

University of Delaware College of Engineering

Initiative to promote best practices in graduate advising

Introduction

In response to concerns raised in a Summer 2018 focus group study of graduate students in the College of Engineering, the working group on graduate student diversity and inclusion undertook an initiative in AY18-19 to promote best practices in graduate advising.

Committee leading the effort

Rachel Davidson	COE Associate Dean for Diversity, Professor Civil and Environmental Engineering
Camil Diaz	Ph.D. student, Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering
Elahe Ganji	Ph.D. student, Mechanical Engineering
Stephanie Law	Co-chair working group on graduate student diversity and inclusion, Professor Materials Science and Engineering
Christine Reoli	Staff graduate advisor, Civil and Environmental Engineering
Michael Santare	Co-chair working group on graduate student diversity and inclusion, Professor Mechanical Engineering

Goals

- Engage key stakeholders in dialogue about best practices in graduate advising
- Develop resources to help staff, faculty, and students improve graduate advising relationships
- In the long term, create a culture that promotes best practices in graduate advising

Process

The initiative included the following steps.

1. The committee collected resources and information about best practices, tips, and tools for graduate advising from colleagues and a web search.
2. A series of six discussions—open to all COE graduate students, staff graduate advisors, and faculty—were held from December 2018 to February 2019 to solicit input on specific strategies for advising. There were three discussions facilitated by and for graduate students (23 participants); two by and for faculty (approx. 20 participants); and one by and for staff graduate advisors (all 7 participated).
3. The committee synthesized the literature and input compiled from the lunches to draft a few documents to provide as resources. In addition, recommendations for follow up actions were developed.

Resource documents developed:

- College expectations for the graduate advising relationship
- Document describing tips and tools for graduate advising include portions focused on:
 - Expectations for individual advisor-advisee relationships
 - Individualized development program (IDP)/yearly report on progress plans
 - Weekly/bi-weekly meetings

Recommendations for follow up actions:

- The department staff graduate advisors should review and where necessary, update department graduate handbooks to ensure they are consistent, complete, readily available, and represent best practices.
 - The Women in Engineering graduate group should update the Graduate student handbook that provides useful information and advice, written by and for graduate students.
 - The Graduate School should develop procedures or guidelines related to key topics, including how to handle conflicts between graduate student and advisor, how to change advisors, graduate student time off, and how to Master's out. If the Graduate School does not, the College should.
 - The Graduate School should develop a document stating the University's values and expectations for graduate advising. The College of Engineering document can serve as a model.
 - The Dean's office should develop a proposal for mechanisms to improve accountability for faculty related to their role as graduate advisors. Possibilities to investigate include:
 - Encourage faculty to collect direct feedback from their students during IDP meetings.
 - Have grad coordinator collect feedback from students on their advising experience via:
 - Exit interviews of graduating students (can start these ASAP)
 - Biannual surveys that ask how well an advisor met previously agreed-upon expectations. These could have a quantitative design (e.g., 5-point scale). As a start, it could be as simple as asking students to indicate where on expectation scales their advisor actually falls, and follow-up discussion can be based on addressing any gap between advisor and student assessments.
 - Incorporate findings in annual faculty evaluations. Beforehand, have grad coordinator summarize data to capture overall trends and anonymize, when possible.
 - Develop appropriate follow up and consequences if an advisor continually fails to meet expectations (e.g., 3 years in a row). This may be a meeting with the Chair and perhaps colleagues to develop a plan of improvement and timeline for re-evaluation. It could involve allowing prospective students to request information on track records of specific faculty, in confidence, from grad coordinators.
4. Multiple stakeholders were offered an opportunity to provide input on the documents, including members of the working group on graduate student diversity and inclusion; graduate coordinators from each department; Department Chairs and Dean's leadership team, and the UD Interim vice provost for graduate and professional education.
 5. Once finalized, the documents will be disseminated through various avenues, such as, the College website, graduate student department orientation processes, graduate student government representatives, and the faculty mentoring program. Representatives of the committee will visit a faculty meeting in each department in Fall 2019 to make a brief presentation about the new resources.
 6. The take up rate and effectiveness of the new resources will be evaluated periodically. Feedback will be elicited from graduate students through the graduate student survey currently being developed in coordination with the Center for Research in Education and Social Policy (CRESP). It is due to be deployed for the first time in 2019, and every other year thereafter. Feedback from faculty will be elicited in parallel through short surveys or visits to faculty meetings.