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Introduction

The issue of attrition at the Ph.D. level continues to be frequently discussed on college campuses but few formal reports have been published on the topic. Students give a variety of reasons for ending their graduate programs prior to graduation. Whatever the reason for quitting the program, the results have a negative effect on all involved. Students choosing to begin a Ph.D. program are usually unaccustomed to failure. Leaving the program without completing the degree remains a difficult memory for most throughout their lives. Faculty members, who have invested money and time in the graduate student, also feel a distinct sense of loss when a student leaves without a degree. Not only have they lost an investment, they often feel the loss of a friend, a sense of guilt that they could not do more for the student, and a sense of loss of potential future collaborations. Then there are the costs and time involved in beginning the training of a new graduate student to replace the one who left. Scott Smallwood points out that attrition rates do not appear to change. "What is changing is the university administrators' willingness to do something about the problem."[1] Most would agree that actions should be taken to promote positive experiences for the student while at the university and to reduce attrition of Ph.D. students. One of those positive experiences is social and collegial interaction – being part of a group.

Because so much of graduate life revolves around research, isolation for hours or days is not an uncommon experience for a Ph.D. student. Although students interact with others, it is often with a small, select group of lab mates or one faculty advisor. Time on task is crucial for successful research. Leonard Baird associates student attrition in part "with poor social and academic relationships with professors and fellow students…"[2] In *Three Magic Letters,* Nettles and Millett (2006) devote an entire chapter to socialization as a contributing factor in warding off loneliness resulting in greater motivation and persistence to complete the degree program.[3] At the National Conference on Graduate Student Leadership 2003, the report on "Bringing a Sense of Community to Grad Student Life" stressed the necessity of purposeful activities. "Without meaningful interpersonal and community relationships, the graduate experience may spawn mental and emotional hardship."[4] This report concluded with several activities which could be developed to encourage graduate student involvement at various levels within the program, the department, or the college, or university-wide.

In one effort to understand and address some of these issues facing graduate students, the College of Engineering at Purdue University formed a Graduate Student Advisory Committee (GSAC) three years ago to provide the Associate Dean for Graduate Education with advice on ways to improve the quality of the graduate experience. The GSAC meets with the Associate Dean monthly. It consists of a representative from each engineering graduate program and an alternate who attends if the representative cannot, thus insuring that each program has a voice. Each year, the GSAC meetings have a theme. For example, in its first year, 2006-07, the GSAC's theme was identifying, and recommending ways to address, issues of greatest concern to the graduate students. In 2007-08, the theme was building graduate student communities. The goal in 2007-08 was to explore the types of communities in which graduate students function (e.g. disciplinary, interdisciplinary, social), determine what communities are of greatest value to

the graduate students, and develop a plan to be implemented in the next year that would either establish or strengthen those communities and encourage broader student involvement.

The GSAC reached consensus on a two-tiered approach to community building. The first tier would be at the program, or department, level, and the second would be at the college level. Within each department, the students wanted to establish or strengthen a graduate student organization that would play a significant role in facilitating the development of both scholarly and social communities. At the college level, the goal was to give students an opportunity to build cross-disciplinary networks as well as to provide opportunities for both the students and their families to make new acquaintances and learn about different cultures. The remainder of this paper describes how the GSAC's recommendations were implemented, what the preliminary results have been, and what lessons have been learned.

Tier 1: Graduate Student Organizations within Departments

The College of Engineering at Purdue University has 12 graduate programs, and the extent to which students have historically participated in a graduate student community has varied significantly among programs. Some programs have had strong and active graduate student organizations for many years. In other programs, some subdivisions or laboratories sponsored student activities, but there was little or no coordination of those groups at the program level, and most students were not involved in any formal graduate student community. Still other programs had virtually no graduate student organization. Furthermore, it is important to note that each graduate program has its own culture and traditions, and that it is not possible or desirable to impose a "one size fits all" structure for graduate student organizations on all of the programs. Thus, it was important to find a process for building graduate student communities that could be adopted or adapted by all of the different programs and departments.

The selected process was to issue a request for proposals (RFP) to "establish or strengthen" a graduate student organization within each department. Successful proposals were to be funded by the College. Each department's proposal was written by students but had to be endorsed by the department head to ensure that the students' proposal was well integrated with the head's vision for the department. Criteria that the proposed organization must meet were clearly stated in the RFP and included

- Build or enhance scholarly communities within the department
- Provide students, and their families when appropriate, with an opportunity to participate in social events
- Help recruit new graduate students and mentor those students beginning when they are admitted, which can be months before they actually move to campus
- Provide opportunities for professional development and networking
- Have a plan to actively encourage all students, and their families when appropriate, to participate in the organization's activities
- Have a plan for sustaining the organization as the funding from the College decreases over time.

The maximum amount of cash a program could receive to support its organization depended on the number of students in the program and ranged form $2,000 to $5,000 in the 2008-09

academic year. The actual amount received depended on the quality of the proposal as determined using criteria that were published in the proposal. Those criteria included

- How well the criteria for the organization specified in the RFP were met
- How thoroughly each activity was planned, and how feasible the plans were
- How realistic the budget was, and how well it was justified
- How strong the support from the School Head was
- How well the proposal was written – organization, spelling, grammar, punctuation, and clarity of expression were important.

Since most students have not had an opportunity to prepare a formal proposal, some guidance was provided. First, the RFP was distributed through the Graduate Chairs in the departments. The Chair was responsible for assembling a team of students in his or her department to write the proposal, and the Chair could answer students' questions as they prepared the proposal, but the proposal had to be the students' work. Second, the RFP specified the sections that should be included in the proposal along with the type of information that should be included in each section. Third, a "bidders' conference" was held by the Associate Dean. A detailed rubric that would be used to evaluate the proposals was distributed, and students could ask questions about their proposals. Unlike most bidders' conferences, participants in this one were encouraged to share ideas since the goal was for every program to have as strong a proposal, and resulting graduate student organization, as possible.

Eight of the twelve programs submitted proposals. All were submitted by the published deadline. Some proposals were excellent – innovative, thorough, well-written, and strongly supported by the department head. Others satisfied 80-90 percent of the published criteria. Teams who prepared those weaker proposals were provided with feedback and were given the choice of accepting a percentage of funding commensurate with the percentage of the criteria they satisfied or revising their proposals to correct the deficiencies. All of the teams in the latter category chose to revise their proposals and eventually received the full funding.

In subsequent years, students will prepare a short report on the previous year's activities and a plan for the coming year. Together, these two documents will be used to determine what portion of the next year's maximum allocation each organization will receive. That maximum allocation will decrease by 20 percent of the original amount each year, so that funding from this program will cease after 5 years. Each graduate student organization's proposal is to include a plan for raising funds and sustaining the organization over time. The decrease in funding from the College is designed to encourage attention to fund raising. Departments that did not submit a proposal in the first year will be encouraged to prepare an initial proposal in the second year.

Since the graduate student organizations are in their first year, at the time this paper is being written it is not yet clear how successful they will be. All have leaders and are functioning. The leaders of several of the graduate student organizations have asked for a time and location to meet and exchange information on their activities as well as ideas for new initiatives. Leaders of organizations that have been in place for several years have been quite willing to share their experiences with students leading the newer organizations.

Some innovative ideas have come from the proposals and their implementation. One department head chose to support the graduate student organization by hiring a graduate assistant to set up and maintain a website for graduate students in the department. Several organizations are working closely with alumni, particularly in the areas of networking, professional development, and building scholarly communities. Obviously, the alumni are also mentioned as sources of funding for the organization.

One unanticipated problem arose in implementing the organizations. It is not a trivial matter to transfer funds from the College to a student organization. How that can be done depends on the source of the funds the College wants to transfer and on how the graduate student organization is registered – as a campus organization or as an organization within a department. Knowing exactly how the transfer will be made ahead of time will allow the organizations to begin functioning more quickly. The process would be easier if the organizations were required to register as campus organizations, but that also reduces the organizations', and the departments', flexibility.

Finally, it is becoming apparent that having strong graduate student organizations in place in all of the departments can have several advantages. For example, if engineering graduate student participation is needed in a university-wide advisory committee, the graduate student organizations can identify representatives. Student organizations in the departments can also help to organize and promote college wide activities such as those described in the next section.

Tier 2: College-wide Events

To encourage college-wide interactions and to promote inter-disciplinary awareness across a large institution, the College of Engineering at Purdue University, established three annual events for graduate students and their families. While financial support and initial planning for these events have been the responsibility of the College, Graduate Office staff members within the departments have played a significant role in hosting the events.

The first college-wide event, held in April 2008, was the Graduate Student Appreciation Celebration. It was suggested by the GSAC when they were asked to describe an event or activity the graduate students would attend and enjoy as part of Graduate Student Appreciation Week. This event was designed to give the graduate students an opportunity to escape from their everyday routine, relax with other students, and simply have a good time. The event was held in one of the largest and most attractive venues on campus. Graduate students were invited to come and participate in silly games of skill for inexpensive prizes, wear balloon hats provided by a clown, have their portrait drawn by a caricature artist, listen to the DJ, and eat. Students could spend as much time at the 4-hour event as they liked -- or could afford to be away from the lab. Families could attend but most did not.

Although only about six percent of the 2300 engineering graduate students attended, many of those who did attend used their cell phones to call their lab mates and tell them to come over. As a result, the attendance increased as the event progressed. Several students were surprised to see other people they recognized but had no idea they were in engineering. The event did seem to provide an opportunity for cross-disciplinary interactions. Those who attended said they would

come again next year and would encourage their friends to do the same. After the event, the GSAC was asked to provide feedback and make suggestions for improvements. They noted that April was too late in the semester to hold such an event. Many students facing end-of-the-semester deadlines did not feel they could take the time to attend. February was suggested as a better time, and the 2009 Graduate Student Appreciation Celebration was planned for February.

The second event was held during the summer session in 2008 and featured lab tours followed by a family picnic. The goal of this event, in addition to socializing, was to expose the students to some of the research taking place in departments other than their own. GSAC members had suggested the lab tours, saying that many students would like to know what people in other disciplines were doing but that there was no good mechanism for learning about that work. Two departments with laboratory buildings near each other organized the lab tours while the College organized and provided funding for a picnic for families following the tours. The picnic was well attended (about 10 percent of the graduate students came), but the lab tour attendance was disappointing, especially for students who had taken the time to prepare for visitors to their labs.

Feedback from the students following the summer event made it apparent that lab tours and family events should not be mixed. Many of the students were eager to bring their families to the event. But young children are not allowed in the laboratories, and they are not very patient while their parents look at poster presentations of research. Another lesson learned was that while some students are interested in hearing about research in other disciplines, most students need some incentive beyond curiosity to take a lab tour. Because interdisciplinary research is so important, the College wants to encourage interdisciplinary exchanges, and the lab tours are one way to do it. Efforts were made to identify a way to encourage students to participate in the tours.

The third college-wide event, lab tours followed by a reception, took place in the fall semester of 2008. This event was designed to promote professional interaction among graduate students from the various engineering disciplines and did not involve families. During a brainstorming session on ways to encourage students to participate in the lab tours as part of this event, the GSAC members noted that graduate students would appreciate having business cards they could use when attending professional conferences or interviewing for jobs. In response to the GSAC's suggestion, any student participating in the lab tours had the opportunity to apply for a box of 50 business cards by completing a form distributed at the end of the tour. Two departments housed in the same building organized tours through some of their labs and set up posters depicting additional research in their departments. Following the tours, a large reception with refreshments was set up in the building in which the tours had taken place. The number of students that could be accommodated on any one lab tour was limited due to the size of the labs. Multiple tours were scheduled, and all were at capacity. Over 70 students participated in the tours, and more than double that number attended the reception even though a heavy downpour throughout the afternoon kept some students from venturing across campus.

Feedback from students who have attended these college-wide events has been very positive. The goal for the second round of events (celebration, picnic, reception) is to get more students to participate and continue to build communities and relationships that will serve the students well. Learning what graduate students will respond to, what they value enough to tear themselves from

their research, is taking some time. However, GSAC members and other students are willing to gather comments from their colleagues and brainstorm on ways to make the events more valuable to the students.   Each event will continue to be refined to best meet the students' needs and interests.

Conclusion

The two-tiered approach to building graduate student communities with the goal of improving the quality of the graduate experience and increasing student retention has been launched. Teams of students have established or strengthened graduate student organizations in eight of the 12 engineering departments at Purdue University. Student-led activities designed to get more students involved in scholarly and social communities within the departments are underway with the support of the department heads. Three college-wide events have been held with the goals of promoting interdisciplinary communities and providing an opportunity for families of graduate students to get to know each other. Feedback following each activity has provided suggestions for improvements which will be implemented in the next round of college-wide events. It is too early to assess the success of the community building effort or its impact on the quality of the graduate experience and retention. The fact that students who have participated are enthusiastic and eager to help improve the programs is encouraging.

[1] Smallwood, Scott. "Doctor Dropout." Chronicle of Higher Education 16 January 2004: A10-A12.

[2] Baird, Leonard L., ed. Using research and theoretical models of graduate student progress. In Increasing graduate student retention and degree attainment. New Directions for Institutional Research 80 (1993): 3-12.

[3] Nettles, Michael T., and Catherine M. Millett. Three Magic Letters: getting to the Ph.D. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2006.

[4] Proceedings of the National Conference on Graduate Student Leadership (St. Louis, MO.: Washington University), 2003, 44-47.