be adequately prepared or they may decide on their own that the degree path they have chosen is not the right one for them. Sometimes conflicts do occur between adviser and student. Many such problems stem from the fact that students and advisers

have implicit expectations of each other rather than communicating them explicitly at various points in a students' career.

In the very first meeting with a student, it is helpful for the adviser to provide explicit explanation of degree expectations/tasks/milestones on the way to degree completion and beyond, even if they are described in a department's handbook. In addition, it is helpful if advisers can describe their own mentoring style (who will be responsible for what), and some general rules of engagement (e.g., when and how to communicate, how soon feedback on writing will be given, what the lead time for letters of reference is, what the role of other committee members is etc.). It is also helpful to discuss the students' work styles (e.g., are they reassured by more frequent meetings, do they prefer to strike out on their own first and only come for help, etc.). Many advisers on campus then ask their students to come up with a reasonable written timeline for degree completion. This document can then be used as a point of reference in later discussions while making clear to students that the plan in all likelihood will change as not every part of the research endeavor will work smoothly.

Many students and advisers find it important to meet on a regular basis, for example after the completion of specific tasks, with the appointments scheduled by the student in advance either by inclusion in a timeline or during a prior meeting. Some additional meetings will be scheduled by either the mentor or mentee who wants to bring up a concern. In all meetings it is important for advisers to provide honest feedback, to show enthusiasm, to praise students, and to connect the student's current work to future work or to the work of others. At the same time, the adviser needs to point out what needs improvement and how to improve it. The meetings can also be used to revisit the timeline and to adjust it if need be. Many advisers also have their students email them a summary of the meeting to have a record of the meeting and to confirm that the student understood the feedback and the next steps.

Many departments conduct annual academic progress reviews, a practice the Graduate College strongly encourages. Depending on the size of the unit and the field, review practices differ (see the resources on the Graduate College website for a variety of different practices). Regardless of the procedures that are employed, it is vital that the expectations and procedures the department adopts are explained to the students in advance, so that they know what to expect. Ideally, students are given the chance to provide input by supplying a list of activities or milestones accomplished during the academic year. The outcome of the review should be communicated back to the students both in writing and in person. Surveys with graduate students on our campus have indicated that they view annual reviews as a professional development opportunity and are genuinely interested in receiving feedback and constructive criticism on their work.

Providing Feedback: Mentor to Mentor

Moderator: Cara Finnegan (Communication)

Panelists: Susan Garnsey (Psychology), Peter Golato, (French), Michael Loui (Electrical and Computer Engineering), Robert Rauber (Atmospheric Sciences)

General best practices in mentoring were recommended by the panelists, including the following:

- Meet with each student for one hour/week, while the student is in the dissertation research/writing stage
- Advise older students on their own mentoring of younger students
- Using group meetings can be an effective way to maintain communications, manage time, and motivate students. In each meeting, students are expected to report on their work during the previous week, and this quiet “peer pressure” helps ensure progress.
- Make yourself available to students with an “open door” policy. Meet with students when they request it—do more than say you will be available.
- In situations where conflict or challenges arise, Rob Rauber recommended:
 - Don’t use email—it’s too difficult to gauge emotions. Arrange to meet instead.
 - Act, but don’t react.

How do you establish a good mentoring relationship? What do you do when a student asks you to be their adviser? What do you discuss in your first meeting as mentor and mentee?

Michael Loui described the following script he follows during his first meeting with an advisee:

- Describe the mentoring relationship as a long-term commitment.
- Discuss goals of research, professional skills development, and learn about what the student’s professional/career goals are.
- Set my expectations for the student’s activities (in lab/research), professional skills development, and timely progress toward degree completion.
- Describe what the student should expect from me as their adviser, such as assistance with networking and the prompt response to requests to review their work.
- Encourage students to seek advice from multiple faculty (such as the members of their committee) and use other campus resources to support their goals.

Rob Rauber emphasized that:

- It is important to acknowledge the challenges and difficulties of graduate study. He talks about the difficulties the student can expect to face in their research, but still maintains and encouraging and optimistic perspective on the path to becoming an expert.

- Graduate study represents a shift in learning mode: as an undergraduate, students primarily learn in the classroom, where the information is organized and delivered to them. But graduate school represents a radical shift to “self-learning.”

In his first meeting with a new advisee, Peter Golato believes it is important to:

- Listen and learn. Ask the student about their area of research inquiry, learn about their interests, goals, and preferred career path.
- Show interest and enthusiasm in the student. Treat them like you would like to be treated in a situation like this.

Susan Garnsey shared that, in her first meeting with a student, she:

- Gives the student advice on how to become engaged and take ownership of their research. Tries to empower the student and encourage them that they can learn to do whatever they need to do.
- Attempts to orient students to graduate study by laying out a pragmatic framework for study and timely completion.
- Emphasizes the collaborative nature of work in her lab. Before taking students outside her own department, she will ask a student to volunteer for a semester before she will agree to accept them.

What are concrete things you do to help students stay on track?

- **Be flexible and understand that each student is unique.** Rob Rauber describes student progress as exponential—at a point it really takes off. As an adviser, he often has to be patient until a student has that breakthrough moment when they begin that rapid development. Susan Garnsey pointed out that while the psychology grad student handbook outlines a framework for PhD progress—and she shares this with students as a guide to their progress—few students go through the program in precisely the way outlined.
- **Continue to educate students on what graduate study entails.** Students often see graduate school as a vague, monolithic block, and Peter Golato says he works to educate students on the process of graduate study, emphasizing that papers can’t be written the night before anymore. Helping them understand the key milestones of graduate study and their goals can help. Also, breaking down the dissertation into smaller, more manageable chunks (the size of term papers) can help.

What are strategies for a student who is making slow progress and possibly avoiding contact with you?

- **Schedule a private meeting with the student to discuss barriers to their progress.** When you can see that a student is floundering, it is the adviser’s job to acknowledge and advise the student.
- **Stay positive and demonstrate your confidence in the student and their potential for progress.** All of the panelists emphasized the importance of having positive conversations with students,

highlighting their strengths and intelligence, as well as their interest in seeing the student succeed.

- **Emphasize that the student must want to succeed.** If the student is not working regularly, Rob Rauber underscores that graduate study is their job, and that they should be working actively from 9-5 daily.
- **Consider a break from graduate study.** Susan Garnsey says she shares with students her experience as a first generation student and how she adjusted to graduate study. Her own leave of absence from graduate study helped to sharpen her goals and ambition.
- **Refer the student to campus resources.** If the student is procrastinating or having difficulty with perfectionism, refer them to the Counseling Center. Career ambivalence? Steer them to the Graduate College Career Services Office.

How much do you “micromanage” a student?

- Panel members indicated that they provide much more direction for younger students (including clear deadlines for work completion).
- As students progress, these mentors increasingly expected more self-direction from graduate students and they imposed fewer deadlines—students instead created their own.

How do you work as a co-adviser to a doctoral student?

- Regular communication between the advisers is essential.
- Susan Garnsey recommended frequent in-person meetings with student and co-advisers.

Where do you draw the line between personal and professional advising?

- Listen and understand their problems, but acknowledge that you may not be able to help the student solve the problem.
- Refer students to other resources on campus.
- Michael Loui stated that mentoring is not being a friend, but it is personal. Student should trust you so they will share their problems, so you can advise and refer.

Providing Feedback When You Don't Have All the Answers

Moderator: Rebecca Bryant (Graduate College)

Panelists: Anne Kopera (Graduate College), Julie Misa (Illinois Student and Scholar Services), Deidre Weathersby (Counseling Center)

A significant portion of students who begin the doctorate do not finish. Students may be challenged by ambivalent career goals, family worries, or mental health issues that can negatively impact academic progress. What ways do you/your unit work with students (and faculty) to help students who are making slow progress? Advise students who are leaving their program?

- **Faculty are encouraged to refer students to the Counseling Center for assistance with a multitude of challenges.** For instance, the Counseling Center can help students who are having difficulty with procrastination or perfectionism. In addition, some learning disabilities such as Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) become apparent during graduate studies. The Counseling Center also has an Outreach Team that helps spread awareness of its resources.
- **Career Services resources on campus, and the Graduate College Career Services Office (GCCSO) in particular, can be a safe place for graduate students to share and explore their career options.** Students may be reluctant to talk about career ambivalence within the department—and especially with their adviser—but they are often willing and even eager to share their concerns with a career adviser located outside their department. Within the GCCSO students may take advantage not only of individualized career advising, but they can also participate in career exploration groups, attend panels on non-faculty and community college careers, and participate in numerous workshops to support either a faculty or non-faculty job search.
- International students have additional concerns regarding making adequate progress connected to their visa status. **Contacting International Student and Scholar Services early is important** when working through these topics.
- International students are often not aware of the resources available on a university campus in the United States. Referring them to relevant campus resources can be very important. They may be less aware than domestic students of the variety of resources available on a university campus. They may also have cultural inhibitions about accessing services, such as counseling.

What are special challenges and considerations for international students who are not making progress?

- International students have far less flexibility than domestic students, as they are required to remain enrolled full-time to satisfy their visa requirements. Students must work with ISSS before dropping courses to understand how it will impact their status.
- International students have fewer career options (within the United States) than domestic students because of visa limitations. When exploring career options and beginning a job search, students are strongly encouraged to connect with ISSS to understand how to best manage the timing of applying for Optional Practical Training (OPT).
- International students may be feeling pressure from high expectations and much of their support network is far away and may not be knowledgeable about the U.S. education system.

What are some ways we can help students who lack motivation/are procrastinating?

- Most faculty probably don't know that the Counseling Center provides support to students having academic difficulties such as procrastination, perfectionism, and test anxiety. In addition to a range of online guides (http://www.counselingcenter.illinois.edu/?page_id=7), students may take advantage of individual counseling.
- In addition, the Counseling Center conducts ADHD assessments, a service that would be very costly to individuals outside the Illinois student community.
- While we think of procrastination as a hallmark of dissertation writing, it is also common in the job search process. Students can feel overwhelmed and discouraged by the job search process (often made worse by nebulous career goals), and students often wait too long to seek support from career services offices on campus. Faculty are encouraged to refer students early to career offices—a minimum of six months prior to graduation. Career services professionals can educate students on the job search process (whether for faculty or non-faculty careers) and help students establish goals and create milestones.

What are resources to support faculty and students who are experiencing conflict?

- The Graduate College is a confidential resource for graduate students and faculty who are experiencing conflict within the advising relationship, problems with student progress toward the degree, or other academic difficulties. Dean Anne Kopera works directly with students and faculty, listening to their challenges, advising on options within Graduate College policy, discussing options for conflict resolution, facilitating resolutions, and also referring individuals to other campus resources, such as the Counseling Center and the Office of the Dean of Students.
- Graduate students are subject to the Student Code and there are resources to assist with students whose conduct is disruptive or dangerous. Faculty can consult with the Office for Student Conflict Resolution in Office of the Dean of Students. In addition, after 5pm, an Emergency Dean is on duty.

What resources are available to help students with financial concerns?

- The Financial Wellness Center (located in the ARC) is a great resource: <http://web.extension.illinois.edu/financialwellness/>.
- Students can search for fellowships through the Graduate College Fellowship Office's Fellowship Opportunities Database: <https://www.grad.illinois.edu/fellowship/>.
- Students can consult with staff in the Office of Student Financial Aid.
- Understanding the student's particular concern is important.

What are other resources on campus that can help faculty working with graduate students?

- The Division of Disability Resources and Educational Services (DRES) works with all students on campus—undergraduate and graduate.
- The Writers Workshop provides individual appointments with practical advice on writing. Graduate students are scheduled to meet with experience graduate writing consultants. The Writers Workshop also organizes Graduate Writing Groups for students at any stage.