THE PEER ADVISING PROGRAM
GRADUATE EXPERIENCE PROJECT

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INTRODUCTION

The Peer Advising Program is a critical component of the Graduate Experience Project, a comprehensive, university-wide initiative designed to recruit and retain women graduate students in engineering, chemistry and physics. Peer advisors serve as mentors, friends, role models, and resources for incoming graduate women and provide encouragement and support. These advisors address the well-documented concerns of women in engineering and the physical sciences: isolation, managing time, finding an advisor, timely access to information, dealing with difficult classes and balancing relationships. Recently, the Peer Advising Program has evolved to meet new challenges and take advantage of new opportunities as we work to institutionalize the program.

PROGRAM GOALS

The program is designed to address the immediate and long-term needs of graduate women by:

- Providing support for graduate women entering targeted departments
- Easing the new students' transition to the department and the university
- Helping entering students develop a supportive network
- Providing professional development opportunities for peer advisors

The program is distinctive in its training methods and emphasis on peer advisors helping students establish their own networks. In addition, the program has among its priorities the professional development of peer advisors. The peer advisors are not simply agents of the program, but constituents as well.

A peer advisor is assigned to each of the thirteen or so departments in engineering, one is assigned to the chemistry department and one is assigned to the physics department.
Peer advisors' responsibilities include contacting assigned students before classes begin, attending training sessions, attending a fall and winter dinner or reception for incoming women graduate students, remaining available to students throughout the semester and organizing one informal gathering for their students.

Our philosophy of peer advising focuses on meeting the needs of graduate women in specific areas. Peer advisors assist new students by first establishing a comfortable relationship, then providing practical information and directing students to appropriate resources. Later, peer advisors might offer alternatives and provide insights as students make decisions such as choosing advisors. Peer advisors provide support throughout the term, but place a priority on helping new students develop their own networks.

As we facilitate mentoring experiences among our students, we operate from the premise that effective communication is essential for a productive mentoring relationship. Peer advisors and students must be made aware of appropriate behavior and expectations. Also, one's style of mentoring may vary depending on the students' needs. One individual may need occasional encouragement over e-mail, while another student might initially benefit from accompanying the peer advisor to a number of activities to become more comfortable on campus. Effective mentoring takes place during a variety of interactions and peer advisors are encouraged not to underestimate the value of a brief telephone conversation or a supportive e-mail. Finally, since students benefit from multiple mentors, peer advisors encourage students to participate in on-line mentoring operations such as MentorNet, to take advantage of informal mentoring and networking common to organizations such as the Society of Women Engineers (SWE) and the Association for Women in Science (AWIS), and to cultivate mentors among faculty and professionals in private industry.

**SELECTION PROCESS**

Applicants are secured by soliciting recommendations from former peer advisors, making applications available at the Women in Engineering Office and through referrals from the Graduate Committee of the Society of Women Engineers (Grad-SWE) and the Association of Women in Science (UM-AWIS). Pertinent questions are posed on the application form. These include "What do you wish you had known as a new graduate student?" and "Why do you want to be a peer advisor?" to prompt reflection and consideration of critical issues.

Peer advisor selection is admittedly subjective. Articulate, outgoing, confident applicants who have proven networking skills are selected. Further, peer advisors who have relevant work experience are highly valued for the insights they bring to their role. Students are consciously chosen to reflect a range of ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds to provide an appropriately diverse group of role models for incoming students.
TRAINING SESSIONS

Training sessions primarily provide an opportunity to communicate expectations, discuss roles, and explore resources. To that end, training sessions include mentoring strategies, a list of campus resources and an opportunity to recommit to program goals.

Training sessions are scheduled at the beginning of each term when schedules are less hectic and students are most available. Sessions last four to five hours and include an hour-long lunch.

Typical training sessions include disseminating information vital to graduate student survival. In addition to announcements such as new funding or services available to graduate students, professionals representing key units and departments from across campus are featured. We have found that hearing directly from a psychologist from Student Psychological Services, a professional from the International Student Center and an expert from the campus Career Services office not only allows peer advisors greater access to information, but increases their confidence in making referrals.

During the session, time is spent identifying and discussing successful advising and mentoring strategies and providing appropriate referrals. The use of effective communication techniques, such as active listening and asking questions that clarify the students’ concern, are encouraged. In addition, advising techniques such as probing beyond the presenting or obvious problem, offering a range of alternatives, helping students explore the consequences of various decisions and sharing personal responses in similar situations, are explored.

While peer advisors are certainly aware of climate issues, some are initially unaware of the consequences of the chilly climate in science and engineering graduate programs. The importance of their role and the potential positive impact upon the experience of current graduate women is discussed at length.

These interactive training sessions include discussion of concerns peer advisors have as well as issues common to women graduate students on our campus. For some peer advisors, the training sessions and activities may be one of few opportunities to discuss national trends, alternative employment opportunities or personal issues.

The use of case studies for training is typical in many fields. For our purposes, the use of case studies to prompt discussion of concerns and to generate solutions is both timely and effective. The peer advisors are given a case study sheet with various scenarios that outline a woman graduate student’s situation with very specific issues or concerns. Recent case studies introduced topics of assisting students with disabilities, securing conference travel funds, changing advisors and dealing with depression.
During the training session, the peer advisor reads the brief case study, considers it on her own and discusses it with another peer advisor. Then the entire group discusses questions to pose to the student, possible solutions, strategies, language to use, etc. The case study approach affords a number of advantages including:

- Allowing peer advisors to share information
- Encouraging brainstorming and creative problem-solving
- Providing an opportunity for peer advisors to share their own challenges
- Allowing peer advisors to explore multiple solutions to a range of concerns
- Previewing common concerns (such as transitions into departments, anxieties surrounding preliminary exams, joining a research group and conducting a job search)

Peer advisors are provided with training materials including brochures from various student services and academic offices. Copies of Advisor, Teacher, Role Model, Friend published by the National Academy Press, and the locally distributed Michigan Women's Handbook that highlights campus and community resources, are presented at the first meeting.

Finally, appropriate social activities for peer advisors and their students are discussed since peer advisors must arrange a gathering or meeting with students every term. These gatherings allow new students to network with one another as they engage in athletic activities, explore local restaurants and cultural events, or simply talk over coffee.

**PEER ADVISORS AS PROGRAM CONSTITUENTS**

At the beginning of the term, a peer advisor e-mail list is established to facilitate networking between peer advisors and to encourage contact with the program coordinator throughout the year. Academic and non-academic job listings, pertinent campus announcements and new funding sources are sent frequently. Updates and articles are mailed several times a term. Finally, thank you notes are sent to peer advisors at the end of each term to acknowledge their important service to their peers and the campus community. Peer advisors are encouraged to become advocates for students in their programs by serving on various committees, serving on conference panels and offering brown bag information sessions.

**EVALUATION**

Inherent challenges exist in assessing our program's effectiveness due to the nature of mentoring relationships and the mentoring process. To date, we have adequately evaluated the peer advisors' response to the program via surveys. But response of the advisees to our queries has been minimal. A challenge and priority for the coming year is to develop an efficient, accurate method to capture information from the advisees.
CHALLENGES

Although we communicate information to new students about the peer advisors by letter, a number of students remain unaware of the peer advisor program. This year, the coordinator will send a welcome message via e-mail to incoming students and provide flyers featuring the name of the peer advisor to each department.

Meeting needs of students who enter mid-year has become a priority. Many of these students miss the comprehensive orientation and networking opportunities available during the fall. To help these students become acclimated, a welcome event is organized for the first week of winter term.

New initiatives for upcoming semesters incorporate suggestions from the peer advisors. Recently, several peer advisors indicated an interest in science policy and community activism. To accommodate their interests, a roundtable featuring a state political analyst is being planned. Additionally, several peer advisors expressed interest in organizing physical activities for all peer advisors and their students. To facilitate their requests, a peer advisor will coordinate a canoe trip and an indoor rock climbing excursion for fall term.

Excellent models for successful peer mentoring and advising programs exist at a number of institutions including the University of Washington, Purdue University, the University of Iowa and others. There are existing and emerging resources for mentoring women in engineering and the sciences as well. Generally, we offer these recommendations for creating or refining a successful peer advising program:

- Develop a formal, structured program
- Utilize existing campus and community resources
- Commit to refining a dynamic, responsive program
- Invest in evaluation of the program
- Communicate expectations to peer advisors
- Provide a training format and content based on needs of peer advisors and students
- Encourage multiple mentors for students
- Facilitate the development of each student's supportive network

INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE PEER ADVISING PROGRAM

Institutionalizing the Peer Advising Program required that we seek financial support in the amount of $9,000 from the Co-Principal investigators for the original Sloan Foundation grant. Funding was readily agreed upon for the program. In addition to developing a plan and timetable for implementation, the following factors may have contributed to the positive response:
• **Keeping the program visible.** Make certain students, faculty and staff are aware of the program and can easily access its resources. It should be noted that the program components may be described or marketed differently depending on the audience. For example, while entering students may be best served by referring to the peer advisors as "supportive," the program may be better served by describing the peer advisors' role as "informational" to ambivalent administrators or faculty lest they attribute those who avail themselves of such programs as needy or deficient. A website can also be developed to increase visibility.

• **Documenting program activities.** In addition to keeping dated outlines and handouts from presentations, activities and workshops, document campus offices and departments with whom you collaborate. Such information can strengthen annual reports and substantiate requests for future funding.

• **Securing support from a range of individuals.** Support from individuals within and outside the department should be sought as well. Program alumni and departmental support staff have been among our program's most vocal allies. Keeping supporters informed through information sessions and via e-mail updates will benefit the program.

• **Encourage constituents to become advocates.** Several peer advisors and their students have cited the program as critical to their success in a range of forums from campus-wide panel discussions to national magazines. While such publicity is welcome, constituents who promote the program to their peers contribute to the effectiveness, longevity and impact of the program.

Among the fine models of peer advising and mentoring programs, a number are making progress toward institutionalization. Collaboration with the programs' coordinators may contribute not only to the institutionalization of similar programs, but to their vitality and effectiveness as well.