

Running Head: NEW AND USED

New and Used Graduate Coordinators

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Abstract

Graduate coordinators are required to perform a greater level of service than is commonly required from a pre-tenured or tenured faculty member. With this increased load, maintaining an effective and productive record of research and teaching is challenging. In this session, strategies will be presented in the context of working models to assist this approach, an integrated and comprehensive set of procedures and protocols can be developed to address a wide range of issues preemptively.

Performing the function of graduate coordinator is a time-intensive, administrative-heavy appointment that often contraindicates a productive research and teaching agenda. The responsibilities required by this position are vast, typically including a lead role in admissions, assessments (e.g. knowledge and skills assessment), graduate funding awards, graduate work appointments, curricular issues, graduate policy and procedure, probation, student visits, and communication. With such varied tasks, an effective graduate coordinator needs a multitude of skills, from administrative organization to a positive interpersonal affect. As a result, this type of appointment is usually reserved for senior faculty, however current realities are such that junior faculty members are often appointed to these positions. It is especially critical for junior faculty members to work strategically and efficiently in this appointment so as not to sacrifice their future career in research and teaching. Several strategies will be discussed in this article to maximize the effectiveness for those in this role while minimizing the impact on research and teaching. In general, the strategies can be placed into the following categories: Outsourcing, delegation and streamlining. The discussion of strategies will be contextualized into this taxonomy.

Finally, the changing culture of our students' is creating new challenges for the graduate coordinator. These differences are exposing a misalignment between the set up of programs and the student profile. As this is an emerging issue for our programs, a general discussion of these challenges will be provided.

Outsourcing

Several campus organizations exist to serve the various colleges, departments, and other administrative bodies. The breadth of responsibilities of graduate coordinators lends itself to using many of these para-departmental services to facilitate our work, especially in areas requiring specialized knowledge. It's reasonable, then, that graduate coordinators have these offices on their shortlist of phone numbers. Even better would be to have a personal contact in each office. Some of the offices are as follows (note that the names likely vary across colleges/ universities):

- Student legal services
- Judicial affairs
- Admissions
- Registrar
- Bursar
- Multicultural and diversity affairs
- Disability resource center
- Graduate student services
- Theses and dissertations office

Delegation and Streamlining

During the first year of appointment, graduate coordinators will do every task for the first time as many tasks occur on an annual basis. A strategy that can greatly

streamline various tasks is by setting up a template system. For instance, a standard set of emails can be created to deal with student inquiries and requests for information so such information will not have to be created anew at each request. Advising memos and/or reminders can be written once and filed appropriately. General models for commendation letters and remediation contracts

The following is an example of an automated process. Take, for example, the issue of probation. The discussion will be held on two levels: academic and professional probation. It will become clear that with a careful set up of probation policies and system to apply these policies, the execution becomes greatly simplified.

Most academic probation policies are easy to apply to most situations as they general consist of highly quantifiable variables. A simple example is a policy that includes a gpa standard (e.g. 3.0). In that regard, student gpas can be checked against this standard at the end of each semester. If in the event a student's gpa drops below the standard, a letter (using one of those aforementioned templates) is sent to the student informing him/her of the new status and requirements to return to good standing. Again, with a system in place and quantifiable variables, the execution can require little time.

Since our programs are developing medical professionals, the addition of a professional standard in probation policies is becoming commonplace. While the variables are certainly less quantifiable than the hard numbers of course grades, dealing with issues of professionalism can be simplified nonetheless through thoughtful and well documented procedures. Take, for instance, a situation where a student is

habitually late (or inappropriately dressed, speaks consistently inappropriately to patients, or a number of other behaviors that need to be addressed) to an extent that the supervisor's verbal communications have gone unheeded. A pre-thought, documented, and signed (by the student, at orientation is preferable) policy can guide this process. The process will be outlined for a major university in our field. Once the issue escalates beyond the immediate clinical supervisor, the specifics of the issue is documented and communicated to the student both in writing and verbally. Following this, a written plan of remediation is developed *with the student*. It is critical that this plan contains 1) measurable outcomes, 2) with stated deadlines (or times of assessment) for these outcomes, 3) includes consequences for failure to meet the outcomes, and 4) is signed by the student and supervisor(s). It often occurs where there are no stated consequences in the event of failure to achieve the objectives of the plan, rendering the remediation plan useless.

Once a professional issue is resolved such that the student returns to good standing, programs' sincerest desire is that good standing remains. However, it occasionally happens that the same or related professional issue occurs again. In these situations, the same basic process occurs but with escalation. Generally, escalation includes more people (i.e. the director) and greater consequences (e.g. clinical suspension, academic suspension, cancellation of funding, or dismissal).

In a different manner, processes can be set up to streamline reoccurring tasks. An important role of a graduate coordinator is in recruiting and putting a helpful, informed, friendly face to the department. Each year, dozens of students request visits

to make formal inquiries and tour the facilities. Without a process or support, this could be a rather time consuming task. However, the following example will show how simple it really can be. Figure 1 depicts the process from the original student inquiry (which is almost always via email), to the final step, a tour of the facilities. This figure has been displayed as two rows to highlight the fact that the graduate coordinator's role has been limited to the crucial aspect of the process: the meeting with the prospective student. A mature graduate assistant (GA) takes care of all the communication with the prospective student (i.e. providing program information, scheduling, visit arrangements, etc), makes the initial introductions, and provides a tour of the teaching, research and clinic facilities. For the graduate coordinator, this takes two hours of work and reduces it to about 15 minutes per student visit.

In general, there are many strategies that when carefully employed can reduce the overhead required for graduate coordinators. This is not to say that the job is somehow miraculously the equivalent of a committee that meets monthly, but certainly goes a long way to protecting time for productive research and effective teaching. The use of competent and trained student support can allow the delegation of responsibilities with appropriate oversight. Combine this with well thought-out processes can truly enhance the graduate coordinator's effectiveness without terminal impacts to other priorities.

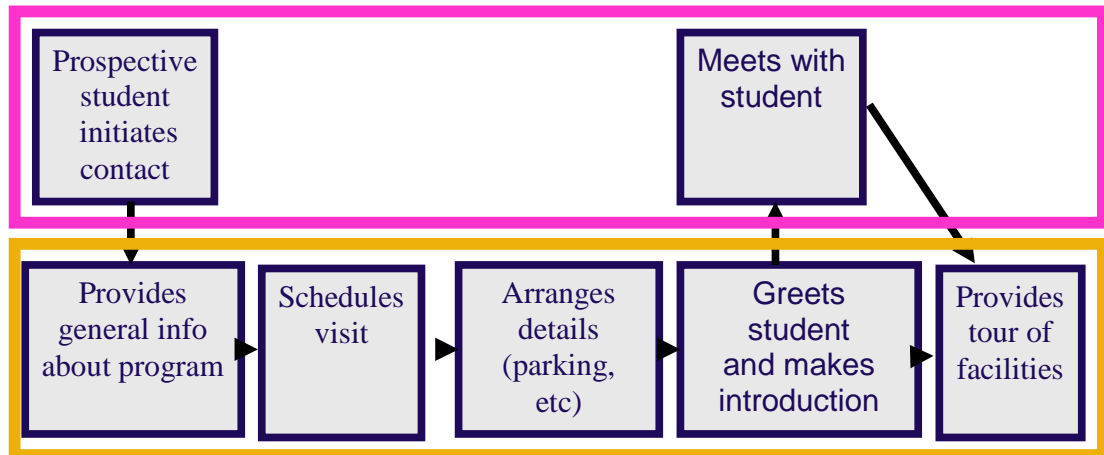


Figure 1. This is an example of making prospective-student visits time efficient for the graduate coordinator. The tasks for the graduate coordinator squared in pink and the tasks for the graduate assistant are squared in orange.

The millennial generation and the graduate coordinator

As time progresses, college and graduate school aged individuals (typically 18-24 y.o.) slowly and progressively shift in culture. Most cultural tendencies are amoral and may be assigned value by individuals, but that is not the intent of this section. Rather, the authors intend to provide a general description of the emerging generational culture, the impacts (often perceived as “problems” due to the mismatch between our expectations (once valid) and the student’s actual preparation) on our programs, and some initial thoughts. As the authors see this as an emerging issue, hard and fast solutions are not provided, but instead a direction of conceptual development.

What happened? It seemed that students used to come into graduate programs, follow the rules, attend class (on time), treat patients, and graduate. Now it seems that there some basic skills that we have continued to expect that simply is not part of many graduate students’ skill set. Most of these unmet expectations lie in the area of

professionalism. To broaden the scope somewhat, this can be thought of as a maturity issue. On average, students are not as mature as they used to be, which means they will not be as punctual or prepared, they will be more stressed and less able to manage a busy schedule. In short, they are less equipped with life skills than once was the case.

So are newer students just less developed? The authors argue *no!* Rather, the profile of these students has changed dramatically, some better, some neutral, and some worse – regardless of the value perception, the authors argue that many of these traits have become incompatible with way in which current clinical programs are executed. In each of these cases, the question must be asked and answered is what should our reaction be? For these traits, how much to we change the program? How much do we increase accountability? To simplify the task, it can be said that students coming in less mature need to be brought a greater distance (as the endpoint has not changed) in the same period of time. That is our challenge. In that regard, a brief review of some of the cultural traits will be provided, then the impacts these traits have on our programs will be given, and finally some closing thoughts.

There are many characteristics that make Millennials distinct from other generations (e.g. Generation X, Baby Boomers, etc). The following is a counterbalanced list of characteristics as observed by the authors. They are resourceful, but potentially more tolerant of easy albeit illegal actions (read: Napster when it was an illegal download site). They are tech savvy but not very security concerned. They are productive but demand flexibility and required emotional support. They are intelligent but are entitled. They have a great capacity for multi-tasking without regard to the

appropriateness of tasks (e.g. text messaging while in class). They will pay for many services, but have high expectations for return (customer/service-provider model in education).

How does this interesting mix of traits impact their behavior and performance in a graduate, clinical program? While many of their traits lend themselves to improved performance, for instance collaborative work, for brevity the discussion will be kept to the challenges this poses graduate coordinators. Time and stress management skills have reached a critical need for improvement. They are also prone to high-anxiety and depression, especially when put in situations that force a greater level of independence and responsibility. They will seek multiple sources (e.g. peers, the internet) for an answer to a question, but often not the appropriate source.

Ultimately, to be an effective graduate coordinator, these issues need to be dealt with by either more effective communication regarding expectations, or changing the program to accommodate (read: NOT dilute the program) these differences in life skills. Some strategies that have helped can be generally stated by clearly stating all the expectations as early as possible and being consistent in the enforcement of these expectations. However, it should be added that setting and communicating expectations does not necessarily bring students to acceptable behavior levels, but it does facilitate accountability. To get specific, orientation can be increased to include specific expectations and consequences. Probation policies (academic and professional) can be discussed and every student can sign the agreement as to these expectations. Expectations are repeated throughout orientation. Expectations are repeated

throughout orientation. Expectations are repeated throughout orientation. During orientation, it may help to have a "burning questions" board, where students can write down a question on a sticky note so they can reduce the distraction of having that question. Throughout the program, it can be beneficial to detect specific problems as early as possible. With the increased growth students need to experience, it maximizes their ability to achieve this growth when issues are identified early. The aforementioned probation policies are increasingly including professional issues and outlines procedures for correction. Finally, it is important for graduate coordinators to continually assess their own attitudes to balance the changing face of graduate students with our response. Graduate coordinators should ask themselves if they are being flexible enough, and assess their own motives. Students should be given the freedom to express, learn and grow, but within the confines of a well developed program that will not needless hamper them.