EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: | What supports graduate students' teaching?

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Why?

For decades there remains a pervasive mythology that graduate students growth as educators and their involvement in professional development is the result of individual motivation and programming offerings. Earlier research on graduate students' teaching development typically focused on formal institution-wide workshops, certificates and programming (e.g., Marincovich, Prostko, & Stout, 1998). The growing literature uncovered surprisingly low levels of awareness and participation (see respectively Golde & Dore, 2001; 2004 McGoldrick, Hoyt, & Colander, 2010). Recently, studies began examining what happens after training sessions are completed and discovered limited impact on graduate students' knowledge (Seung, Bryan, & Haugan, 2012) and teaching practice (e.g., Buehler & Marcum, 2007).

At the same time, higher education institutions were being conceptualized as complex organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2008) understood through frameworks such as complexity theory (e.g., McClellan, 2010; Reid & Marshall, 2009) and communities of development (Blackmore, 2009). Academic development was similarly perceived as occurring within individual, institution, and sector levels (Fraser, Gosling, and Sorcinelli, 2010), as well as disciplinary cultures (Taylor, 2010).

This complexity intrigued me as I tried to tease out the reality of graduate students' support from the mythology. As a full-time graduate student working in educational development supporting graduate students' teaching, I experienced both perspectives. I

was one of the students chatting inthe hallway and one of the team in meetings discussing programming. The disparate views of informal and formal supports, differences in awareness of institutional and sector resources, and the range of goals of people in both groups, inspired me to look closer at what really supports graduate students' teaching. This article is a short summary of the key findings for individuals and committees involved in supporting graduate students.

Study

In seeking to examine the broad question of "What supports graduate students' teaching?", this study sought to identify existing and recommended supports for graduate students' teaching and the documented goals of such supports.

Data Sources:

This mixed-method study encompassed five data sources spanning a decade:
-National and institutional documents from 2002 - 2012
-Two pre-existing surveys of graduate students: the student services survey and the exit survey
-Interviews with 13 graduate students who are indicated by GS1 to GS13
-Interviews with 8 supportive individuals who were given pseudonyms (e.g., Patricia)

Patterns of Support:

Through qualitative and quantitative analysis, this research identified formal and informal supports, including feedback, across all segments of the university including individuals, faculty, peers, courses, departments, the institution, and the higher education sector. Access and quality was shaped by communication and collaboration across and within these layers. Thus support for graduate students was based on interrelated sources of information, feedback, and mentorship spanning all layers of their academic and personal environment.

Key Findings

Each of the four main findings is described below with evidence and related questions for supportive individuals, educational developers, and administrators.

1. Formal Supports Are Only Part of the Mechanism

Evidence: In addition to formal supports, such as journals, institution-wide workshops, departmental training, and course TA meetings, graduate students sought or

experienced informal support from peers, family, fellow TAs in the same course, faculty mentors, research supervisors, and other supportive individuals. The most common sources of informal support were faculty members and peers, which were mentioned by all 13 interviewed graduate student; in comparison, formal course-level support was mentioned by 12 of the 13. "A lot of times it was fellow grad students sitting around the grad lounge, informally discussing: 'I have 40 papers to mark within a day. Do you have any suggestions?'" (interviewed graduate student GS5).

Questions for supportive individuals, educational developers, and administrators:

- What supports are currently described, recommended, or celebrated in planning documents?

- What supports exist on campus if one considers all forms of support?

- To what extent do we value informal sources of support? How is this valuing reflected in planning?

2. No Form of Support Operates Independently

Evidence: Just as no person or group acts in isolation within a university (Bolman & Deal, 2008), every source of formal or informal support was interdependent, with support shaped by multiple layers inter-connected (or disconnected) through communication and collaboration. Graduate students' feedback and training was influenced by layers that encouraged or hindered their awareness, access, motivation, and engagement, such as the relevancy of the focus and timing of such training or feedback (student services survey; interviewed faculty/staff Linda; Mary). Graduate students motivated to seek feedback felt stymied by policies and the lack of an institution-wide process (or encouragement) for TAs, relying mainly on students' willingness and instructors' permission (student services survey; interviewed graduate students GS7; GS8; GS11; GS12).

Questions for supportive individuals, educational developers, and administrators:

- Who do we consider as providing support

for graduate students' teaching?

- Who else is providing support on our campus? Does their support matter when planning?

- Where exist possibilities for collaboration? How might they be nurtured?

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3. Graduate Students and Supportive Individuals Can Feel Disconnected

Evidence: Despite access to such seminars, courses, experienced graduate students, mentors, training, websites, and more, graduate students were unaware and felt disconnected and isolated (student services survey, Linda, interviewed graduate student GS12), echoing prior research (e.g., Barrington, 2001; Lovitts, 2004). Individual graduate students struggled with self-doubt while pretending that everything was okay, further isolating them (interviewed faculty/staff Patricia). Miscommunication occurred within the layers of courses and departments as graduate students were left unsure of their responsibilities, confused about the content and how to handle late assignments, tentative about their place as instructors within a department, puzzled about expectations, and generally uncertain as educators (Elizabeth; student services survey, GS5, GS13, exit survey). Online resources were not easy to navigate or locate (interviewed graduate students) or had broken links and inaccurate names (document analysis). Supportive individuals felt similarly disconnected with limited discussion among colleagues within the institution about graduate student support and resulting limited awareness of what was available, needed, and could be jointly created (Patricia). One-off events brought people together briefly, but were infrequent (GS1) or did not encourage conversations between graduate students (GS11; student services survey). Sustained conversations would require more time and effort.

Questions for supportive individuals, educational developers, and administrators:

- Who is included in current discussions and planning?

- How are formal and informal supports communicated?

- To what extent is (or might) the widest possible range of individuals included? How?

4. Longitudinal Support is Needed as Even Well Laid Gears Need Regular Tuning

Evidence: One single session at the start of graduate students' two to six (plus) years of studies is not enough. To improve their teaching over the length of their studies, graduate students needed training, feedback and other support to be ongoing. For example, end–of-term feedback alone left graduate students unsure about their teaching quality during the term when improvement was possible if they knew what to change (student services survey). Some graduate students sought informal feedback from their students throughout the term, stating the benefit for those students (interviewed graduate students GS6, GS11, GS12). Graduate students desired and needed access to initial feedback followed by an opportunity to implement that feedback, including through ongoing mentorship over a prolonged relationship (GS7, interviewed faculty/staff Linda). Benefits could include self-reflection, awareness of teaching strategies, knowledge of good teaching practices, and confidence as highlighted by researchers (e.g., Bell, Mladenovic, & Segara, 2010; Gaia, Corts, Tatum, & Allen, 2003; Smith, 2001).

Questions for supportive individuals, educational developers, and administrators:

- What are the goals and purpose for supporting graduate students' teaching?

- How is teaching development generally viewed (e.g., longitudinal, valuable)?

- When are supports made available, communicated, and encouraged during their studies?

- What additional supports are needed and when?

Once the goals are set, communicate this vision widely as shifts in university culture require more than a single written report (see literature on universities as dynamic and

learning organizations including: Blackmore, 2009; Bolman & Deal, 2008; McClellan, 2010; Reid & Marshall, 2009; and Trowler & Bamber, 2005).

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