Writing a Successful ETS Award Proposal

In 2009, the Council of Graduate Schools and the Educational Testing Service created a new award, *Innovations in Promoting Success in Graduate Education: Admissions through Completion*. This program recognizes promising innovations in graduate education that occur after the student enrolls in graduate school. It is designed to encourage institutions to create and implement programs that work with admission and early stage information to ensure success for students. One institution is selected to receive a grant of $20,000 for a two-year period, matched by $10,000 from the institution.

Recently deans from institutions which received the award or whose proposals were selected as honorable mention were asked to respond to three questions designed to assist those preparing proposals for this award. Responding were Melissa Bostrom, Duke University (DU); Lori Henderson, Eastern Illinois University (EIU); Magnolia E. Hernández, Florida International University (FIU); Samuel Attoh, Loyola University Chicago (LUC); Douglas Paulsen, Morehouse School of Medicine (MSM); Venkat Allada, Missouri University of Science and Technology (MST); Karen Klomparens, Michigan State University (MSU); Jeffery Gibeling, University of California, Davis (UCD); and Francis Leslie, University of California Irving (UCI).

1) What was the issue you wanted to address with this project?

**UCD:** We were interested in improving the success of all graduate students, especially those from diverse backgrounds, as suggested by the title of the award program. Early on, we recognized that a traditional approach of working with students would have a limited impact, since we would need to have a program that supported successive generations of students. As an alternative, we decided to focus on faculty mentors as the keys to success of students and as a way to have a lasting institutional effect that would benefit multiple generations of graduate students. We also identified three critical stages in graduate education (especially doctoral education) that can be barrier points to success: entering graduate school, moving from coursework to research and making the transition from graduate school to career. Hence, the name of our program: “Mentoring at Critical Transitions: Faculty Professional Development to Promote the Success of Graduate Students,” or MCT for short.

**LUC:** The goal of our project was to create a Loyola Humanities Institute in the Graduate School to: (a) explore the importance of the Humanities in contemporary life; (b) encourage interdisciplinary efforts that involve humanities faculty and students in collaborative research; (c) provide workshops and mentoring opportunities that will help prepare humanities students for multiple career pathways upon degree completion; and (d) house the Humanities Post-Doctoral Fellows program.

**MST:** We at the Office of Graduate Studies at Missouri University of Science and Technology wanted to put a higher focus on lessening time-to-degree for our students and we wanted to strengthen our students’ skill sets to create stronger and more successful outcomes upon graduation so that we have highly prepared STEM professionals for the workforce.
UCI: Enhancing climate for diversity in graduate programs.

MCM: At Morehouse School of Medicine, we were experiencing growth in our graduate program and wished to provide support for our graduate students beyond that typically provided in the classroom. We had noted some variability in the types and levels of support provided by our students’ research advisors. The basic purpose of the program we proposed was to assure that all our students received more consistent support and training in many of soft skills not directly addressed in their coursework or laboratory training. In particular, we wished to focus on helping our students through three key transitions in their training program: first the transition from undergraduate to graduate school, then the transition from graduate student to degree candidate, and finally the transition from degree candidate to graduation and beyond into their careers.

MSU: Michigan State University focused on several of the important steps in the journey to producing a Ph.D. graduate: admissions criteria: if you do what you’ve always done, you’ll get what you’ve always gotten. So we set up discussions so they could look at the outcomes they have and compare to the admissions criteria they use. Several partner departments changed to a more holistic review of applications. Second we put our Setting Expectations and Resolving Conflicts workshop online. It is now part of “Career Success” at MSU. http://careersuccess.msu.edu/ Third we continued with our development of Career Success website…tracking the placement of students and the kind of professional development they received (we are still doing this tracking). Last we added a component of writing for the discipline. Our Writing Center at MSU trained peer mentors to help students write proposals, draft documents, etc. We are also still engaged in this as several departments really like the outcomes. Recently, with the opening of our newly restored building, we provide monthly “write-ins” to encourage 50-60 students to write for at least 4 hours. Writing consultants are on hand to help.

EIU: Increased diversity rates in undergraduate enrollment were not being reflected in the graduate enrollment.

DU: We wanted to encourage doctoral students to start planning their professional development early in their graduate careers and help them stay on track with their goals through graduation. Because recent research has found both that women and underrepresented minorities may experience reduced access to graduate school mentors in many disciplines, as well as that these groups follow different career pathways within STEM fields, creating an online tool that would provide access to all our students was a key motivation for the project.

FIU: The purpose of the project was to address the challenges that we are facing in doctoral education—high attrition and time-to-degree completion rates, especially among underrepresented minorities—by creating a synergistic, interdisciplinary, self-paced learning community for doctoral students.

2) How was your proposal developed?
**UCD:** Writing the proposal involved a team effort of the deans and directors of functional units within the Office of Graduate Studies. We spent several sessions brainstorming ideas, eventually coalescing around the chosen topic and approach. Various individuals drafted different sections of the proposal with one person taking overall editorial responsibility for an integrated final product.

**LUC:** We worked in collaboration with campus partners, including our Office of Research Services, the Office of Institutional Research, and Graduate and Professional Student Enrollment Management.

**MST:** Over the years, we have spoken with several high achieving female students at Missouri University of Science and Technology (S&T), one example being the first female president of the Council of Graduate Students. In these conversations, we had determined a strong need for professional development in the female and underrepresented minority student population at S&T. Specifically, these students emphasized the need for an innovative institutional practice that encompassed mentoring, support programs, intellectual enrichment, and social support for female doctoral students. Implementing something of this nature would contribute to time-to-degree analysis and create highly prepared STEM professionals for the workforce.

Focusing on female students, an underrepresented population on this STEM focused campus, we decided to target the need for professional and leadership development by creating programming via the Women as Professional Leadership in STEM (WAPLIS) initiative.

Some of the specific elements of the WAPLIS initiative came from a previous program put together by Missouri University of Science and Technology and the three other schools in the University of Missouri system (University of Missouri – Columbia, University of Missouri – Kansas City, and University of Missouri – St. Louis). This program, entitled the Graduate Leadership Development Program (GLDP) allowed for 5 students to be selected each year from each of the four campuses as a cohort. The main goal of the GLDP was for students in a cohort to gain professional and leadership skills. Specific elements borrowed included a 360 degree evaluation of leadership skills and applicable workshops.

Our knowledge of the need to leadership and professional development from students informed our proposal development, and by borrowing specific programming from the already successful GLDP, we were able to develop a proposal to address promoting success in graduate education.

**FIU:** Our proposal was developed based on the need for doctoral students to acquire interpersonal and intrapersonal skills along with cognitive and research skills. Our effort is an extrapolation of the National Research Council’s published work on "skills for life and work,” which addressed undergraduate needs. Our proposal was developed with the goal of bringing together all professional development opportunities in a structured fashion so that cohorts of doctoral students are trained in a holistic fashion and in a community setting.

**UCI:** It was a part of a Department of Education FIPSE grant that was being written simultaneously. The grant was funded.
**MCM:** Our graduate office leadership and staff, along with several key graduate faculty members, initially identified the need. Focus groups were then held during a graduate faculty retreat to help prioritize concerns to be addressed. During a subsequent accreditation process for the school through the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), the school selected student mentorship as the focus of our required Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) which involved the development of degree-program based Learning Communities for students in each of the school’s degree programs. The initial proposal we submitted to CGS after our faculty focus groups (which earned an honorable mention) served as the foundation for developing the Learning Communities for our graduate students. That second version of the proposal describing the Learning Communities (which earned a second honorable mention) was then implemented by our institutional QEP office with the assistance of the graduate office and some key graduate faculty, along with other faculty and peer mentors. During the initial implementation phase, feedback from the students, in the form of both surveys and focus groups, provided data that allowed us to modify the content of the Learning Community sessions to directly address areas identified by the students as their greatest needs. The program is now in place and the Learning Community sessions (about 8 per semester) are well attended by our students who are fully engaged. A poster describing our program was presented recently at the 2015 Conference of Southern Graduate Schools in New Orleans.

**MSU:** This was a collaboration (as most of our successful projects are) with several partner department and colleges and across the Grad School staff. We started by analyzing the data we had and the research that was available in order to expand what we believed to be possible successful pathways to improve completion and career success of our students. Then we collected more data as the activity unfolded and used those data to feed into the various sub-projects for improvement.

**EIU:** We created the “Enrollment Quality and Diversity Board” who were charged with studying the issue. A year-long study revealed that most EIU undergraduate students were not being prepared or even introduced to the opportunities available to them for advanced study.

**DU:** We identified all potential data sources that might help us develop the project, created new data collection processes to fill any gaps, searched for professional development competency models in graduate education and adapted them to a Duke-specific model, and met with technical colleagues to test the feasibility of our proposal and research the budget for the project.

**3) What activity in your proposal do you believe was most successful and why?**

**UCD:** We believe that the overall approach of focusing on faculty mentors has been very successful. The MCT program has evolved over the years, but we have sustained it through internal funding. It continues to attract faculty interest and we are reaching an ever broader audience. However, this program is designed to be a long-term effort and it is difficult to measure the direct impact on student success in the short-term. At this point, we know that
faculty are thinking about mentoring in new ways and having conversations relevant to supporting a diverse graduate student population.

**LUC:** We were most successful in establishing a post-doctoral program for humanities students, which resulted in some tenure-track job placements for them.

**MST:** Our proposal has not been implemented in its entirety since we were not final awardees of the ETS/CGS award (so subsequently did not receive funding). Unfortunately, other funding resources were not readily available to us. We are still seeking funding within the University and are also reaching out to external sources for funding as well. We will be unable to implement the entire WAPLIS program until funding is secured; however we have dedicated ourselves to implementing some pieces of the program, such as providing the StrengthsQuest strengths finder for many of our female students, and covering the cost of conference attendance for students receiving fellowships. StrengthsQuest seems to be successful so far as it allows our students to understand their strengths and subsequently focus them for their own leadership and professional development. Covering conference attendance has allowed students to gain opportunities to further their knowledge of their program of study and gain networking and presentation skills as well.

As additional funding becomes available, we will implement more elements of the WAPLIS program that was proposed for the ETS/CGS Award.

**UCI:** Creating faculty advisors in each program who were advocates for equity and inclusion.

**MCM:** For us, focusing on key transitions in the lives and academic program of our students and gathering students at similar stages in their progress to degree have been the major keys to our success. We have a relatively small graduate program with students scattered among several departments. This opportunity to focus on topics of common interest and to share ideas and resources with other students at the same stage, with near-peer mentors, and with faculty facilitators has helped to more quickly identify and address obstacles to progress. At the same time it has helped provide an overarching sense of community within the graduate program. It has also helped to strengthen the graduate student government association which has become more confident and effective in student-led efforts to address student needs.

**MSU:** The web version of Setting Expectations and Resolving Conflicts and continued expansion of Career Success website were our most successful activities (and both were linked). Both were completed using the funds provided AND are still being expanded using our own funds and those of other grants (we now have an NIH BEST award—one of 17 universities) to help us collect data on many pathways towards careers (not in academe). We still collect data on the career and professional development aspects of graduate education, and still focus on this important aspect of being a Ph.D. student headed for a career in any area and in any sector of the economy. We believe this is one of the most important ways that a Graduate School can contribute to the success of our graduate students and to partner with faculty to improve graduate education.
**FIU:** The most successful activity in the proposal has been the Saturday Community Meeting. These meetings, normally about three hours in length, focus on a specific theme related to the students’ doctoral experience that they can learn from as a group and then incorporate into their everyday lives. All community meetings begin with a brief 30-minute dialogue about the students and whatever is on their minds. We then spend the next two to 2½ hours focusing on a theme that is presented to the students. Community meeting themes have included some of the following topics: Presentations and Communications (the three-minute research talk); Writing the dissertation; Community Engagement; Branding of the Self; Wellness and Wellbeing; Mentorship. The themes are presented to the students by staff or faculty members at FIU who have expertise in these areas; this adds to the community-building, engagement piece of AGILE as it allows students to interact with the university community through dialogue at a smaller scale and in a more intimate setting.

**EIU:** The most successful activity has been our undergraduate mentoring program, which evolved to include an online incentive program called “Graduate Network for Undergraduates.” The online program allows students to participate in activities all designed to educate and prepare them for graduate study and allows us to follow their progress and include them in our network.

**DU:** Building the Duke OPTIONS (Online Professional development Tool for Individual OpportuNitieS) tool is the core of our proposal. By making the tool available not only to all 2500 Duke doctoral students but also to prospective students who visit The Graduate School’s website, we hope to share the message that Ph.D.s can look forward to myriad career options and can pursue them successfully by starting their professional development early.