Best Practices in Graduate Mentoring

Why Graduate Mentors are important.

Graduate mentors are role models' students can interact with; new graduate students are usually overwhelmed, nervous, and often need advice on how to manage the substantial workload of a Master's or PhD program. These mentors can offer study advice, help point out resources available at UNCG, provide research tips, as well as remind students of simple things, like how important a good night's sleep is. Graduate mentors help students develop their work to a higher level to prepare them for what the academy expects. It is also beneficial to have an advocate when seeking funding or preparing to enter the work force, especially if the student wishes to become a colleague.

Occasionally, a student needs to hear that what they are going through is normal for a graduate student. Graduate mentors not only provide students with academic advice, but also help navigate the stress associated with pursuing a graduate degree. Hearing from someone who has experienced this before can offer comfort during exams, defense, teaching, and other trying times during a graduate career. For students new to the Greensboro area, these graduate mentors can offer students ideas on recreational activities in town so they can relax periodically.

Having graduate mentors also reinforces the productive and welcoming atmosphere that UNCG is known for. New students who encounter mentors that are encouraging, friendly, and knowledgeable help cultivate the enthusiastic learning environment here at UNCG. Graduate mentors are necessary for a graduate school to maintain an open connection between the faculty and students.
~Brandon Hill, MA English, 2018

Holistic Approach

Faculty advisors support the academic promise of graduate students in their program. In some cases, academic advisors are assigned to entering graduate students to assist them in academic advising and other matters. In other cases, students select faculty advisors in accordance with disciplinary interest or research expertise. While advisors help guide students to choose appropriate coursework and assist them in understanding the requirements of the university, a mentor takes a more holistic approach to assisting the student. This includes helping the student assimilate into the culture of the profession by engaging in activities that might not be a formal part of the curriculum of the program. The mentor helps the student plan a trajectory that will lead to a professional identity that will culminate in successful placement in the job market. Faculty should help teach students about the importance of networking outside the lab, outside the subfield, and outside the department.

Faculty should encourage students to avoid becoming too compartmentalized and isolated during their graduate studies both in a personal and in a disciplinary sense by encouraging them to find appropriate professional and community networks and support groups. These groups may be within their graduate student cohort or department or a student or community group.

Faculty should encourage and support the professional development of graduate students, providing them with as much information and assistance as possible regarding programmatic and professional opportunities and decisions.

Investment of Time

The consensus among excellent mentors is that mentoring requires a significant time commitment on the part of both the mentor and the mentee. Faculty should develop reasonable expectations for themselves in terms of time and effort. By making a commitment to devote time to their students, they are helping to ensure success. Faculty should expect mutual commitment: time put into advising and mentoring should correspond with the time the student devotes to his/her work.

Intellectual ownership

Intellectual ownership of joint projects, particularly between faculty members and students, should be clear and explicit to everyone involved in a project before the project is undertaken. As the faculty-graduate student relationship matures and intensifies, direct collaborations may evolve which entail the sharing of authorship or rights to intellectual property developed in research or other creative or artistic activity. Such collaborations are encouraged and are a desired outcome of the mentoring process.

Clear goals and reasonable expectations

Faculty should set clear goals and outline reasonable expectations. In order to help predict and monitor a student's academic progress, faculty should consider what work will need to be done for a student to complete his or her program, and students should be encouraged to break this work down into the number of years, then semesters, then months, that it will take to finish in a timely manner.

Cultural differences

Cultural differences can easily and unexpectedly lead to miscommunication about expectations and procedures. Contact the Graduate School (336-334-5596), the Office of Multicultural Affairs (336-334-5090) or the International Programs Center (336-334-5404) for assistance.

Varieties of student goals

Students come into graduate programs because they want to contribute something to the discipline and to society. Faculty should be aware of these external motivations and should be prepared to help students identify a variety of paths that are not limited to careers in academia.

How to be an Effective Doctoral Dissertation Chair

Although advising/mentoring practices vary from discipline to discipline, the outline that follows provides widely applicable guidelines to a chair's key responsibilities.

The Student-Advisor Relationship

- Provide information to the student about your working style and what to expect from the other committee members so that the student has a clear understanding of your definition of a good working relationship.

- Remain accessible to students for dialogue, formal and informal meetings as needed.

- Respond to student emails in a timely way. A reasonable guideline is no more than 48-72 hours after receiving an email.

- Respond to student drafts in a timely way. A reasonable guideline is no more than 10 working days turn-around time upon receipt of a draft or a response to a student within that 10 working-day window if more time is needed.

- Be familiar with the Requirements of All Doctoral Degrees section of the GPD Handbook.

- Be aware of student's work/life situations and working style. Periodically, but consistently assess how they are doing (e.g., whether they are working well with you and seeking appropriate mentoring from others).

- Refer the student to appropriate resources for significant problems or weaknesses (e.g., in the student's writing, research-related skills, or personal life).

- Reach agreement with the student as to how often he or she will consult with you and submit work for you to critique.

- Respect the power differential that exists between student and chair and not abuse the trust placed in them as faculty for the appropriate conduct of a dissertation/thesis project.

- Review student progress at least once per semester.

- Report problems that cannot be negotiated to the GPD or others as appropriate.

- Report serious breaches in research protocols and principles (e.g., violation of ethical principles and protection of human subjects and animals, and/or the responsible conduct of research – fabrication, falsification, plagiarism, research misconduct) to the GPD and the Office of Research and Engagement.

- Assist the student with selecting faculty members to serve on the dissertation committee.

The Dissertation Proposal

- Help the student to select and refine the dissertation topic, avoiding overly ambitious goals and expectations.
- Supervise the submission and modifications of the IRB application until approval is reached (if IRB project will involve humans or animals). Maintain your human subjects research certification.
- Ensure the scheduling of an oral defense of the dissertation proposal and distribution of a copy of the proposal to all committee members.
- The proposal defense should not be distributed for reading until after the proposal is in a form acceptable to the dissertation chair.
- Members should have the proposal to read at least ten working days before the scheduled defense date.
- If successful defense is not achieved, counsel student on areas of weakness and determine what content area or skill sets require remediation.
- Refer students who do not pass to program coordinator to rework a program of study

The Dissertation

- Reach agreement with the student as to how often he or she will consult with you and submit work for you to critique.
- Seek a progress report from the student at least once a term.
- Emphasize secure data collection, careful record keeping for potential audits, ethical issues, and the responsible conduct of research.
- Help the student formulate a long-term plan for the research and writing of the dissertation, including a timetable and tentative completion date. Ask the student to revise the plan, if needed.
- Be aware of conflicts in a research group, and when they arise, take steps to advocate or mediate.
- Direct the Candidate in carrying out the approved study and closely supervise the writing of the manuscript(s).
- Evaluate student progress for each semester of the candidacy period.
- Provide editorial support, along with University resources, that students need to prepare a final, correctly formatted manuscript.
- Ensure co-authors or committee members are properly acknowledged.

Dissertation Committee Functioning

- The Chair should consult with other members of the committee to divide up supervisory responsibilities, and then inform the student and make sure committee members are clear on everyone else's role.
- Discuss how closely and frequently members other than the chair(s) engage with the student's work, enforcing that all should be in regular contact.
- Approve when the student may circulate the manuscript(s) for review to members of the committee. Typically, the dissertation chair will approve the manuscript drafts and/or dissertation chapters before they are circulated to the committee members to read. But, each committee may decide how committee members will monitor and provide feedback on the individual chapters or manuscripts. The dissertation chair, student, and committee members should agree on this procedure as well as authorship on the manuscripts as soon as possible after the student enters candidacy.
- Work with the student to schedule and plan for committee meetings.
- If a member of the committee is not responding to the student's communication or failing to review the draft sections of the dissertation in a reasonable amount of time, coach the student about how to proceed, or intervene directly if the problem is severe. If all efforts fail, encourage the student to consider finding are placement.
- Take responsibility for dealing with conflicts among committee members. (e.g., personal conflict and intellectual disputes that create a roadblock for the student).

Supervising Research

- Emphasize data collection and record keeping.

- Go over ethical issues, including human subject and animal care protections.

- Build backup ideas into any research project.

- Follow the student's development and make adjustments in assignments.

- Be aware of conflicts in a research group, and when they arise, take steps to mediate.

- Report serious breaches in research protocols and principles (e.g., violation of ethical principles and protection of human subjects and animals, and/or the responsible conduct of research – fabrication, falsification, plagiarism, research misconduct) to the FGPD and Office of Research and Engagement.

Administrative Matters

- Tell the student to work with the department or program administrative staff to meet Graduate School requirements such as filing an up to date Dissertation Committee Form.

- Where feasible, assist the student in securing funds, such as fellowships, assistantships, research, and travel funds.

The Oral Dissertation Defense

- Confirm that the student's document is adequately prepared for the final defense.

- Be sure the student and the committee know that Graduate School policy requires that the oral defense must be conducted as a public event, (except for the Committee's private deliberations either before or after the defense), open to all interested persons.

- Before the student schedules the oral defense date, be sure the student knows the date in the term of final registration by which the defense must be held. Also, the student must be able to give the entire dissertation to the committee sufficiently in advance of the meeting. This must be at least two weeks before the defense but can be as much as three or four weeks, depending on the Committee.

- If the student is unable to meet the aforementioned deadline for distributing the dissertation, ask the student to postpone the defense *unless* you are certain all committee members have critiqued earlier drafts and, therefore, should be able to submit the oral defense evaluation forms on time. *It is devastating when a student learns about major concerns shortly before the oral defense because the faculty member hadn't read the student's work previously*.

- Prepare the student for the oral defense, in accordance with the traditions of the department and/or the wishes of the committee. (Note: The committee will need to decide how long the defense itself will last; there are no prescribed guidelines.)

- If there appear to be serious concerns about the student's work, advocate for a delay in the oral defense. Dissertations should be approved based on the quality of the work, not because of other pressures (e.g., a job offer contingent upon completion; the expense of registering for a further term, etc.).

- Before the defense begins, the committee must meet to review all the members' concerns and identify the topics they will raise and their sequence. If this has not been done in advance, excuse the student and others from the room to do so.

- Facilitate the final defense and record key points for the student raised during the defense in order to discuss what revisions may be required after the conclusion of the defense.

- At the defense, make sure it's clear which committee member(s) will sign off on any required revisions.

- After the defense, submit the completed Oral Defense Examination Form, and, if no revisions or corrections are needed, the Dissertation Completion Form.

- If revisions and/or corrections *are* required, make sure the Dissertation Completion Form is submitted as soon as possible after the dissertation has been completed and approved.

Launching the Student's Career

- Ask students to do tasks they will need to do after they get into the field.

- Encourage students to attend professional meetings, and when the two of you attend the same meeting, actively help them to network.

- Speak honestly to students about their strengths and weaknesses (e.g., not everyone can succeed as a faculty member).

- If appropriate to your field, call people to help students seek positions and be deliberate and careful about treating them fairly in this regard.

- Prepare students to consider the full range of career possibilities appropriate to their field.

- If the student's dissertation is outstanding, consider nominating it for the Graduate School's Outstanding Dissertation Award.

Student Responsibilities in the Mentoring Relationship

As author of the dissertation, students are ultimately responsible for developing the topic idea, conducting the research and/or data collection, analyzing the research, and state conclusions. The student must follow the guidelines for the responsible conduct of research. The final document must be properly edited and follow the requirements established in the Dissertation Guidelines.

In addition, students are expected to:

- Use your dissertation chair as the central point of contact for the development of ideas, selection of an appropriate committee and development of early drafts; the conduct of research, the approval point for submission of materials to the dissertation committee; and the supervisor for scheduling the final defense.

- Schedule regular meetings with the chair to discuss the project and its development and when suggested by the chair, with members of the committee.

- Submit all their own, original work and as appropriate to the conduct of research, properly cite the works of others that inform the study.

- Be familiar with polices on academic dishonesty and plagiarism. Misconduct in these arenas is treated seriously and can result in academic dismissal. These and any other incidents of research misconduct may require reporting to the federal Office of Research Integrity.

- Obtain and maintain human subjects research certification if required for your research; complete IRB requirements as applicable; close IRB when your work is complete and your document is submitted.

- Take personal initiative to move the project forward and to discuss with your chair any problems that may arise. In the event there are issues that arise with your chair that cannot get resolved or that are best discussed with another person, the student may opt to discuss them with the GPD.

- Become totally familiar with the materials found in the Dissertation Guidelines and University Catalog. This would include all post-defense and graduation steps that are required of students.

- Be aware of and accountable to established defense date and dissertation submission deadlines.

- Recognize that crafting a dissertation is an iterative process between the student and the chair, and at key moments, between the student, the chair, and the committee. As such, students are expected to be responsive to feedback provided in a timely manner if they are to expect the same from the chair and/or the committee. Students need to also be respectful of the fact that chairs and committees have many other duties pressing on their time. Thus, realistic expectations around holiday and vacation times as well as normal busy periods (e.g., ends and starts of semesters) are necessary.

- Students who feel that they can no longer sustain a collaborative working relationship with either a committee member or their committee chair should consult with their GPD to determine appropriate actions.