Improving Advising and Mentoring of Graduate and Professional Students

Advising is a key component in the successful completion of a graduate degree. A good advising relationship correlates positively with student achievement, retention, and satisfaction. A successful advising process ultimately reflects well on the department and the institution and helps to build the program, attract high-quality students, recognize faculty contributions in this critical area, and conserve scarce departmental resources.

The following easy-to-implement process can help ensure that high-quality advising is a part of your graduate programs.

Clarify Expectations

Colleges and programs often have different understandings of advising and mentoring and it is becoming increasingly common to use advising teams. Clarifying expectations in your unit is an important first step in promoting best practices in advising relationships. Take steps to ensure that students in their programs receive high-quality advising and mentoring; programs may wish to designate a person to coordinate this effort. The following checklist offers suggestions to consider:

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<tr>
<th>How often are advisers expected to meet with their advisees?</th>
<th>We have not discussed this in our program.</th>
<th>We have an informal understanding.</th>
<th>We have a written policy.</th>
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<td>What are the key functions of an adviser?</td>
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<td>What are the boundaries of the relationship between an adviser/advisee?</td>
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<td>What challenges do faculty face in providing high-quality advising?</td>
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<td>How do conflicts between students and advisers get resolved?</td>
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A useful resource, SUCCESS for Faculty Mentors and Graduate/Professional Students, is available at http://www.sos.umn.edu/stafffaculty/SUCCESSMentors.pdf.
Provide Orientation

Once you have determined standards for your department, you may want to develop written documents for faculty and an orientation program for new students. Providing an orientation for students—and new graduate faculty—will support students and their advisers as they work to establish a mutually beneficial collaborative relationship.

In developing an orientation program:

- Determine the information that students need within your department. Things to consider:
  - Academic requirements
  - Criteria for satisfactory progress
  - Culture
  - Successful adviser-advisee relationships
  - Survival strategies

- Customize by level:
  - Years 1-2: stronger focus on academic plan and GA/TA/RA expectations
  - Year 2-3: focus on research and career
  - Year 4 and on: focus on career

- Integrate existing resources, including the Graduate Student Virtual Commons.

Utilize experienced students in planning, evaluating, and delivering orientation sessions. Remember that orientation need not be a one-time event; you may wish to offer shorter sessions on various topics throughout the year. Consider other methods of delivery, such as online.

Evaluate Process and Outcomes

Satisfaction with advising, both on the part of the student and of faculty, is also important to assess. The Council of Graduate Students (COGS) survey is a good place to start. Reports are available by unit for those with large enough populations.

You may also want to conduct your own assessment of advising. Collecting baseline data and establishing quality indicators can help provide a snapshot of your advising program and identify areas for continued development.
Indicators to consider are:

- Number of students who graduate each year, noting Ph.D. track students who “master out”
- Number of, and circumstances regarding, students who withdraw each year
- Number of, and circumstances regarding, students who change advisers
- Feedback from faculty on their advising roles
- Feedback from students on the advising relationship

Below is a sample template of the type of evaluation form that can be used to gather feedback from students. Please feel free to modify this template to fit your individual program needs and take steps to ensure that the students in your program feel comfortable sharing information on their advising experience. Specifically, if your program departs significantly from the “one adviser” model, or if students do not have an assigned adviser, be sure to edit the questions to accurately reflect the advising practice used by your program. If there are very small numbers of students in the program, consider reporting the results in a larger aggregate summary.

Consultants from the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) can help you design an assessment plan that will be confidential, appropriate to your program, and simple to implement. They also work with programs to promote the best use of findings.

Finally, review annually with faculty any data that has been collected to get their feedback, review expectations, and consider ideas for improvement of current practice.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Resources</th>
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| **Center for Teaching and Learning**  
Suite 400  
University Office Plaza  
2221 University Avenue S.E.  
*Phone:* 612-625-3041  
*Email:* teachlrn@umn.edu  
322 Johnston Hall  
101 Pleasant Street S.E.  
*Contact:* Karen Starry  
*Phone:* 612-625-2815  
*Web:* [http://www.grad.umn.edu/](http://www.grad.umn.edu/) |
Graduate Student Adviser Evaluation

Thank you for taking this survey, which seeks to gather information about your experience over the past year about your advising relationship. This important feedback will be used to help improve the quality of advising—a critical function of programs. Please answer as many questions as you wish, and return the form to (location) by (date). Your adviser will not see this form; the faculty in your program may be informed of the summary of responses.

1. About how many times have you met with your academic adviser in the current academic year?
   
   0 1 2 3 4 5 more than 5

2. Have you talked with your adviser about any of the following topics? Please check all that apply.

   □ Progress to date
   □ Academic course planning
   □ Funding
   □ Publishing
   □ Attending conferences
   □ Teaching
   □ Research
   □ Your career goals
   □ The job search process

3. My adviser is available when needed.

   Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree

4. My adviser has a thorough understanding of my overall progress.

   Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree

5. My adviser listens to my concerns and questions.

   Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree

6. My adviser provides constructive feedback.

   Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree

Please indicate your year of study:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 more than 7

Please use the back of this sheet for any comments you wish to make.
Overview

A successful orientation program establishes a welcoming and supportive departmental culture for students, and provides them with the information, tools, contacts, and confidence to thrive academically, professionally, and personally. Orientation can begin prior to your students’ arrival on campus, and continue as they move through each stage of their academic careers.

Orientation provides departments with the opportunity to:

- Welcome and invite students to join your community of scholars;
- Foster an environment in which students feel empowered to ask questions, express concerns, and seek assistance; and
- Provide information about the department’s expectations for satisfactory degree progress, as well as realistic strategies for navigating through the graduate/professional student experience.

Orientation provides students with the opportunity to:

- Establish connections with departmental faculty, staff, and students;
- Learn about both the official requirements and unofficial expectations/cultural nuances of the department;
- Identify departmental, collegiate, and university support services, as well as informal avenues for assistance; and
- Ask questions and/or express concerns.
Planning Your Orientation Program

- Ensure that your department’s expectations for satisfactory degree progress are clearly articulated and easily available to your students.
- Empower your current students in the planning process. Consider asking the following questions:
  - How would you describe a successful orientation experience?
  - What information was most crucial for you to know upon entering the program in order to thrive during your first year?
  - What is the most effective orientation format for sharing that information with students?
- Consider incorporating one or more of the following best-practice elements into your orientation:
  - **Peer mentoring**, which provides structured opportunities for experienced graduate/professional students to meet with and assist new students.
  - **Small-group discussions**, to share information about how graduate/professional students fit into the academic culture, and about their new role(s).
  - **Recognition of your students’ diversity of cultures, values, and experiences**, and how this diversity may, for example, inform their sense of belonging in an academic environment, and how they best interact with faculty, staff, and other students.
  - **Ongoing formal and informal opportunities** for peer and faculty interactions, throughout the students’ first and subsequent years, that address their ongoing needs. Sessions for more advanced students might focus on research methods, thesis/dissertation writing, funding, and career options.

Delivering Your Orientation Program

Prior to students’ arrival on campus:
- **Send a welcome letter to your incoming students**, if your department does not already do so. The letter could include information about important dates, funding and appointments, selected readings on academia and/or personal and professional development, information on the necessities (parking and transit options, local food, housing), and contact information for students if they have any questions.
- **Take advantage of the MyU Portal for admitted students**, which provides university-wide information, and (for most departments) a cell for you to provide program-specific information, such as orientation date(s), links to faculty bios, links to student organizations, and links to program pages for Facebook, Twitter, etc.

Early in the first semester:
- Provide an initial orientation session that incorporates any/all of the elements described above, as well as any elements you identify as important for your students.
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<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Contact Information</th>
<th>Services</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boynton Health Services</td>
<td>Phone: 612-624-1444 (Clinic) Web: <a href="http://www.bhs.umn.edu">www.bhs.umn.edu</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Center for Teaching and Learning</td>
<td>Phone: 612-625-3041 Web: <a href="http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/">www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Counseling and Consulting Services</td>
<td>Phone: 612-624-3323 Web: <a href="http://www.uccs.umn.edu">www.uccs.umn.edu</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>University Libraries</td>
<td>Web: <a href="http://www.lib.umn.edu">www.lib.umn.edu</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other sources, as appropriate</td>
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