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CCCC Statement of Professional Guidance for Mentoring Graduate Students

Conference on College Composition and Communication
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Executive Summary: This statement establishes principles for graduate student mentorship that is inclusive, equitable, sustained, and networked. These principles are intended for graduate faculty and program administrators in masters and doctoral programs in rhetoric and composition and related fields to help sustain robust mentorship and related initiatives (including redirecting resources; creating a culture of mentorship; encouraging curricular innovation; developing extracurricular panels or workshops; and provoking discussion among graduate faculty and students, among other efforts.)

Ethical mentorship¹ requires ongoing institutional and interpersonal efforts to move graduate students into, through, and beyond degree completion toward satisfactory job placement beyond or within the academy. The imperative for mentorship is especially urgent now in light of pervasive precarity within higher education including scarcity, contingency, overloads, corporatization, and labor exploitation (e.g., Bérubé, 2013; MLA Task Force, 2014). In these contexts especially, mentoring relationships can become flexible responses to students' differentiated needs as well as a part of larger efforts to dismantle institutional biases and exploitative practices. Graduate faculty and administrators have a responsibility to engage in inclusive, differentiated, and collaborative mentorship with graduate students. We thus affirm the following principles for sustaining mentorship that is responsive to local conditions, needs, and individuals:

Make academic practice and conventions accessible: Graduate study necessitates that students take on new languages, discourses, epistemologies, and ways of being, and navigate unfamiliar and potentially hostile spaces and discourses. Each student, with their ranging prior experience and positionalities (e.g., neurodiverse, veteran, parent, working-class background, multilingual) will experience the culture(s) in their graduate program differently. To help make academic cultures explicit and accessible, mentors can:

Demystify practice: Explicitly address discourses, genres, research methods, and networking, especially with minority, first-generation, and/or historically underrepresented or marginalized students who may disproportionately labor to acclimate to and work within an institutional academic culture as a “foreign place with a different language” (Sinanan, 2016, p. 156).

Demystify writing and research: Teach students to identify, acclimate to, and interrogate (with the possibility of resisting and transforming) academic discourses and practices. Graduate faculty should work to unpack and make available disciplinary ways of critically writing, researching, and publishing (Micciche with Carr, 2011; Brooks-Gillies et al., 2015).

Advocate for financial support: Advise on professional opportunities, like conference travel, mindful of students' varying financial situations. Advocate in departments and programs for adequate or increased financial support for critical professionalization activity (e.g., conference travel, summer support, job market support).

Enact collaborative and networked mentorship: More than a one-to-one relationship alone, graduate students and mentors benefit from a networked approach. Complementing mentorship in students' home departments, graduate mentors can encourage horizontal mentoring (VanHaitsma and Ceraso, 2017) and facilitate mentorship across their institution (and even in other institutions and the field) to help meet varying needs, intersectional positionalities, interests, and concerns. To practice networked mentoring, graduate mentors can:

Scaffold mentoring: Enact advising schemes which intentionally build mentoring relationships with multiple faculty and program stakeholders (e.g., assign students a first-year advisor, then assign a different second-year advisor before they select a dissertation or thesis director). Networked mentoring can also involve the expertise of various stakeholders, including alumni, university career centers, graduate school personnel, mental health professionals, faculty in other departments, field organizations, and so on.

Manage relationships: In co-advising situations graduate students should not be responsible for managing or resolving potential conflicts. Moreover, the labor and responsibility of mentorship should not be disproportionately placed on students themselves nor on the generosity of any individual mentor. It should not be assumed that certain students should be mentored by certain faculty, that mentoring is any single faculty member's responsibility, or that mentoring is limited only to those sharing scholarly interests.

Practice mentoring as transformation: "Remaining wedded to outmoded systems, including a model of apprenticeship in higher education that reinforces the false assumption that professorship is the only meaningful career for humanities doctoral recipients, does a tremendous disservice to all individuals and organizations that benefit from humanistic perspectives" (Rogers, 2013, p. 21). More than apprenticeship, mentorship can take transformation as its paradigm, as new pathways to success embrace the diverse needs of contemporary graduate students and the worlds in which they live and work (see Smith, 2012; MLA Task Force, 2014). To enact mentorship as transformation, graduate mentors can:

Learn about mentees' intentions: Those involved in the mentorship of graduate students should learn why each student has chosen to pursue graduate education and how to (re)imagine "the field" and its varied work in ways that exceed mentors' own.

Learn about job markets: Graduate students and mentors should learn about the state of the academic job markets, including the casualization (i.e., the current climate of nontenure track and contingent labor) of the academic workforce. Mentors and graduate students should learn about resources for quality positions outside higher education, including careers in education, nonprofits, government, etc. Some resources include [MLA's Connected Academics initiative](#), [Versatile PhD](#), or [#Alt-Ac Academy](#).

Validate and help students prepare for diverse careers: Graduate students should be encouraged and validated for career aspirations, choices, and outcomes beyond (ever fewer) conventional academic tenure-track positions (MLA Task Force, 2014). Toward mentorship that imagines a rich range of postgraduation options, we recommend that mentors:

Avoid myths: Mentors should not invoke or imply damaging and unrealistic myths about what success on the (academic) job market must look like (e.g., that only R1 academic positions are desirable, that a national academic job search is the only way to secure satisfactory employment). Instead, faculty should work with graduate students to imagine myriad postdegree options and follow students' leads on working to meet their goals (see also Miller, et al., 2015).

Share information: Mentors and students should share information about writing careers, academic job markets, and where program graduates go. Programs might consider tracking and making available information about student job placement after graduation (Rogers, 2013, p. 19) and/or build networks among recent graduates and current students for horizontal mentoring.

Embody commitments to inclusion and diversity through differentiated mentorship:

Mentorship is, of course, never one-size-fits-all. Students coming from undergraduate and graduate work at minority serving institutions (for instance, a student of color entering a predominately white institution) may experience the academy as a “brave space,” a positioning which leaves them to take on additional emotional and mental labor as they give up a former condition in favor of a new way of seeing and understanding (Arao & Clemens, 2013). While all graduate students work to become socialized into their varied roles as graduate students (Golde, 1999), historically underrepresented and marginalized groups benefit from mentorship practices in and outside of the classroom (Okawa, 2002). Toward practicing inclusive and differentiated mentorship, mentors should:

Stand as an ally: To practice allyship (see Edwards; Patel) mentors can, to start, reflect on their own privileged positions and work to understand the experiences of those they’re allying themselves with; publicly identify their allyship efforts by marking their own and others’ positionalities of privilege, practice self-reflection, and “initiate the change toward personal, institutional, and societal justice and equality” (Kendall, 2003).

Rhetorically listen: Mentors should practice rhetorical listening, which “signifies a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture” and combats how whiteness may function as an invisible racial category that influences the lens through which the listener may hear certain voices (Ratcliffe, 2005).

Make and protect space: Mentors should never engage in exclusionary practices, such as using stereotypical language, engaging in microaggressions, or enacting privileged acts of socialization. Mentors should practice vigilance against and intolerance for implicit or explicit bias. In sum, mentors should make and protect spaces for all graduate student issues and concerns.

Efforts to enact a culture of equitable and accessible mentoring are in the interest of all stakeholders in higher education to realize a diverse future scholar population that will continue to enact change throughout our field and varied institutions.

¹Domains of mentorship include (but are not limited to) field knowledge; research practices; academic discourses and critical writing; classroom, tutoring, administration, and other work training and experience; networking; professional development (including conferences, publication, research grants, institutes, and so on); life-work balance; time-to-degree planning; as well as securing employment post-graduation in a range of possible settings, including positions in government, higher education, nonprofits, education, etc.

References and Further Resources

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