

EMPOWERING STUDENTS ENHANCES FACULTY MENTORSHIP

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The Department of Environmental Sciences (DES) at the University of Toledo (UT), USA, has adopted methods to enhance the mentorship of its graduate faculty. These methods include providing a broader context of student support, providing more support for graduate advisors, and conducting explicit training for advisors. The primary goal is to empower graduate students to better understand and participate in their own professional development, emphasizing interaction with their graduate advisors. To be successful, students must master programmatic and disciplinary requirements, which require advice and direction on several professional levels both within and without the university environment. In our program the burden of these needs is shared among peer groups, graduate advisors, and a DES program advisor. Together, they provide a network of support that helps identify and facilitate delivery of the particular mentoring needs that advisors best provide, release advisors from providing support that is better gained elsewhere, and thus optimally position advisor mentorship within a larger context of student career development.

Two peer groups supporting graduates students in DES at UT are the departmental Environmental Graduate Student (EGS) organization and the university wide Graduate Student Association (GSA). The GSA has officers elected from the graduate student body, participates in university governance, and coordinates three programs that specifically encourage interaction with their advisors at a professional level: awarding travel stipends, awarding research stipends, and conducting a region wide research forum. The EGS also has elected officers, participates in DES meetings and decisions, awards travel stipends, and conducts fundraising events, again encouraging professional level interaction with advisors. Both organizations arrange social events, discuss student concerns, and enhance peer mentoring, thus providing a peer-based professional network that faculty cannot match.

The departmental graduate advisor (GA) has the primary responsibility of providing students with knowledge of and familiarity with programmatic requirements, freeing the student advisors from the burdens of keeping current with shifting state and university policies. The GA serves on the university wide graduate council and also serves as the EGS advisor, facilitating flows of information and interaction between graduate students, department, and university. The GA also offers an orientation course required for all new graduate students, which presents program requirements, completes initial paperwork, launches bibliographic searches, prepares short grant proposals, and develops preliminary science presentation, all of which require close interaction between graduate students and their advisors at the start of the student's career in DES. Finally, the GA monitors the progress of all students, insuring that each student completes all requirements in a timely manner. This includes a progress report filed by each advisor for each student in each semester, again encouraging interaction.

Graduate advisors in DES still occupy the central role in directing the professional development of their students. However, this role has been refined to reduce some of the burdens and enhance professional interaction. Because the GA oversees many programmatic demands, advisors are free to focus on developing

disciplinary competence and engagement of their students. The activities of peer groups and requirements of the initial orientation course in DES provide additional structured opportunities for professional interaction between advisor and student. Finally, the department initiated a training program for graduate advisors that emphasizes the engagement of their students in a shared process of graduate advising (Wagner et al. 2016). This began with a half-day interactive workshop required for all graduate advisors, and includes a short refresher meeting at the start of each autumn semester. This material is also discussed in the orientation course for entering graduate students. The key features of this program are to (1) encourage engagement between faculty and student, (2) educate both faculty and student about differences in their roles and perspectives, and (3) provide a framework for assessing both progress and barriers to progress for the student. The framework also serves to remind both student and advisor that progress varies over time and between the different requirements of a research project, coursework, and professional development.

One of the unexpected outcomes of these efforts is a broader, more transparent engagement of both students and advisors within this community of scholarship in DES. Problems with the graduate experience are more quickly identified, discussed, and (sometimes) resolved than in prior years when students and advisors felt more isolated within their particular laboratories and research programs. Graduate advising has become a shared enterprise within DES. To date, attrition rates have declined and student progress towards successful completion has increased. Exit interviews with graduating students are identifying our multi-level network support as an important part of their experience.

References:

Wagner, H, C boyd, R Napper. 2016. How to share the process of graduate advising. FACETS 1:263-279 <http://facetsjournal.com/article/facets-2015-0013/>