Strong Mentorship Develops Successful Leaders

John C. Keller, Professor, College of Dentistry; Interim Vice President for Research and Economic Development; Associate Provost for Graduate and Professional Education; Dean, the Graduate College, University of Iowa

Being the recipient of the Debra W. Stewart Award for Outstanding Leadership has afforded me the wonderful opportunity to reflect on my journey from an undergraduate student to my current roles as Associate Provost for Graduate and Professional Education, Dean of the Graduate College and most recently, interim Vice President for Research at the University of Iowa. My experience over the past thirty-five years has been marked by one consistent factor—strong mentorship. As I look back on my education and career I appreciate that, at each stage, I have been the beneficiary of patient, caring, tough mentors who not only celebrated my accomplishments, but also recognized my potential.

As a college student in the 1970’s, I was a first-generation college student. My parents were members of Tom Brokaw’s “Greatest Generation” and they had no opportunity to pursue their educational dreams. Yet, they were ardent believers in higher education and strong believers in self-reliance. In my family it was expected that you would make mistakes, but you were also expected to learn from them. For me, in retrospect, attending a large research university was daunting and maybe one of those mistakes.

Upon graduation I was totally unprepared for what was next. Fortunately, I applied for and was appointed as a staff assistant in a vibrant research laboratory at Northwestern University. My supervisor was a young full professor who was quickly becoming a leader in the field of biomaterials science. He later told me I was hired because I had potential, and because I had experience using tools and machines. That factory job during several college summers actually did help and ultimately got me to graduate school!

My graduate program faculty offered me chances to teach in laboratory, discussion and lecture settings; I presented at conferences; and they introduced me to leaders in the field to develop and expand my networking potential. I met other key faculty who later helped me with my research and became additional mentors I could lean on. I soon learned that mentorship meant treating me like a junior colleague as opposed to a student. The mentorship and encouragement that I received during graduate school was critical to building my self-esteem and confidence.

As a very young faculty member I was asked to serve on a doctoral committee, giving me the opportunity to apply this approach in my own mentoring. The encouragement I was given to ‘test-drive’ my developing skills—even if I failed—motivated me to be open to new experiences and to actively seek new opportunities. In retrospect, this was the beginning of my connection between mentorship and leadership.

As I progressed to full professor, I viewed campus-wide and national committee work as a way to contribute as part of my faculty service obligation. Beyond fulfilling the service obligation, I began to value the opportunity to meet other people who had interesting backgrounds and perspectives. This reinforced for me the value of diverse perspectives and the importance of gaining input from others to inform my viewpoint and decision-making.

I actively sought opportunities to further develop my own leadership and scholarship and was fortunate to serve on the Board of Directors for my national research organization, the American Association for Dental Research. As a full professor, I now looked to senior leaders in the field to develop my leadership skills and my
service to these organizations provided unique opportunities to learn from seasoned researchers and administrators.

Upon completion of my board term, I felt a gap in my professional life. I began to look around campus for opportunities and, fortunately, one presented itself; I was appointed Associate Dean in the Graduate College. As I assumed the role of an administrator I was warned, again by a trusted senior mentor, that I would forfeit the mentor-student relationship that I so enjoyed in the research environment. This proved to be another turning point, reinforcing another lesson: relationships matter.

Although I was impacting graduate education across 125 programs and nearly 5,000 students, this seemed more diffuse than the individual relationships I developed in the laboratory setting. I learned quickly that I needed to work much harder to maintain direct connections to our students. The relationships I was able to build with our Graduate Student Senate, and even undergraduates in the first-year seminar I taught, were key to my growth as a graduate dean. Very quickly I realized I still had a lot to learn from our current and future graduate students and that they were in essence mentoring me. I treasure the relationships I have built with students over my career and it has been my privilege to watch them go on to accomplish great things in their careers and in their personal lives. It has been a source of great pride knowing that after I received such powerful mentorship during my career, hopefully I have been able to do the same for those following me.

In an academic environment, it seems strong leaders are made possible by strong mentorship. Great mentors challenge us to build a foundation of confidence and vision that are amplified as opportunities to impact broader audiences present themselves. As I serve as a mentor to some and a leader to many, people sometimes ask me what has shaped my leadership philosophy, and so I’m compelled to share five of my core leadership tenets:

1. Be the leader that people want to follow, not the leader they have to follow.
2. Gather as much information as you can before you have to make a decision; then make the decision and, provide rationale for the decision.
3. Share credit for success; assume responsibility for failure; learn from it and try something else.
4. Listen to others; have an open-door policy; invite conversation and visit people on their turf.
5. Seek to make persistent progress on strategic goals.

As my career now evolves into its latter stages, I am humbled that others look to me for leadership. I believe that some leadership characteristics come naturally, but most are gained through experiences—good and bad—and from the mentors who help us navigate those experiences.

The Advocate Dean: Let’s Help Elected Officials Understand Graduate Education

Kinchel Doerner, Dean, Graduate School, South Dakota State University

Elected and civic leaders need a better understanding of graduate and professional education. Recent events on the national stage and in many state houses indicate that an appreciation of higher education and an understanding of the integral role our graduates play in society and the economy is lacking. As graduate deans we must illustrate the unique and important role of advanced degrees in our society.

Higher education competes with many other important societal and economic interests in federal and state budgets. Human and social services, healthcare and K-12 education are just a few of the needs legislators must consider when determining allocations. On average, states fund higher education at 10% of state expenditures, indicating legislators do value higher education (Peters, 2017), but experience tells us that the percent of funding is going down. We are slipping in priority.

One reason may be that elected officials do not have personal experiences with our programs. The degree attainment of state legislators varies widely from state-to-state. Forty-four to 93% of state lawmakers hold bachelor’s or advanced degrees while 7 to 56% hold less than a bachelor’s degree (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2015). In the federal House of Representatives and Senate, those holding advanced degrees are 60% and 76%, respectively. However, of those degree holders, 34% of the House and 58% of the Senate are schooled in law and medicine (Manning, 2017). While I am sure they appreciate their own disciplines, I doubt if these members truly appreciate the rest of our programs (e.g., agriculture,
natural sciences, engineering, design, humanities, arts, etc.). When asked about the degree of consideration given to graduate education in the state budgeting, Teresa Lubbers, Indiana Commissioner for Higher Education replied, “we just don’t think about it much” (Midwest Association of Graduate Schools, 2016). We must ensure they think about it.

What can we do about this? Build relationships! Reach out to off-campus constituents. Here are a few ideas:

- Get to know your institutional liaison officer. Working together you both will be more effective.
- Produce stories that connect your program’s students to local and national businesses. CGS’s GradImpact is a great place to get them published!
- Encourage academic departments to develop advisory boards, composed of, in part, civic leaders, business leaders, elected officials, disciplinary experts and alumni.
- Invite elected officials and their staff to campus for graduate education events (e.g., 3MT; research symposia, prominent guest speakers, etc.).

Pressing Issue: Mental Wellness of Graduate Students
Hironao Okahana, Associate Vice President, Research & Policy Analysis

A number of recent studies have drawn attention to the mental health challenges experienced by graduate students. Studies note that the prevalence of mental health challenges among PhD students is higher than that of the highly-educated general population, and much higher than in the general population. The most recent study published in Nature Biotechnology reported that 39% of their participants, mostly doctoral candidates, fell into the moderate-to-severe depression range, while other studies reported that one in two PhD students have experienced psychological distress, and one in three is at risk of a common psychiatric disorder. Some factors known to adversely affect the mental wellness of graduate students have also been noted in CGS’s recently concluded “Doctoral Initiative on Minority Attrition and Completion (National Science Foundation grant number 1138814)” project. In that study, we found that underrepresented minority doctoral candidates in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields were more likely to feel isolated from other students and worried about their mental or physical health than their peers.

The challenges surrounding mental wellness of master’s and doctoral students are at the forefront of the minds of many graduate deans in the CGS community. In the 2018 CGS Pressing Issues Survey, 63% of respondents

References

Manning, J. (2017). Membership of the 115th Congress: Profile. 7-5700


6 The 2018 CGS Pressing Issues Survey was sent to all U.S. and Canadian based CGS member institutions in February 2018, and asked graduate deans...
strongly agreed or agreed that current graduate students struggle to maintain mental wellness more than students five years ago. Only 10% of respondents disagreed with the statement and none strongly disagreed. However, even with this heightened awareness about mental health challenges among graduate students, graduate deans also seem concerned that campus stakeholders may not currently be equipped to address these challenges.

Identifying Mental Health Challenges

When asked how well their institutions inform and train various campus stakeholders to recognize symptoms of mental health challenges in graduate students and in turn refer those students to appropriate support services, many graduate deans who responded expressed concern that their institutions weren’t doing enough. Notably, the results suggest that more than four out of ten graduate deans think that more can be done to inform and train graduate faculty members, faculty advisers, PIs, and dissertation/thesis chairs, as well as graduate program directors/department chairs and graduate students themselves. Only 21% of deans reported that their institutions do an excellent or good job of informing and training graduate faculty members. About one out of ten respondents (11%) reported that they do not know if graduate students are informed or trained about symptoms of mental health issues.

However, we also learned that support services for mental health are available at institutions. In the 2017 CGS Pressing Issues Survey, 96% of CGS member graduate deans who responded indicated that mental health support and crisis counseling are provided either by their graduate schools and/or by other units at their institutions. Yet, the results from the 2018 survey suggest that institutions are not doing as well at informing and training graduate school stakeholders to recognize and refer students with mental health challenges to the appropriate and available resources at their campuses. This is problematic, particularly given that 70% of graduate deans in the 2018 survey felt that when provided with adequate information and training, graduate faculty members—including faculty advisers, PIs, and dissertation/thesis chairs—should be best positioned to recognize the signs and symptoms of mental health challenges and ensure that graduate students are referred to appropriate support services. Graduate schools may have a role here in better connecting graduate students with available resources through their graduate faculty members.

Among other questions: How prevalent are mental health disorders among graduate students? and Who is best positioned to recognize when a graduate student needs to be referred for mental health support services? In total, 204 or 42% responded to this survey.

The author thanks Julia Michaels, former CGS staff member, for her contribution to the literature review in this piece.
Promoting Mental Wellness

Of the graduate deans who responded to the survey, 33% reported that their institutions are doing a good or excellent job of training and informing graduate school staff members to promote positive mental health among graduate students. However, many graduate deans also felt that institutions are not doing enough to inform and train various graduate education stakeholder groups to promote positive mental health among graduate students. Notably, nearly half of responding graduate deans indicated that their institutions are doing a poor or very poor job of informing and training graduate faculty members, faculty advisers, PIs, and dissertation/thesis chairs. This is another area in which graduate schools have the potential to engage more graduate faculty members to promote positive mental health among graduate students: 47% of graduate deans also felt that when provided with adequate information and training, graduate faculty members should be best positioned to promote positive mental health among graduate students.

Moving the Conversation Forward

Graduate student mental wellness is a key area of priority for the graduate education community and CGS is committed to advancing the national conversation. At the 2017 CGS Annual Meeting, we held a concurrent session on Supporting Students With Mental Health Challenges, and at the upcoming CGS Summer Workshop in Chicago this July, Mona Shattell, chair and professor in the College of Nursing at Rush University, will give a plenary talk on supporting graduate student health and wellness. Also at the Summer Workshop, there will be a Dean’s Toolbox session about evidence-based strategies for supporting graduate student well-being and success, using an example from Texas A&M University. We encourage you to be there and to be a part of this important conversation.

CGS is also beginning to formulate a series of projects and initiatives that aim to facilitate culture change in academia and to destigmatize mental health support-seeking, while promoting mental wellness among master’s and doctoral students. As a first step toward this goal, we are preparing a white paper that addresses some of the foundational questions about trends in graduate student mental health challenges and ways for graduate schools and graduate school leaders to play more integral roles in promoting the mental wellness of master’s and doctoral students. As we draft this paper, which we will share with CGS members, we will explore examples of currently available resources and will reach out to member deans for insights. While we will conduct a scan of the landscape of both extant literature and institutional practices, it is also helpful to crowdsource some of the cutting-edge ideas among our member institutions. If you have any promising approaches, new initiatives, and insights in promoting mental wellness among master’s and doctoral students, we invite you to share them with us.
In Memoriam

Dr. Nancy Marcus, chair of the CGS Board of Directors in 2017, passed away in February. Nancy served as Dean of the Graduate School at Florida State University from 2005 – 2017, after many years as a faculty member and chair in FSU’s Department of Oceanography. A tireless advocate for graduate education, Dr. Marcus received many honors, but her most cherished was the Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor Award, the highest honor bestowed on a faculty member. While Dean of the Graduate School, Marcus played an integral part in establishing the FSU Honors Scholars, and Fellows House in 2014; the main auditorium of the building is named the Nancy H. Marcus Great Hall. Nancy was a valued leader, teacher, and mentor who gave her time to many, many committees, councils, boards, and professional societies. She will be missed.

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• Clarkson University (NY)
• International Institute for Restorative Practices (PA) – Associate
• University of Melbourne (Australia) – International

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