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Graduate Student Peer Mentoring Programs: Benefitting Students, Faculty and Academic Programs

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10 Graduate Student Peer-Mentoring Programs: Benefiting Students, Faculty, and Academic Programs

Beth A. Boehm and Amy J. Lueck

Peer mentoring—students mentoring other students—is an area of increasing interest for scholars and administrators of graduate education. The range of activities that constitute peer mentoring is vast, but includes providing insights into the departmental culture, guidance through major program milestones, psychosocial support, and friendship (Kram and Isabella 1985; Grant-Vallone and Ensher 2000). While most students are assigned a faculty advisor or mentor, the perspectives of peer mentors who may be only a year or two ahead of the mentee are valuable in different but powerful ways (Kram and Isabella 1985). While it is most common to talk about peer mentors helping new students adapt to a graduate program, peer mentees and mentors both can benefit from the mentoring relationship by co-presenting at conferences, forming study groups, or co-authoring articles. These other models of co-mentoring and group support are increasingly recognized alongside one-on-one peer mentoring as supportive of student retention, satisfaction, and success in graduate studies (Allen, McManus, and Russell 1999; McGuire and Reger 2003).

In this chapter, we will draw on our diverse experiences with peer mentoring programs, Beth from the perspective of an English faculty program advisor and administrator and Amy as a graduate student mentor/mentee at our institution, the University of Louisville. What unites our experiences is the programming we have developed to support peer mentoring programs across the disciplines through the School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies (SIGS), where Amy works as a research assistant to Beth, who now serves as the Vice Provost for Graduate Studies and Dean of SIGS at the University of Louisville. Through the following dialogue,¹ we will

address the benefits of peer mentoring to various constituencies involved in graduate education and describe our own institutional attempts to foster peer mentoring across the disciplines.

While peer mentoring has always occurred informally through advice-seeking and collegial relationships among students, facilitating peer mentoring formally through departmental and university-wide programming is important for ensuring that all students have access to the benefits of peer mentoring and for maximizing the benefits of peer mentoring for faculty and programs. Some students do not seek out or secure fruitful peer-mentoring relationships on their own, and informal mentoring does not help faculty and programs in their work with graduate students. We argue that formal peer-mentoring programs support faculty by relieving the full burden of mentoring from the primary mentor and benefit graduate programs by dispersing the efforts of recruitment, orientation, and acculturation of incoming students. We describe the various forms of peer mentoring that we have supported and participated in—from one-on-one mentor pairings to intergenerational writing groups and interdisciplinary support groups—focusing throughout on the specific benefits to faculty and programs as well as students. By demonstrating the varied benefits of formalized peer-mentoring programs, we hope to increase the faculty and departmental support necessary for the success of such programs.

Peer-mentoring programs provide ways for students to take control of their own learning and professional development process, but these efforts need to be supported. Formalizing peer-mentoring programs provides that support, and a well-functioning peer-mentoring program subsequently releases crucial faculty time and resources, which can be allocated to more focused and effective forms of student support. Though some research suggests that informal mentoring is perceived by protégés as more effective than formal mentoring (Chao, Walz, and Gardner 1992; Allen, McManus, and Russell 1999), especially on career-related functions such as sponsorship, coaching, exposure, and visibility, these two models certainly need not be mutually exclusive. Instead, assigned peer mentors represent just one node in what should be a network of formal and informal mentoring relationships for graduate students.

Beginnings

AMY: Arriving in Louisville on a cold March day in 2010, I was greeted at the airport by a warm and energetic Nepalese man named

Shyam. I was coming to Louisville at that time for a visitation day that welcomed newly accepted PhD applicants to the program, and though I hadn't accepted my position in the program yet, Shyam had been assigned as my peer mentor. He had already contacted me prior to visitation day to extend his welcome to the program, answer any questions I might have, and, yes, offer to cart me around Louisville during my first visit. As a third-year student, Shyam had successfully navigated the transition to Louisville and the first years of coursework and exams. As Beth would say, he had been vetted as a student who could represent the program well and guide others through. He had first-hand knowledge of the program that he was willing to share, and wasn't too far removed from the experience himself to remember how difficult it can be to find one's way through the first days, months, and years of graduate study at a new university.

Coming from Pittsburgh, with no local network or friends in Kentucky, I was comforted to have someone to help show me the ropes. From my first call home to Pittsburgh that night from the bed-and-breakfast, Shyam's was the first name my family would know, and one they would hear again and again throughout my first years at the University of Louisville, as he moved from being a mentor, to being a colleague, to being a friend.

BETH: The idea to begin a "peer mentoring" program at the University of Louisville was born of necessity. I was in my second or third year as the director of graduate studies (DGS) in English (in 1998 or 1999), making my annual calls to doctoral students, letting them know that we had chosen them for a spot in our program. I gave a standard spiel about the strengths of our program: that we hosted the then-still-new biennial Watson Conference on Rhetoric and Composition and in the off years had a prestigious visiting professor in the discipline, and that it was an extremely collegial program, where collaboration between doctoral students was valued far more than competition, and where students frequently presented together at conferences and co-authored articles. I bragged about how this collaborative spirit made our program unique. I always ended my recruitment phone calls by asking what questions they had for me, and the questions were usually quite basic, about timelines, teaching loads, and so on.

But this year, students asked questions that I really couldn't answer. "What is the social life like for graduate students? Is there a Louisville music scene? How do graduate students meet each other outside of class?"

As the mother of two children under the age of three at the time, whose music scene consisted of The Wiggles and Raffi, I laughed out loud: I had no idea what the music scene was like, and while I knew graduate students quite well from the courses I taught and from sitting with them in my office, I really had no idea what most of them did outside of class. A question from the very next student I called was similar, in that she asked what kind of lifestyle she could maintain in Louisville on the stipend, how much an average one-bedroom apartment in areas where students wanted to live would cost, and how safe people felt walking in areas close to campus. I realized that while I knew what rents were ten years before when I had first moved to Louisville, I hadn't bothered to keep up since buying my own home, and as a faculty member, I had parking on campus and did not walk in the neighborhood after dark. My inability to honestly answer these questions led me to ask several of the graduate students who I knew were friendly, smart, and helpful folks to call not only these students, but all the students we had given admittance to that year, so that they could answer the recruits' questions about what it was really like to live and learn in Louisville, and all of them leapt at the opportunity to help recruit the next cohort.

I didn't conceive of these initial phone calls as part of a peer mentoring program or even as part of a recruitment program, but every potential student who was called and every current student who made a call thanked me for putting them in touch with one another. That first year, we had a 100% acceptance rate, and thus the practice was established as a regular part of the recruitment process. The next year, most of those first-year students who had received a call from a student further along in the program volunteered to call a student we were hoping to recruit. Over the years, as each successive DGS modified and further formalized the program, it has become stronger and more useful to both departmental administrators and students. It allows the work of recruitment to be distributed among many, and it also encourages a cross-cohort engagement of students with one another. What began simply as a way for me to find answers to prospective students' questions has become a program that has strengthened the collaborative culture of the doctoral program and of the department as a whole.

Recruitment

AMY: Having applied to several doctoral programs, I had not decided whether to attend the University of Louisville by the time of my visit in March 2010. With Louisville's early notification, I was still

waiting to hear from two other prestigious programs in my field. However, with the personalized attention afforded me through my peer mentor and the overall collegial and welcoming atmosphere of the program, my mind was all but made up by the time I left Louisville that weekend. Other programs were difficult to contact, and the information I received from administrative assistants often felt rehearsed. At Louisville, communicating with my peer mentor made me feel as though I was already a part of the community, and provided a personal touch to the decision process that was nothing if not persuasive.

As a peer mentor myself now, I have built a network of contacts both through students who have matriculated to our program and even some of those who decided to go elsewhere. I now serve as coordinator of our department's peer-mentoring program, and I encourage all of our peer mentors to make early connections with prospective students and to attend as many of the visitation day activities as possible. But this effort involves more than salesmanship. As my relationships with my peer mentor Shyam and my peer mentees Meghan and Jamila attest, structured peer-mentoring assignments can greatly aid in the transition of new students into the program, and can establish a collegial connection that benefits both mentor and mentee throughout their time in the program. Of course, not all peer-mentoring matches will result in meaningful personal and professional connections. However, my experience has been that providing this opportunity to students is particularly useful early on. After they matriculate into the program, students may certainly develop other, perhaps more successful mentoring relationships and friendships. But they also may not. Those students who are shy or who don't want to seem like they "need help" may particularly benefit from the assignment of a peer mentor early on.

Asking peer mentors to participate in recruitment activities also builds the mentor's connection to and interaction with the department. The PhD can feel like a lonely journey, and student engagement among graduate students tends to be low due to their research obligations and their difference from the undergraduate students who are the emphasis of most Student Affairs efforts (Kern-Bowen and Gardner 2010). But as they help with the recruitment activities, students also interact with other peer mentors and faculty members, gaining valuable personal and professional networking opportunities.

Transitioning to the Program

AMY: The importance of formalized peer mentoring to me lies in the fact that students transitioning to graduate school often don't understand how graduate school is different from their undergraduate experience, what the expectations are for coursework or other departmental activities, etc.—but they don't always know that they don't know these things. I am always drawn to the idea of what learning theorists call “unconscious incompetence.” This is identified with the first of four stages of development towards skill acquisition (also applicable to cultural acclimation and proficiency), when the inductees don't even know what questions they should be asking—they don't know what they don't know. This concept resonates with me because it perfectly describes my own experience in my master's program. In my first semester of coursework, I was assigned what I now understand to be a staple genre of graduate education: a seminar paper. I knew this term was new to me but, like so many new students, didn't want to ask what seemed like a stupid question. Everyone else clearly knew what a seminar paper was, so I used my experience as an undergrad to arrive at my own definition. I was wrong. Instead of producing an original, researched argument, I simply reported on the sources I located. To be honest, it may not have even been a very strong undergraduate paper, but the archival research methods we were using in the class were so unfamiliar to me, this was all I could imagine producing from them.

I try not to blame my past self for not asking for more guidance from my professor, but I also believe that this situation could have been addressed quite easily if I had had a peer mentor to discuss my progress with. In the conversation I imagine, a peer mentor might ask what the argument of my paper was going to be, and I might then realize that an original researched argument was what was expected. Even if this conversation would not have occurred with my imagined mentor, I nonetheless draw on this memory to shape my own interactions with my mentees, and share this example with others to help them consider what knowledge their mentees might be assuming—to uncover and address their unconscious incompetencies.

New graduate students also do not know the departmental culture they are entering. If there are tensions or politics within the department, a new graduate student may not know they are there until they trigger them. Academic advisors and faculty mentors are not usually in a position to discuss their colleagues with incoming

students, but fellow graduate students certainly are. This “gossip” is not just senseless chatter, but important to understanding and successfully navigating the discourse community of the department. While the students will pick up on much of this culture through their experience, it is helpful to have a guide who can provide insider knowledge and a “safe space” for asking sticky questions. In my own department, it was my peers who thought to clue me in to the fact that certain faculty members were actually married to one another, which helped me avoid any *faux pas* in my conversations with them.

The safe space afforded by peer interactions is an important psychosocial support mechanism that faculty often cannot provide. Because of the clear power differential between graduate students and faculty, I am more likely to experience “imposter syndrome” in my relations with faculty, afraid to ask questions that may reveal my own ignorance. With peers, I have a greater sense of trust, confident in the expectation that they may have quite recently asked the same questions and faced the same uncertainties.

BETH: Amy clearly articulates why official peer mentoring programs are useful to students as they transition to graduate school. As her own story illustrates, the differences in expectations between undergraduate work and graduate work are not always transparent, and faculty often fail to explicitly define the skills they hope to see demonstrated in graduate work. Whether in the classroom or the lab, more experienced graduate students can help guide new students in learning the skills they will need to survive in that particular environment. And when the relationship between experienced and inexperienced students is formalized by the program as a peer-mentoring relationship, the experienced student can take pride in the mentee’s successes, rather than feeling threatened by them. Additionally, if all students are provided a peer mentor, then no student need feel embarrassed to ask for one or “remediated” if encouraged to seek one out: students who don’t know what they don’t know (and thus won’t seek out a mentor on their own through informal processes) won’t be left out if a formal mentoring program is in place for all students.

Perhaps even more important to new students is the vital role peer mentors play as explicators of the unwritten rules of department culture regarding things such as whether students are expected to attend departmental talks and receptions, whether to call faculty by title or first name, whether there are departmental politics (or partnerships) that might make it awkward to ask some faculty members to be on the same committee, and so on. A colleague once jokingly told me to stop encouraging

graduate students to talk to one another: “It’s like the telephone game. What begins as a simple statement winds up as a full-blown drama.” Of course, there’s some truth to the claim that student anxieties can escalate in a culture of gossip, but peer mentoring programs can actually work toward limiting those anxieties and runaway gossip by giving students a mentor from whom they can expect accurate, professional advice. When peer mentors are properly trained and understand their roles as both helping the program (by improving its recruitment and retention of students) AND supporting new students in their transition from undergraduate work to graduate work, most will be professional AND supportive. Peer mentors occupy a space between representing the program and university and being a friend to the new student. Training in how to manage this space is terrific preparation for assuming a faculty position, which is likewise suspended between the sometimes competing interests of institution, programs, colleagues, and students.

Ongoing Co-Mentoring

AMY: While the role of my peer mentor, Shyam, was central to my matriculation and transition into the program, it is our later collegial engagements that I found the most valuable. Once I found my footing in the program, the peer-mentoring relationship Shyam and I had developed morphed into a collegial co-mentoring that helped us both to meet our professional goals (McGuire and Reger 2003). During my first summer as a PhD student, Shyam and I organized a writing “partnership.” We each selected a seminar paper that we wanted to develop into a publishable article, and met twice each month to share and comment on each other’s drafts. These meetings made us accountable to continue to write over the unstructured summer months, and resulted in conference papers as well as a collaboratively designed essay that was published in 2013 (Lueck and Sharma 2013).

In addition, Shyam invited me co-present with him at our field’s largest national conference. The content we presented was not in my area of expertise, but Shyam recognized both that I had useful contributions to offer and that I would benefit from the experience. Never having presented at this conference, I was what Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) have termed a “legitimate peripheral participant.” Nonetheless, the experience was invaluable in my transition towards full scholarly participation at conferences in my field. As a way to describe and theorize the process by which a newcomer is invited to learn through participating alongside the experts in a

“community of practice,” I find Lave and Wenger’s concept of legitimate peripheral participation to be particularly useful for understanding the affordances of peer mentoring relationships where students learn through collaboration.

But I was not the only one who benefited from these collaborative endeavors with Shyam. Of course, Shyam stood to benefit from the writing accountability group and from sharing the burden of the conference presentation. In addition, though, when it came time for Shyam to go on the job market, I was there to help proofread application documents. He got an editor; I got early and valuable insight into the process of applying for academic jobs. Though I’m not the only person Shyam sought feedback from on these documents, I was probably one of the only ones whom he could email in the middle of the night and ask for an immediate turnaround. And he knew I would be glad to do it, because of our professional and “official” commitment to one another’s progress as peers and co-mentors. In other words, he knew he wouldn’t be putting me out, as he might if asking a friend; as a peer-mentoring pair, we both saw it as “our job” to help one another, and did so willingly. I think this is one of the particular benefits of a strong peer-mentoring program—making it “official” that we have someone to rely on, and even to impose on if necessary.

As a mentor myself, I draw on my experience with Shyam to try to develop effective mentoring relationships. Though I quickly learned that I couldn’t replicate the experience I had with Shyam for my own mentees, I’ve learned some important insights over my last three years as a peer mentor.

Every mentee is different, so my strategies as a mentor have to be different too. Though I really benefited from Shyam’s direct and structured approach to our peer mentoring relationship, other students may not be as receptive to this mentoring style, which can seem overbearing or simply too clinical. When I was assigned my first mentee, my initial instinct was to set up a writing group and to talk about collaborating on a project. But I found that she wasn’t necessarily interested in this kind of experience, or wasn’t interested in pursuing it with me. Either way, that strategy was not going to work in this relationship. And each subsequent mentee has brought out a different kind of mentor in me, as I respond to their personalities and styles. Sometimes, the mentoring pair might just not be right regardless of my approach, and that’s okay too. Formalizing peer mentoring runs that risk, but it also opens possibilities for

relationships that wouldn't evolve on their own. This has led me to the next realization, which is...

My mentee might not need me in the ways I expected. Since the first mentee that I was assigned was a student who had come through our university's master's program and had been in Louisville longer than I had, I had a hard time imagining how I could be useful to her. I was prepared to introduce someone to the city, to give insider's knowledge about the department and program, to help someone meet new friends—but what did I have to offer to a student who didn't need these things? What did *I* know? This was quite difficult for me, as it required me to more actively acknowledge my own expertise, as well as my own limitations. As it turns out, there was one thing the new student definitely did not know yet: what it was like to be a PhD student. In particular, I could share my experiences and provide guidance as my mentee navigated program requirements. In fact, I have come to recognize that...

Peer mentors are invaluable as guides through program milestones. Many program benchmarks and milestones—passing qualifying exams, writing dissertation proposals, etc.—are isolated genre performances that students have never before and will never again be asked to practice. There is little reliable information on the Web, because the expectations vary across departments and programs. But peer mentors are uniquely valuable in helping students navigate program milestones because they have just recently navigated them themselves. They know what it's *really* like and how to be successful. And, having already passed through themselves, they are minimally defensive and competitive, like peers in one's cohort might be.

My mentoring relationship is inflected by my informal, social relationship with my mentee. As Kathy Kram noted in her germinal work on mentoring (1985), mentors perform both career and psychosocial functions for their mentees. In other words, mentors provide more than professional advice; they also provide confirmation, acceptance, role modeling and friendship. In peer-mentoring relationships, this may be particularly true. I have found that when I am good friends with my mentee, I sometimes have a hard time performing my role as “mentor” in the same way. I may be less prone to give advice, as asking to meet over coffee simply as a way to check in seems artificial. Though it sometimes feels difficult to strike a balance between my role as friend and role as mentor in these cases, I have less anxiety about it than I used to now that I have begun to think more about “networked mentoring.”

Peer mentors are never a student's sole mentor, but can be an important node in a network of mentors. As Kerry Ann Rockquemore notes in a recent article in *Inside Higher Ed* (2013), mentees have a wide range of needs. These will not be met by one person—the “guru mentor,” as she calls it—but instead will be addressed by a network of mentors at different levels. In focusing on the diverse needs of mentees, Rockquemore's networked approach proposes a different role for mentors: “Instead of YOU meeting all those needs, the network model suggests you initiate the conversation, ask powerful questions, validate needs, help brainstorm solutions, make connections, and confirm next steps” (n.p.). Though she is discussing the mentoring of new faculty by senior faculty, her comments apply just as well to peer mentors at the graduate level, if not better. As most new peer mentors fear, they indeed *don't* know all of the answers, and don't always have the best advice. What they do have, though, is the knowledge and experience to point newer students in the right direction, and they can encourage, validate, and follow up with the student.

Utilizing Peer Mentoring to Improve Faculty Mentoring

BETH: After serving as a director of graduate studies in English for almost ten years, I was asked to take on an associate dean's position in the School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies (SIGS) at the University of Louisville in late 2008; I was charged with advocating for graduate student welfare and professional development in the newly formed unit (prior to the summer of 2008, the unit was called the Graduate School). After a stint as interim dean when the previous holder of that office left for another position in the university, I was chosen to lead the unit as the dean and vice provost for graduate studies. With Amy as my assistant, we designated 2012–2013 the “Year of the Mentor” and developed a year-long series of workshops designed to increase awareness of the importance of faculty mentors to graduate students, and to improve the quality of mentoring at the university. We launched the year with a half-day program that included a graduate student improv troupe from the Department of Theatre Arts performing a series of vignettes, written by graduate students, that illustrated mentoring moments gone wrong; faculty and students were invited to step in as each vignette was performed a second time, to offer different perspectives and different ways of handling the same mentoring moments. The event also included a panel session with four of the first six winners

of the SIGS Faculty Mentor Award, which has been given since 2009. The mentors who spoke were some of the university's most rigorous, most successful (in terms of number of students who had earned their doctorates), and most beloved. Since the improvised vignettes mostly depicted mentors as non-caring, selfish, or inadequate (remember, they were written from the students' perspective!), the panel in many ways served as an antidote; these expert faculty mentors spoke persuasively and passionately about the importance of mentoring and on the rewards of mentoring well.

What is most relevant about that panel conversation to this discussion, however, is the way these very successful faculty mentors used informal peer mentoring to improve their own efficiency. One, a highly funded and very productive diabetes researcher, talked about his lab, and how he brings together postdocs, graduate students at different stages of their work, and undergraduates, all of whom are working on individual projects that are part of his research. Each student is expected to mentor a student who is junior, so that even new graduate students begin immediately mentoring undergraduates. This informal peer mentoring, which the faculty member oversees to make sure no one is left "unmentored," encourages all the students in the lab to be problem solvers who seek to help each other when experiments do not work out as planned. This arrangement also saves the faculty member from having to answer every new student's questions and reading every draft of every student's papers. Having trained the first two or three students to mentor other students well, he effectively trains the entire lab, and while he holds weekly lab meetings with the entire group, this method allows him to mentor a higher number of students than he could possibly train one-by-one. While this peer-mentoring system clearly helps the faculty member both maintain his research productivity and mentor many students, his students also feel they benefit from the system: many of his former students wrote about him as part of his nomination, particularly praising him for giving them that early opportunity to mentor others. Just as Amy learned so much from being mentored by Shyam and by mentoring the new students who were assigned to her, I am willing to bet that the students who leave his lab begin their careers as stronger mentors than most new faculty.

While scientists often work in teams in the lab and rely upon supervised peer mentoring, such arrangements are much less common in the humanities. Yet faculty in library-based disciplines can also create peer-mentoring groups that benefit themselves and their students. Another of our "Outstanding Mentors," a professor of English, spoke about the

reading group she has established for her doctoral students. All students who have asked her to direct their dissertations meet regularly as a group to discuss their progress, to share drafts, to comment on each other's work, and to suggest possible avenues for revision or further exploration. While the faculty member oversees the group meetings and continues to meet individually with students, the group cuts her workload and individual meetings almost in half, she said, by distributing responsibility for leading the discussion of drafts and by providing feedback that keeps students writing between individual meetings. Because the students who work under this professor share a common methodology and theoretical perspective, they are able to offer substantial advice to each other, despite their sometimes very different dissertation topics. I am not suggesting that such writing groups and lab teams are equivalent to a "formal peer-mentoring program," but like those programs, these faculty-organized groups help to create a sense of community, provide examples of others who are struggling and succeeding in similar ways, and help future faculty learn how to respond to colleagues' and students' presentations in productive ways.

Another benefit of bringing small groups of students together to discuss their work with a faculty mentor is that the conventions of dissertation work (or experimental design) become more transparent: as one student's lab tragedy or badly written chapter is discussed by the group, the others learn how the work could be done "better." When one student learns to survive a failed experiment or having to start a chapter over, the entire group learns that failure is indeed part of the process. They also learn the importance of resiliency. When the group is composed of students at different stages of their work, students who are just beginning their programs learn what a dissertation "proposal" or a "literature review" looks like before they have to produce one. And frankly, all mentors—but particularly new faculty mentors—benefit from being forced to articulate those conventions and life skills in a more explicit fashion than they might if they were working one-on-one with students.

Taking It on the Road: Programs to Support Peer Mentoring

Since Beth began the peer-mentoring program in our English department, it has continued to grow and become more formalized each year as we become more strategic about drawing on the benefits we've witnessed. This last year, Amy advocated for and eventually established an MA peer-mentoring program, and we've begun to see the effects of this effort in the increased involvement of both funded

and unfunded MA students in department activities. In addition, students revived an English Graduate Organization Facebook page to connect students to one another and support a networked approach to peer mentoring. This has been a very effective strategy, whereby common questions can be answered just once, for the benefit of all, rather than individually by each mentor. The answers provided in this forum are generally more thorough and more accurate than those that one peer mentor could provide, further extending the initial informational function Beth sought from peer mentoring in the beginning.

Because we have had such a positive experience with a formal peer-mentoring program in our English department, we have worked centrally at the School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies to help spread such programs to other departments to benefit the recruitment, retention, and success of their students, and to build a culture of mentoring on our campus.

Our effort to foster peer mentoring on campus began with several workshops for graduate students, introducing them to the idea of peer mentoring and sharing some of the research on how it can help students and programs. From those workshops, we found that there was really a low level of knowledge and engagement around the topic of mentoring on our campus, with many students understanding mentorship quite narrowly as pertaining only to their dissertation director or lab advisor. Without knowledge about alternative forms of mentoring, many students expressed dissatisfaction with their mentoring experiences but seemed to have no strategies for taking responsibility and improving their situations. We came to see peer mentoring as part of a larger conversation about mentoring on our campus, and organized the half-day workshop described above to initiate a campus-wide conversation about the role of mentoring in graduate education at our university. This “Mentoring Kick-Off” was a great success, and generated energy and interest among faculty and students to think more purposefully about both faculty- and peer-mentoring practices.

Out of that Kick-Off, we developed more workshops dealing with different aspects of peer mentoring for students, including sessions on how to start a peer-mentoring program in one’s department, strategies for effective peer mentoring, and models for networked mentoring and co-mentoring for students in later stages of graduate study. We present these workshops to graduate students from across the departments through SIGS’ program for graduate student

professional development, called the PLAN (Professional development, Life skills, Academic development, and Networking). The many activities and workshops that SIGS sponsors to improve the graduate student experience are organized under the PLAN umbrella.² In addition, we offer targeted workshops for individual departments or programs, such as the peer-mentoring orientation we recently organized and presented for the College of Education.

In addition to these more pragmatic workshops, we organized reading groups and learning communities targeted at both graduate students and faculty. In these contexts we read research on mentoring and discussed the implications of mentoring—both peer and faculty—as a praxis. These discussions were productive as a means both to share strategies and to consider mentoring and changes to graduate education in the twenty-first century more theoretically.

Finally, we developed the MentorCenter, an online repository of resources and FAQ-style information about faculty and peer mentoring. Included on that site is a MentorConnect portal, which provides faculty and graduate students an outlet for asking their own mentoring questions in a more anonymous interdisciplinary forum. The questions are forwarded to our Mentoring Advisory Board, which is comprised of faculty recipients of the Outstanding Mentor Award. We are continuing to build this site and develop digital resources to support mentoring across the departments, including a series of video introductions to peer mentoring and program development.

From our centralized position at the School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies, we can support formalized peer mentoring programs by providing information, trainings, and resources, and by fostering a culture of mentoring in which conversations about mentoring as a praxis are the norm. From there, it is up to students and faculty in each department to establish and support a peer-mentoring program of their own. The work of this chapter, we hope, is to use our own experiences to make clear the affordances of such a program not only to students, but also to faculty mentors, program directors, and perhaps even graduate education as a whole.

Notes

1. We introduce our respective sections by name. Additionally, Amy's sections appear in roman type, Beth's in italics.
2. See our website at <http://louisville.edu/graduate/plan>.

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