Best Practices for Graduate Student Advising and Retention

As part of effective advising, faculty should understand the current university policies, and any changes that may have occurred, student support personnel should follow up to ensure that all graduate school forms have been filed and satisfactory academic progress has been established. In addition, all programmatic responsibilities must be completed.

In this section, we have prepared a list of best practices that are nationally recognized in various graduate programs and are particularly helpful in creating a stimulating and supportive environment for students to be successful and graduate in a timely manner.

ATTEND ORIENTATION FOR NEW AND EXISTING GRADUATE FACULTY MEMBERS

Program directors should keep informed of policy changes by attending the Fall Seminar/ Orientation for New and Existing Graduate Faculty Members and Graduate Council meetings. The Graduate School staff will visit each College annually to go over new policy changes, as requested. Graduate Council representatives are required to present new policy changes with faculty in department meetings and at graduate program committee meetings to ensure faculty members are kept up-to-date. Policy information can be found in the Graduate Catalog and updates are posted on the Graduate School website. To obtain minutes as well as policy updates visit the Graduate Council website at ( ).

Faculty members should not contradict university policies, nor promise or commit the university to decisions contrary to university policies. Faculty should be knowledgeable about the override, petition and appeals processes and know when each is appropriate.

CONDUCT DEPARTMENTAL OPEN HOUSE/PROGRAM ORIENTATION

Host departmental open house or college orientations for new graduate students. Fall orientations are best held to coincide with the Graduate School Orientation, held each fall in August. In the program orientations the most important information that you can provide to new students is what you expect from them. Often those students new to graduate school experiences do not know the culture or expectations for graduate school. Provide students with the tools and resources needed to navigate their graduate career. Departmental Open House could be held during the Spring semester or Summer.

Departmental orientations should include information on degree plans, meeting university-wide and coursework requirements, departmental requirements, meeting the requirements of teaching or research advisors, joining professional organizations, making presentations at professional meetings, publishing presentations, what determines a good thesis or dissertation, what determines satisfactory academic progress, ethics in research, and understanding professional behavior.

ENROLLING COHORT GROUPS OF STUDENTS

If resources are limited in a department, then it is best to think about cohort groups of students who enter and take classes together on a well-defined schedule throughout the curriculum. Generally, scheduling in cohorts requires fewer electives courses. Also, having a good, solid curriculum that is up to
date, but streamlined, with few tracks is always easier to market and to maintain. Advising is often much easier for cohort students in that they will take the same courses each semester until graduation.

DIVERSE COURSE DELIVERY SYSTEMS

Programs with large numbers of part-time students should consider offering the program online, or at least offering a majority of the courses online. Although initial costs can be higher to convert the curriculum to online (the university has resources to assist), these costs usually decline in time and allow many programs to reach scattered, but important audiences of students at a distance.

FALL ADMISSIONS

Consider admissions only in the fall semester, to simplify course offerings. Keep the curriculum simple so that advising is easier, particularly for the master’s programs. Consider cohort groups of students that will take courses together, as well as a few electives that could be taken by many students. In this way, the course offerings are simplified and students get some choice. It is best in master’s programs to have fewer tracks or no tracks and concentrate on a solid and up-to-date curriculum.

DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL SKILLS

Develop a formal extracurricular component to the program, of fixed events that are considered important in developing professional skills of students. Examples include a brown-bag lunch discussion of teaching challenges; a research symposium; a seminar on portfolio or resume development; an award ceremony for those who graduate or receive fellowships or honors; a discussion panel of faculty, employers, or others discussing future employment situations; and email listservs for students to connect with each other, etc. Formally adopting the extracurricular component makes it easier to ensure that student’s needs are consistently met.

GENERAL ADVISING SESSIONS EACH SEMESTER

General advising sessions assist students in understanding departmental expectations. A Special Advising Day/Night should be held every semester so that students will have a clear understanding of policies and procedures. This will save time and is more convenient for staff and students. Those that need to take special courses such as thesis and dissertation can have a question and answer section and get their forms approved in one setting. If you have a computer setup, then students who wish to take regular courses can enter these into the registration system and problems can be solved in real-time.

It is helpful to post the information on your website several weeks prior to this where you let each student know what they should bring to the advising session. Also this is a great opportunity for students to gain clarity on information regarding program milestones, such as independent study, qualifying examinations, exemptions from university-wide examinations, and thesis/dissertation.
UNIVERSITY CHAT FOR GENERAL ADVISING

Consider using the JSU on-line chat system for general advising sessions. Contact the Office of Communications to schedule an event.

EARLY STUDENT REGISTRATION

Graduate students need to register early for courses. It is helpful to establish the curriculum so that a standard first semester course schedule is completed and you can register students into it without waiting for students to attend the graduate program orientation. Any adjustments can be made at the program orientation. Students can finalize and accept the registration process online.

MAINTAIN A CURRENT STUDENT HANDBOOK

It is important to have a current student handbook available for all students. This student handbook should provide students with all departmental requirements for successful matriculation through the program. It should list important milestones to be completed, a listing of full-time and part-time faculty members, including those who can chair thesis and dissertations, research interest of faculty members, departmental organizations, and other items of interest to graduate students.

DEGREE PLAN DEVELOPMENT

In order to advise graduate students effectively and efficiently, it is best to organize the departmental functions so that courses are offered to students in a sequential manner following the departmental curriculum guide for degree completion. It should be planned with few substitutions and specificity for course substitutions. Approved Course Substitution Forms are required for course substitutions. It is helpful to not list courses nor require students to take courses that are not required for degree completion. The degree plan should be included in the curriculum section of the student handbook.

DEVELOP THE DEGREE PLAN DURING THE FIRST SEMESTER OF student enrollment

Once the course schedule has been planned, it is possible to build effective degree plans for students. A degree plan is a listing of required and elective course work along with other degree requirements agreed to by the student and the degree program specifying what is needed to successfully complete the program. It should be used as an advising tool to help students plan their course of study. Developing and monitoring degree plan processes will prevent delays in students meeting graduation requirements.

Degree Plans should be developed in the first semester of enrollment for all students. Please submit all requests for transfer work at the same time that you submit the degree plan to the Graduate School.

The Graduate School places a checklist template for all active degree-seeking graduate students in both CYBERORIENTATION and CYBERADVISING and are on the Graduate School website.
The Graduate School will accept faxes of degree plans provided all appropriate signatures are indicated on the form. It is recommended that copies of degree plans are maintained in departmental offices for internal and external auditing purposes.

PROACTIVELY MONITOR STUDENT SATISFACTORY ACADEMIC PROGRESS

Advisors are required to monitor satisfactory academic progress of students during pre-registration and scheduled advisement activities. Ensure that there is a systematic way to proactively track information regarding successful academic progress towards the completion of Graduate School and department requirements, each semester. This includes identifying students requiring Academic Enhancement Plans (AEP), ensuring that all “I” and “I/P” grades are completed in a timely manner, all required university-wide and departmental test have been completed, and required forms have been filed in a timely manner. Refer to the section on Academic Regulations for guidelines and resources available to assist you with helping your students maintain successful academic progress. AEP’s are used as an intervention strategy to assist students who are in danger of being dismissed and we strongly advise programs to file these plans BEFORE students are dismissed, provided that the program believes the student can succeed. Students who have been dismissed from selected programs may be eligible to take advantage of the Graduate Second Chance program after a three year period. Policies related to this program are documented in the Graduate Catalog.

IDENTIFY GRADUATION DEFICIENCIES EARLY

Complete a pre-certification of graduating students in the semester before they are intending to graduate. One easy way of determining who will is close to graduation, is to meet regularly with the students in general advising sessions. The degree plan may be used as a guide.

The Graduate Council will not approve petitions for students to graduate without meeting published degree requirements. Students must meet all degree requirements as stated in the Graduate Catalog, and all departmental requirements as published in the student handbook.

The Graduate School has a graduation certification checklist and a timeline of all graduation deadlines available to assist you with planning for graduation. The checklist can be found on the Graduate School website.

GRADUATE STUDENT HANDBOOK

A graduate student handbook is required for all programs and should carefully describe expectations for student progress, in both coursework and independent learning experiences. Place this on your website and inform students about it during orientations and other advising meetings. Having a handbook that describes policies and expectations for graduate students is a requirement by SACs. Maintenance of the handbook is important and should be done at the time that Graduate Catalog copy is due, for consistency of information. Every program should have its own individual handbook (master’s and doctoral programs must be developed and maintained separately in the content management system). Plan to make updates to your handbooks every spring semester, prior to June 1.
TRACK REGISTRATION INTO DISSERTATION HOURS

Confirm that all students registered for dissertation hours have been declared a degree candidate and passed qualifying examinations as required by the department and that the appropriate documents have been submitted to and received by the Graduate School. Advisors should assist doctoral students in forming an approved dissertation committee. Outcomes should be agreed upon for each semester of dissertation hours.

ACADEMIC PROGRESS FOR DOCTORAL STUDENTS

Advisors must monitor student progress milestones from entry to graduation. All doctoral students should have successfully passed qualifying examinations. Admission to candidacy for doctoral students will normally take place near the end of the third year and course work should be completed during this time. Doctoral students should meet with their doctoral advisory committees each semester during their dissertations. IRB Approval must be granted prior to collecting data. Data collected prior to IRB Approval will not be used for dissertation purposes. Dissertations in progress (preparing a prospectus) for more than two semesters should be reviewed by the dissertation committee, which should notify the program director if there is lack of progress.

All doctoral students must be evaluated each year by the graduate program committee to determine if they are making progress to degree completion.

ADVISING OF GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANTS

SACs requires that all teaching assistants have a faculty supervisor. Please inform your faculty supervisors that they are to meet with the GTAs at least weekly and are required to provide an evaluation at the end of each semester on their teaching performance. The results of the evaluation should be maintained in the office of the faculty supervisor.

GRADUATE AWARDS AND RECOGNITIONS

The Graduate School recommends to departments and colleges that they offer recognition for outstanding achievements and contributions made by graduate students and that they nominate graduate students for the university-wide awards such as the Excellence in Graduate Teaching Award, the Excellence as a Graduate Assistant Award, and the Best Dissertation and Best Thesis awards.

In addition, the Graduate School awards certificates to graduate students for outstanding presentations and research each year immediately following the Graduate Research Forum. Please encourage your faculty and students to attend and participate.

The Graduate School is always interested in thanking our outstanding faculty who selflessly mentor doctoral students. Therefore, a new award, the Award for Faculty Excellence in Mentoring Doctoral Students, will be offered annually to the two best mentors. You may nominate an outstanding faculty mentor in January of each year and the recipients will receive their award at the Graduate Student Appreciation Luncheon and students will be recognized at the Exemplary Doctoral Scholars recognition.