

Date: April 26, 2018
To: Carl Lejuez
From: Committee on Graduate Studies
Subject: Dean's Charges 2017-2018

"[A] mentor should make sure a student has all the tools needed to complete the degree and end up placed well at the end of it" (student survey respondent)

BACKGROUND

This year's Dean's charge for the CGS tasked us with surveying existing practices in mentorship at KU, including policies on how mentoring is evaluated and how a change of mentor process is handled among different units in CLAS. We were also asked to produce a position statement on mentoring for CLAS. In approaching this task, we thought it best to start by distributing a questionnaire to both faculty and students that would help us have a good grasp of prevailing practices and attitudes about mentoring at KU.

The first week of the Spring 2018 semester, we distributed a survey to all CLAS faculty, including both DGS and regular faculty, asking them a range of questions about mentoring, for a total of 28 questions. Faculty questions targeted issues of how faculty approached advising at the university, the amount of labor they invested into it, how their departments evaluated mentoring, and procedures for the change of mentors. We received around 234 responses, from a range of disciplines, roughly split among humanities, natural sciences and social sciences (near 30% of respondents were from each group).

After interpretation of the faculty survey results, we distributed a comparable survey to graduate students, though with some adjustments due to their professional standing, as well as feedback received from faculty respondents. We had 209 student respondents to this second survey, which contained 33 questions. The disciplinary breakdown was similar to that of the faculty survey, though we cannot really compare with any great accuracy because students occasionally misidentified their units. (See Appendix I for survey questions).

As our work was aimed at helping develop satisfactory policy at the college level rather than as a research survey of KU mentoring practices, we approached the survey in a primarily qualitative manner, trying to glean as much as we could from comments from both faculty and students about how mentoring is working at KU. By and large, as our report reflects, we encountered considerable discontent and confusion regarding mentoring. There is both incredible passion and incredible frustration among faculty and students – both parties understand the need and importance of good mentoring, but both parties also share frustration regarding current mentoring practices.

DEAN'S CHARGES

1. Develop a College "Position Statement" on graduate mentoring.

The committee's efforts were geared toward providing college governance with feedback and suggestions on establishing oversight over mentoring and helping create fair and transparent

processes for the evaluation of mentors and the change of mentor process. Due to the extensive work we did on evaluating survey results, we were unable to evaluate existing practices on mentoring among peer and aspirational peer institutions. For this reason, we are not prepared to make a recommendation on a position statement for the College. We suggest forwarding this element of the Dean's charge to next year's committee with the hope that the work we have done will make that task easier.

The committee's work did yield several recommendations for improving graduate student mentoring that could inform such a position statement and future mentoring policy.

Recommendations for the College

- A cohesive message from the College will communicate to mentors the importance of establishing and maintaining effective mentoring relationships.
- An initial mentoring training or webinar should be required for both students and faculty.
- Resources for students and mentors on effective mentoring practices, use of mentoring agreements and establishing mentoring networks should be provided through regular mentoring workshops, lunches, and additional webinars.
- Faculty should be encouraged to interact with faculty outside of their program to build additional mentoring skills. Developing peer relationships for the purposes of mentoring will expose faculty to diverse perspectives and encourage them to learn from each other.
- Support should be provided to students in developing a road map of needs and career goals and how multiple mentors can facilitate their professional development. Students should be encouraged to develop mentoring networks by identifying faculty within and outside of their program to support their many needs.
- To encourage departments/programs to value mentoring, the College should outline how mentoring could be recognized and incentivized.
- Particularly, the College should look into mentoring issues in the sciences or in departments where student funding is contingent upon either work in a research lab or work with a particular faculty member. From the Student Survey results it becomes clear that when challenges arise between student and mentor in these situations, the consequences are more far-reaching than in other disciplines.

Recommendations for Departments/Programs

- Departments/programs should be encouraged to use individualized contracts between the student and mentor. Expectations of both the student and mentor should be clearly defined, with description of responsibilities, quality mentoring practices and agreed-upon timelines.
- Guidelines for these expectations should exist in manuals or handbooks with details and examples. Departments/programs must have detailed guidelines and policies for how to report and resolve issues, a process for disputes that is taken seriously.
- To better support faculty development, departments/programs must provide time to discuss mentoring among faculty on a regular basis.
- Peer mentoring by pairing experienced and effective mentors with new or struggling mentors will provide more opportunities to learn from each other and develop skills.

- Consideration of how mentees are distributed is needed to ensure equity in workload.
- Departments/programs should encourage students and faculty to take advantage of College resources.
- Apart for the opportunities provided by the College, departments should create additional opportunities for students to connect with professionals outside of academia, including alumni.
- Additional support can be provided through establishing a peer mentoring program for students.

That committee may also wish to revisit recommendations that emerged from the 2012-2013 Dean's Charges pertaining to the learning outcomes of GTAs and GRAs, as some of the recommendations pertain directly to the mentoring of graduate students in these roles (See Appendix II).

2. **Develop a set of recommendations for the evaluation of graduate mentoring in the College.**

Generally, the evaluation of graduate mentoring takes four forms or a combination of all: part of the faculty evaluation; part of annual evaluation of graduate students; collection of student feedback; and part of degree-level assessments.

The evaluation of graduate mentoring is most often **part of the faculty evaluation**. However, the faculty evaluation often only looks at easy to measure aspects such as number of students mentored, time to degree, number of publications co-authored by graduate students, and time spent on directing the students' work. There is often no measure of the quality of mentoring involved neither in the diversity of research that the mentor's students are pursuing nor of student growth and professional development. Since evaluation is often only based on self-reporting by faculty, there is an overall lack of accountability. Intervention (by DGS or Chair) only seems to occur when there are (repeatedly) problems. In some departments working with graduate students is not given high importance.

The **annual evaluation of graduate students** (yearly or per semester) is a way in which the graduate studies committee in a department can get insight into mentoring issues that the graduate director can then address, but the focus here is on evaluating the students and not their mentors. When graduate students approach their DGS to discuss mentoring issues, it is often up to the DGS to develop a strategy for helping the mentor. How effective this is, seems to largely depend on who is serving as DGS, who is serving as Chair, and the personality (receptiveness to constructive criticism) of the mentor.

Mentoring issues sometimes come up via **student feedback** (confidential or informal; questionnaires) or **degree-level assessment**.

Recommendations for the evaluation of graduate mentoring

Measures for evaluating mentoring should take various forms and be completed at multiple points.

- Use of mentoring contracts and yearly assessments (more formal measures of accountability and self-assessments for both student and mentor) are encouraged for all departments/programs.
- The mentoring relationship can be evaluated through student surveys completed at a student's annual reviews, annual review for faculty and with an exit survey. Departments/programs should consider carefully how to solicit anonymous feedback as well so that all graduate students feel safe to share.
- There must be a clearly defined process for accountability when there is poor mentoring and a clear avenue for students and mentors to share concerns when they arise, beyond their department/program.
- It is essential good mentoring be acknowledged and rewarded in a meaningful way.

While survey respondents felt that it would be a good thing for mentoring to be more closely assessed at the university, there was nonetheless concern that KU is already so bureaucratized and faculty are already undergoing multi-level assessments on a regular basis that to tack on another layer of assessment would be too burdensome and demotivating. There is a sense that too much of this responsibility is falling on women and junior faculty, often at the detriment of their PT or PTTR. There were also some looser suggestions about mentoring being cultivated outside the university bureaucratic systems at a more localized level. Concerns were raised about how candid the students could truly be in an evaluation of their graduate advisors.

3. Develop guidance for departments to facilitate the creation of department-specific policy on changing graduate advisors and determine whether or not such policy should be required of departments by the College or only recommended.

As the assembled responses from both the faculty and student surveys we administered clearly reflected, changes in advisor are a frequent occurrence for KU graduate students. Either because intellectual interests shifted or due to interpersonal challenges with an advisor, students needed to go through this transition. Survey responses indicated that the change in advisor was certainly doable in practice and that it was happening regularly, without students necessarily being penalized in the process. By and large, this is an encouraging finding. It is, however, less encouraging that even though the change is possible in practice, many faculty members were unsure as to how a student could initiate such a process in a professional, low-stress manner. The most common existing practice included students using DGS or chair/associate chair as primary point person to facilitate any changes in advising. (see Appendix II for detailed responses).

In light of how frequently graduate students have to confront uncertainties about their professional future, and the general hierarchical nature of academia which may leave them disempowered, all the more so should they belong to marginalized groups and identities, this lack of clarity is problematic in a process that could significantly affect a graduate student's professional and personal well-being. Existing practices, which would require that graduate students approach faculty in power and control over their professional futures, merely reinforces departmental power imbalances.

Recommendations

We recommend the following changes for how departments handle changes in advisor:

- Departments should have a written, transparent policy on changing advisors and that this policy be readily accessible to students, either through the graduate student handbook, or on the departmental website.
- Students should be able to access this policy independently and without needing to consult with departmental leadership in order to become aware of it. Policies should be posted on departmental websites under resources for graduate students.
- Students should be able to initiate the process independently, even though the DGS and other departmental leadership may need to be involved in order to ensure that the required changes go through.
- Within the policy language, departments should make it clear what they consider acceptable reasons for students to be able to change advisors.
- Within reason, departments should be as flexible as possible about allowing the student to work with their advisor of choice and take into account interpersonal and academic compatibility.
- Departments should specify timing for when advisor changes take place, if, depending on the discipline, there are timing constraints.
- Departments should also provide students with extra-departmental points of contact and support in the process, should students require or need such contacts, including Ombudsman or Admin support staff/graduate advisors.