

Action Items to Enhance Campus Climate
Graduate Student and Postdoc Experience Workgroup

Final Report

submitted in April 2019 to President Wintersteen by:

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Executive Summary

The Graduate Student and Postdoc Experience Workgroup was charged by President Wintersteen to recommend action items in response to the 2017 Campus Climate Survey administered by Rankin & Associates, Consulting. The Workgroup recommends five action items that are described in this report. These suggested action items are based on survey results and information gathered open-forum sessions with postdocs and graduate students.

Action Items

1. Improve messaging and information flow throughout the student/postdoc experience on reasonable expectations and support resources.
2. Institutionalize Cy's Grad Checklist for graduate students and their supervisors.
3. Formalize the process for annual (at minimum) evaluations.
4. Create seamless and easy-to-navigate support processes for graduate assistants with documented disabilities.
5. Add best practices for mentoring to the recently implemented training of new graduate faculty.

Please note: Improved options for childcare emerged as an important issue, but it was recognized that this issue is already being considered by university leaders.

Our Process: Development of Action Items

President Wintersteen created the Graduate Student and Postdoc Experience Workgroup and designated its chair. The chair invited other members as outlined by President Wintersteen.

The limited data available on postdocs from the 2017 Campus Climate Survey concerned the workgroup in the early stages of its efforts. Therefore, the workgroup organized a listening session for postdocs. The session was held over the noon hour on November 30, 2018, with food provided. Spedding Hall was selected as the venue to make it as easy and pleasant as possible for postdocs who work in the Ames Lab to participate. The workgroup also organized open forums for graduate students on two dates in the spring semester of 2019. These forums were structured around four themes that had been identified as issues to prioritize: disabilities, childcare, diversity and inclusion, and relationships between students and their advisors/mentors/supervisors.

Synthesis of data from the 2017 survey, along with information gathered during subsequent listening session and open forums, led the workgroup to its recommended action items.

Implementation of Action Items

Improve messaging and information flow throughout the student/postdoc experience on reasonable expectations and support resources.

The experiences of graduate students and postdocs will be enhanced by providing them with messaging and information that is clear, succinct, and timed to be appropriate. Improvements should begin before students and scholars matriculate. The workgroup heard that graduate students often receive a great deal of attention when they are being recruiting, but messaging and helpful information flow may be absent between the time a student accepts an offer of admission and the time of arrival on campus. This workgroup proposes that relevant offices and individuals provide students and scholars with better information at this stage about what to expect upon beginning their degree programs or postdoc tenures. Once on campus

or in an on-line program, timely messaging about important milestones is important, as is information on late-stage events such as applying for graduation or preparing for another position as the end of a postdoc's term approaches. The Graduate College is exploring ideas around the development of a voluntary (opt-in) database of students' cell-phone numbers so that text messaging can be implemented. The college also will explore the development of videos and messaging via social-media.

Institutionalize Cy's Grad Checklist for graduate students and supervisors.

The important relationship between a graduate student and a major professor frequently is the root of students' frustration, anxiety, and stress. Similar reactions are manifest in graduate faculty who are struggling with advising, mentoring, and managing their students. The workgroup believes that open, direct communication between the student and professor is critical, starting before the parties agree to embark on the relationship, and continuing through degree completion. A new tool from the Graduate College, Cy's Grad Checklist, seeks to address this problem. Students and faculty will be encouraged to use the checklist first as they are getting to know one another, and periodically during their work together. The checklist will raise topics the two parties should discuss. It will not recommend outcomes, only provide topics that students have identified as potentially contentious. The tool is intended to promote the vetting of these issues early, so the two parties know what to expect from each other.

Formalize the process for annual (at minimum) evaluations.

A few years ago, the Graduate College began encouraging the practice of evaluating the progress of doctoral students annually. How the evaluation was to be carried out was not prescribed. It could be conducted by the major professor only, include input from the entire program of study committee, be a review by all graduate faculty in a program, or follow some other process. The only expectations were that evaluations be done, and that the graduate program report to the Graduate College the fraction of all doctoral students in the program that had been evaluated each year. Many graduate programs have implemented evaluations, but some have not. Feedback from students indicates that the evaluations are helpful. Therefore, the workgroup proposes to expand evaluations to all degree-seeking graduate students and make them required. In addition to the

required annual evaluations, this workgroup strongly encourages major professors to provide their students with frequent constructive feedback on their progress.

Create seamless and easy-to-navigate support processes for graduate assistants with documented disabilities.

Graduate students with documented disabilities must navigate a complex and confusing process to seek accommodations needed to meet expectations associated with their assistantships. In response to input from students, and to what is perceived to be an increasing number of students in need of support, University Human Resources, the Graduate College, and other units have focused on the need to improve in this area. This workgroup proposes to identify a single office and point person on campus who will oversee accommodation requests related to duties of teaching, research, and administrative assistants. This is intended to make it easier for students to know where they can find knowledgeable staff who can be advocates and direct the resolution of requests. The lead staff person will be trained and certified by the National Association of ADA Coordinators. The office location and personnel dedicated to this student service will be advertised to graduate students, graduate faculty, and program support staff. In addition, the existence of the Graduate College's Graduate Disability Assistance Program, which helps to fund assistantships for students with disabilities, will be communicated more prominently on web sites, during orientation for new graduate students, and in meetings of graduate program directors, etc.

Add best practices for mentoring to the recently implemented training of new graduate faculty.

The Graduate College recently introduced the expectation that new members of the graduate faculty receive training before being permitted to serve on program of study committees. The response has been positive. New faculty report that they appreciate the information provided, which is not redundant with content provided in other orientations for new faculty. To date, the training by the Graduate College has focused on policy and practice matters. This workgroup proposes to enhance this training with content on best practices for mentoring, including possible participation by theater groups widely recognized for the value of portraying scenarios related to mentoring graduate students.