Ph.D. Mentoring

Introduction/Background

The mentoring of Ph.D. students is a most important faculty responsibility. In the absence of consistent, high-quality mentoring, it is exceedingly difficult for Ph.D. students to work expeditiously through their program and advance to a successful career in their chosen field. Given the importance of mentoring, the Graduate Studies Committee, at the request of Associate Dean for Graduate Studies Tara Wallace, conducted an inquiry into the state of affairs of mentoring in the Ph.D. programs of Columbian College of Arts and Sciences. Dean Wallace communicated to the committee that CCAS has received in recent years a number of complaints from Ph.D. students regarding inadequate and inaccurate advising. As a means of encouraging programs to reevaluate, as appropriate, their mentoring practices, the committee asked three basic questions: In what kinds of mentoring practices do Ph.D. programs engage? What are the challenges Ph.D. programs face in mentoring their students? What kinds of solutions have programs adopted to address these challenges?

The committee collected information about Ph.D. mentoring from the programs in two separate phases. Following our September meeting, committee members asked program advisors (e.g., program chairs, directors of graduate studies) a range of questions about mentoring practices. (1) What are the strengths and weaknesses of mentoring in the program? (2) Who has primary responsibility for mentoring Ph.D. students? (3) Do faculty members have a forum for discussing the progress of Ph.D. students? (4) Do graduate students submit annual reports? (5) At what point(s) in the program do Ph.D. students typically run into difficulties in sustaining their forward progress?

Following our October meeting, after the committee had discussed the feedback received from the program advisors, a decision was made to reach out with a follow up inquiry. The reason for this follow up was that, in the first phase of our inquiry, we found that many departments noted that the post-comprehensive examination period was a particularly challenging period. A number of programs had identified the post-comprehensive/pre-dissertation prospectus period as one that can consume a lot of time for certain students and potentially derail completion of the degree altogether. With these concerns in mind, the committee specifically asked about the approaches programs take to keep students on track during this crucial stage, whether such approaches are big or small, successful or not.
Findings

The information collected by the committee highlights both similarities and differences across Ph.D. programs within CCAS in terms of mentoring practices, successes, and challenges. It is important to point out that Columbian College’s Ph.D. programs vary along a number of potentially salient dimensions. Some programs are larger than others (e.g., one program has 104 Ph.D. students, while another has 18 Ph.D. students). Programs also vary in the extent to which their Ph.D. students are fully funded and, therefore, are enrolled on a full-time basis. Also, programs in the natural sciences can be quite different from their counterparts in the humanities and social sciences, in terms of the recruitment of students to work with particular faculty in particular laboratories, and, as a result, the frequency and nature of faculty-student interactions. Despite such differences, some common patterns emerged across programs of all types. Below we summarize our findings. We believe this information will be useful to all Ph.D. programs as they engage in their ongoing processes of assessment.

(1) First-year mentoring. About half of the Ph.D. programs indicate that first-year Ph.D. students have a designated advisor (i.e., an advisor other than the program’s graduate advisor). In some instances this advisor is assigned. In other instances, there is naturally a first-year advisor, as students are admitted to work with particular faculty members. For example, in one department one new student is admitted each year per faculty member, based on mutual research interests. The matched faculty member serves as the first-year advisor. In the programs where there is no designated first-year advisor, the program advisor effectively serves in this capacity for all first-year students. Most departments that had designated first-year advisors found that this was an effective way to help students choose classes and get other specific academic advice.

(2) Annual reports. About two-thirds of the Ph.D. programs require periodic progress reports on the part of students. A typical model is the written annual report. Some departments require such reports throughout the course of their program, while others limit this requirement to particular stages. For example, one department requires annual reports specifically for students who have completed their comprehensive examinations, while another department requires the submission of a CV every year, along with reports on summer research activities. There can be limits to the utility of annual reports, as one program reports that it encounters a significant non-response to its call for annual report submissions.

(3) Faculty discussions of Ph.D. student progress. What happens to these reports once they are submitted? Which faculty members consider these reports? Or, more generally, in what capacity, if any, do program faculty meet to discuss Ph.D. student
progress? About half of the Ph.D. programs report faculty meetings of one sort or another to consider the progress that students are making. These meetings vary in their composition from program faculty as a whole in some instances to a committee of graduate faculty in others. In other programs, program advisors, or student-specific advisors, have the primary responsibility for monitoring student progress and providing feedback. Some programs discuss every student each year; others focus more on discussing students before they reach the dissertation stage, at which point the dissertation committee takes over. There seems to be no guarantee that the dissertation committee will meet regularly. Most departments that had designated meetings of some set of faculty found this to be useful, and some found that it was particularly useful as a way of tracking students at the post-comprehensive exam stage.

(4) Post-comprehensive examination/pre-dissertation prospectus period. As mentioned earlier, a number of programs identified the period after comps and before a proposal has been approved as a challenge to mentoring. Students in this period can take a long time to produce a proposal, or fail to produce a proposal altogether. Programs have taken a number of steps to mentor students effectively through this process. For example, two programs require students to enroll in a workshop where they receive assistance in the proposal development process, as well as other professional development mentoring. Another program requires that students stay programmatically engaged by attending numerous seminars each semester and making annual research presentations. Students are required to submit forms verifying that they have met these requirements.
Recommendations

The information collected by the committee during its consideration of Ph.D. mentoring is limited in a number of key respects. Committee members reached out informally, usually via email, to program advisors. Such informality might limit the accuracy and completeness of the information generated from programs. In addition, with such limited information, no effort was made to systematically search for patterns between programmatic practices, on the one hand, and markers of success, on the other hand (e.g., attrition rates, time to degree completion). Despite these limitations, the committee is offering several recommendations for programs, as appropriate, to consider as best practices in advising.

(1) Require annual reports of all Ph.D. students. The type of auditing that annual reports entail strike the committee as an important benchmark for gauging and encouraging student progress. More informal tracking, such as through the efforts of program advisors and research mentors, lacks the comprehensiveness of written documents that must be officially submitted. In addition, the mere presence of an annual reporting exercise may serve as an impetus for students to seek out mentoring ahead of time, as a means of staying on track when the time comes to make an official filing.

(2) Provide students with faculty feedback on annual reports. A program may hold, for example, faculty meetings to discuss the progress of Ph.D. students. As the program increases in size, the burden of providing such feedback naturally increases as well. Despite such burdens, best practices would require a program to persist in this practice. In general, the committee believes that timely official feedback on student progress is an essential element of mentoring that can identify challenges and serve as a launching point for designing solutions to keep students moving expeditiously toward degree completion.

(3) Support student programmatic engagement after the completion of comprehensive examinations. With the period prior to the approval of a dissertation prospectus being a challenge in a number of Ph.D. programs, the committee encourages programs to take official steps to address such difficulties. To the extent that sustained engagement with an intellectual community is a challenge that students encounter, programs might consider actions such as making seminar attendance and research presentations mandatory on some periodic basis. To the extent that proposal writing itself can be a challenge, programs might consider convening dissertation workshops, or at least providing examples of previous proposals of the excellence expected by the program.