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Mentoring at Critical Transitions: Faculty Professional Development to Promote the Success of Graduate Students

Background

The ETS/CGS Award for Innovation in Promoting Success in Graduate Education was launched in 2009. In establishing the award, the sponsors issued a call to create new approaches to promote success in graduate education from admissions through completion. The Office of Graduate Studies at the University of California, Davis was selected as the inaugural recipient of this competitive new award based on a proposal titled “Mentoring at Critical Transitions: Faculty Readiness from Admission to Completion” (MCT) that described an innovative program focused on helping faculty become better mentors of graduate students.

This initiative was motivated by recognition of the far less than desirable completion rates after 10 years by students who have embarked on doctoral studies. Specifically, extensive research literature on this question had shown that ten-year completion rates, nationally, are in the range of 50-60%^{1,2}, which is quite mediocre in an absolute sense and in comparison to the 90-95% completion rates (in less time) of those who pursue professional doctorates in medicine, law, etc.

The UC Davis team responsible for writing and submitting the proposal for this award knew from the literature and from years of experience in consulting with graduate students that probably the most important factor underlying completion of the doctorate relates to attentive mentoring of students during the course of their graduate career. Too many students do not have a successful relationship with their faculty advisor; indeed, the relationship is sometimes very negative or there is no mentoring—good or bad—to speak of. The quality of mentoring is also among the most prominently mentioned factors leading to success (or lack thereof) in the literature on the graduate student experience that has emerged in recent decades.²⁻⁵

Accordingly, the planning team determined that our innovative approach should focus specifically on mentoring at what we described as the three most critical transitions for graduate students as they proceed through their program:

1. from admission to student status and successful engagement in coursework
2. from coursework to the research phase of the doctorate after passing the qualifying examination
3. from completion of dissertation research and writing to a career as a researcher, professor, or other professional.

A key decision in developing the MCT program was to focus on faculty. Here, we reasoned that providing professional development opportunities *for faculty* to improve their mentoring skills would have a lasting impact

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on the institution, whereas a student-focused program would need to be repeated for each entering cohort. Our planning team also recognized that while some faculty excel at mentoring their students through the critical transitions, others may need additional training in how best to guide their students at each stage of their studies. Thus, we envisaged MCT as a year-long professional development program for faculty who would be encouraged to participate through a combination of carefully planned themed programs (lectures, panels, group discussions, retreats) and a financial award for the participating programs to use as they saw fit to improve mentoring within their own programs.

An Evolving Program

The MCT program was launched in August 2010. In our first year we limited participation to faculty from four graduate programs who self-identified by responding to our invitation to submit proposals. Those proposals described why they wished to participate and how they envisaged expending their award money following completion of the program. We also included a group of faculty who were affiliated with a training grant program that cut across degree programs.

Faculty who participated in the program were offered information via the themed monthly programs relating to (among other themes):

- Strategies for providing successful mentoring at each critical stage of the graduate student experience
- The common concerns of all graduate students as well as the needs of graduate students from diverse populations
- Resources (especially on campus) available to foster and support mentoring
- Developing mentoring mechanisms and policies for their specific programs
- Advising and preparing students for their post-graduation careers.

While helping faculty develop mentoring strategies constituted the primary focus of our program, we also emphasized the need to create a culture for graduate students that would help them become socialized into their discipline and to feel included and welcomed by faculty and other students whatever their diverse backgrounds may be.

The first year of our program (2010-11) involved a fairly intensive effort, commencing with a two-day retreat in late August for all 35 participating faculty followed by monthly workshops or presentations during the academic year. The year ended with a half-day retreat with an externally facilitated program assessment. Each graduate program that completed the MCT training was then invited to submit a proposal for an allocation of up to \$4,000 from the original ETS/CGS award to develop and implement mentoring strategies at the local level.

A Sample of Topics Presented

In the first year, our workshops and presentations included the following, among others:

- *Mentoring from Dissertation to Career* (Guest Speaker Cynthia Fuhrmann, UC San Francisco)
- *Issues for Women Graduate Students* (Guest Speaker Mary Ann Mason, UC Berkeley)
- *Relationship Building and Socializing Graduate Students* (Guest Speaker Catherine Millett, ETS)
- *Mentoring Graduate Students through the Qualifying Exam* (UC Davis Speaker Professor Louis Grivetti)
- *Mentoring the Importance of Scholarly Integrity, Ethics, and Responsible Conduct of Research* (UC Davis Speakers Professors John Yoder and Tonya Kuhl)
- *Issues for Underrepresented Students* (Guest Speaker Professor Carlos Gutierrez, CSU Los Angeles and UC Davis Speaker Professor Manuel Calderon de la Barca Sanchez).

Given the high level of staff effort needed to offer the program in the first format, we began to experiment with different models that would enable us to sustain MCT with a reasonable level of staff effort and within the budget available after the ETS/CGS award ended. Thus, in the second year (2011-12), our focus shifted from seeking to provide a comprehensive mentorship program to expanding to other topics not covered in our inaugural year. In addition, our first year's focus was largely on the STEM fields and we wanted to reach out to our colleagues in the humanities and social sciences. We offered three seminars:

- *Mentoring Graduate Students through a Branching Career Pipeline* with Cynthia Fuhrmann
- *Building a Sense of Community: Socialization and Mentoring of Underrepresented Students* (with a

panel of UC Davis graduate students)

- *Mentoring Highly Successful Graduate Students—Seven Strategies* with Hugh Kearns. This last seminar speaker also provided a workshop for graduate student mentees – a model that we would later build into all of our programs.

Attendance, unfortunately, included few of our targeted audiences in the humanities and social sciences. To remedy this situation, we hosted a roundtable luncheon discussion with recipients of our Bilinski Educational Foundation Fellowships. The luncheon proved highly successful with a productive exchange of ideas from both the Bilinski Fellowship recipients and their faculty mentors.

Our program in 2012-13 followed a now familiar structure of a series of seminars, but we sought to further address topics of concern—both new and previously covered. These seminars included presentations on distressed and distressing students, a repeat performance by Hugh Kearns on mentoring highly successful students and a year-end panel of Ph.D. alumni who had pursued careers beyond academia and could discuss their successes and challenges in finding the mentoring they needed in graduate school.

Last year (2013-14), new colleagues joined us in the Office of Graduate Studies, Drs. Steve Lee and Josephine Moreno, who specialize in diversity issues. We were able to incorporate their expertise into our program around the themes of *Mentoring First Year Graduate Students* (Moreno) and *Mentoring Up* (Lee). In addition, Hugh Kearns gave a new seminar on *Ensuring First-Year Graduate Student Success* and one of the developers of the highly successful myIDP online tool, Bill Lindstaedt, discussed *Creating an Individual Development Plan Using the myIDP*. All of these seminars were well-attended, although we would like to further increase the numbers of faculty.

Another evolution to our program is to incorporate both faculty and graduate student versions of each of our programs in back-to-back sessions. This aspect taps our guest speakers' expertise and extends our programs to both mentors and mentees, making maximum use of scarce resources and time.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The MCT program has met initial expectations, achieved desirable outcomes and gained recognition across campus. Still, there have been challenges and lessons learned along the way that are worth noting.

Faculty Participation

As mentioned, many faculty excel at mentoring while others need additional training in how best to mentor students at program-defined "critical transitions." Over time, we noticed that seminar activities generally attracted faculty who already possessed the desirable characteristics and skills of effective mentors. Conversely, those faculty who would benefit from additional training, experience and program engagement were often missing. While individual seminars were met with a high level of faculty engagement and participation, in many ways we felt as if we were "preaching to the choir." To address this challenge, individual seminars were intentionally developed to include a high level of engagement, interaction and discussion. Still, we continue to approach topics and program delivery with greater variability in an attempt to attract a more diverse faculty audience who would benefit from the program offerings. We also recognize that over time, recognition of the value of good mentoring skills will spread as those who participate in MCT share the lessons learned with their colleagues through leadership roles.

Funding

As with many other efforts, resource development, both financial and human, continues to be a challenge in meeting the goal of institutionalizing and sustaining the MCT program. After the initial award funding year, the expectation and desire to grow the program so that more faculty could benefit was met with many challenges including an economic downturn, severe institutional budget reductions and changing program leadership. Over time, we turned to developing new partnerships as well as creative and collaborative efforts including identifying presenters who could be shared among other institutions in the region so as to diminish travel costs and honoraria amounts. Even within the campus itself we collaborated with specific departments, programs and divisions in co-sponsoring activities. Recently, we were fortunate to redirect and refocus an existing funding source to develop a substantial fellowship that would not only support the funding of graduate students but incentivize faculty to increase participation in MCT program activities.

Program Sustainability

While the first year's program was deemed successful by the participants, it was intensive and, we feared, too exclusive in the sense of focusing only on faculty from a limited number of science programs. Therefore, in planning for the second year we decided to open the invitation to all faculty to participate in programs around most of these same themes, but on a quarterly rather than a monthly basis. It was thought that in this way we could reach a larger and more diverse body of faculty. In addition, as mentioned earlier, this structure was financially manageable on our own. This was the model we followed for the next several years, and it was moderately successful; frankly, we wish we had been able to attract more faculty, but at least several faculty always turned up as did a goodly number of graduate program staff coordinators, to whom we also issued invitations knowing that they are frequently key players in the success of graduate students moving through their programs. A further innovative aspect of the program in later years was asking our speakers/presenters to offer separate seminars for graduate students as well as faculty. These were well attended.

Program Impact and Evaluation

Looking forward, it will be necessary to improve our evaluation of MCT activities and outcomes. While we have built in participant evaluation of program activities, we still desire to better understand and learn how effective faculty are as mentors to their graduate students. In addition, a number of questions remain unanswered. As the result of the MCT program, are faculty better able to mentor graduate students across identities (e.g. gender, citizenship, ethnicity) and disciplines (e.g. STEM, non-STEM)? Can and/or should mentoring effectiveness be included in faculty and program evaluation? These and other questions should be considered in developing programs that are related and relevant to graduate student and faculty success.

MCT Going Forward

The 2014-15 academic year coming up will be the fifth year of our MCT program, and we will be innovating again thanks to the support of an endowment fund devoted to graduate education. With this financial backing we will annually award up to five fellowships of \$10,000 each to faculty mentors to help support one or more of their graduate students. To be eligible to apply for this award, faculty must attend a minimum of three of the MCT programs offered during the academic year and they must submit a proposal showing how their mentor-mentee relationship can be enhanced from the skills or concepts learned in the MCT programs, with the overall goal of helping their graduate student(s) complete their degrees in a successful and timely manner. Winning faculty will be recognized with a plaque for Excellence in Mentoring at a special awards presentation during the UC Davis Week of Orientation and Welcome of graduate students (just before the start of fall quarter each year). The endowment will also fund some of the operating costs associated with inviting speakers to campus.

Anticipated topics for 2014-15 will cover new areas in order to keep the MCT program fresh, including:

- *Overcoming the Impostor Syndrome* with Guest Speaker Valerie Young of Changing Course
- *Stereotype Threat* with Guest Speaker Claude Steele, UC Berkeley
- *Writing on Research* with Guest Speaker Hugh Kearns, Flinders University
- *Exploring Career Opportunities* – a panel of employers who typically hire Ph.D.s.

We look forward to another productive year and the opportunity to serve both faculty mentors and their students through our new fellowship program. We will continue to experiment with the structure and content of the MCT program as it evolves, but funding from the endowment provides us the key resources to ensure its sustainability.

By Lenora A. Timm, Associate Dean; Richard H. Shintaku, Assistant Dean; Teresa L. Dillinger, Manager of Professional Development Programs; and Jeffery C. Gibeling, Vice Provost and Dean, Office of Graduate Studies, University of California, Davis

Endnotes

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