Assessment of Mentoring and Advisement Practices in the Department of Classics 2020

Because we are a small department, it is not that hard for us to do a good job of mentoring and advising, and our students tend to agree. All students are advised during the first year by the Executive Officer. There are currently 25 students in our program. This year, we have three entering students, one MA student and two PhD students. It has been my duty and pleasure to serve as their advisers. These numbers are fairly representative of those in our program, although perhaps a little on the low side.

Our students generally teach during their second year, sometimes during their first, so that by the end of the third semester they have normally pinned down an adviser either from among those with whom they have taken courses or from the faculty of the campus on which they are teaching. Students seem to be satisfied with the number of meetings they have with their advisors, which varies, but there is always room for improvement. Once a student commences work on a dissertation, the director of that dissertation normally takes over as the student’s mentor. To date we have no formal student mentors, although many of our students undertake that job unofficially but we are talking about changing that. Again, because we are a small department, our faculty are generally aware of academic requirements and support services, but I’m sure we could do better, as we could on reports of student progress.

Some undergraduate campuses have more formal student mentoring for teaching than others. This is something we are currently examining.

Although it is not that long since we undertook an exploration of how we might improve our mentoring and advisement practices, the department of Classics began discussing issues of advisement and mentoring once again at a full faculty meeting on December 13, 2019. At the beginning of the spring semester, I solicited input from both students and faculty, and this input was discussed at a meeting of the curriculum committee on February 26, 2020. The committee was extremely pleased to discover that on the whole our students are immensely enthusiastic about the quality of the advisement and mentoring they receive. In one area, that of selecting a topic and a director for the PhD thesis, there was a little bit of dissatisfaction on the part of a minority of the students, and we spent a significant portion of the meeting exploring means of addressing this concern.

The question has always been: what happens next? Our students come to know the faculty primarily through coursework, but also at through a variety of professional and social occasions throughout the school year. Our methods seminar introduces students to a large percentage of our faculty, but we are only able to offer it every other year, so students do not always have the advantage of meeting faculty in this way during their first two semesters. Those who enter with MA degrees, moreover, are frequently teaching already on the undergraduate campuses, and have gotten to know the faculty there, and nearly all students are teaching by their second year. Many students find it easy to establish mentoring relationships with a faculty member with whom they have come into contact in one of these ways. Inevitably, however, some fall through the cracks, and the committee discussed various ways in which contact could be expanded to ensure that each student will have an opportunity to make an informed decision about a mentor. One option considered was to have a couple of events scheduled at which students ending their
first year could engage in, in effect, “speed dating” with our faculty (there are only about 15 of us) with an eye to identifying someone with whom they feel compatible in terms of both interests and (ideally) temperament.

To foster better contact between students and consortial faculty—and in my program, we are all consortial faculty—we also discussed the advantages of adding virtual office hours during which we would be available for distance chats. In the present COVIC-19 crisis, we are moving to this immediately.

We feel strongly that entering students should also be mentored by students who have been here for a while. I will propose at the meeting of the full faculty of the department on later this semester that we seek funding from the administration to remunerate one student, to be elected by either the students or the faculty or above, to serve as mentor to the entering students. This would ensure that the student mentor was someone with a genuine commitment to the project. If this is not possible, we can pair entering students with individual seasoned students, but we see some pitfalls there.

In terms of the selection of a dissertation topic, we are exploring the possibility of making it a practice for students during the semester preceding advancement to candidacy to sign up for an independent study with their prospective director in order to explore possibilities for dissertation topics. This is done with profit at some other universities. It need not be a three credit course. It could only be taken once; if nothing gels and the student decides to explore a different avenue with a different faculty member, that would have to be done independently and for no credit.

I am appending to this report a document put together largely by Prof. Ronnie Ancona outlining best practices for the onboarding and support of our students when they teach on CUNY campuses as adjuncts. I circulated this document to our full faculty in the fall.

I look forward to discussing all of this with the faculty at our next meeting. See also the document on onboarding and support below, which Prof. Ancona kindly put together following an open meeting of the Executive Committee with the students.

Respectfully submitted,

Jennifer Roberts
Acting Executive Officer
Ides of March (we are, after all, the Department of Classics), 2020

**Onboarding and supporting Classics graduate students for teaching at the campus colleges**

**These are things faculty/administrators do or should do:**

Help with onboarding. The HR process can be daunting. Make sure people start early. This affects access to CUNY First, Blackboard etc.
Provide information about the course that might affect the requirements and the syllabus – is it in Pathways? Is it writing intensive?

Provide at least 1, preferably more, syllabi that others have used for the same course in the past.

Provide office space and key. Show what the office resources are, if any, like computer, printer etc. Explain duplication methods and timeframe. Explain how book orders are done.

Connect the person, if desired, with someone who has recently taught the same course for additional support. Some campuses regularly link beginning adjuncts with more experienced ones.

Provide any required rubrics for syllabi, grading, etc. on the specific CUNY campus. For example, Hunter has a sample syllabus rubric online, that is very helpful. It also includes some specific language that must be on all syllabi (including sexual harassment policy, and so forth). There is also an adjunct handbook at Hunter online that is shared with adjuncts via a link.

Some campuses find it useful to have professional development meetings of some kind. Hunter currently, for example, has two of these a year. These occur right before the start of each term. Adjuncts are paid to attend (attendance is voluntary) and full-timers are welcome, but not paid. Discussions involve a variety of topics, but typically include time for sharing what has gone well, what faculty want or need help with, and so forth. Attendance is high among adjunct faculty and full-timers who attend are positive about the experience, as well. Just getting together with so many other faculty members is a rare and enjoyable experience on our commuter campus. Typically, refreshments are served as a result of a small amount of funding provided by the Department. The learning and sharing are by both full-timers and adjuncts.

Have a faculty member (typically the Chair or Program Head) make him/herself available for any questions.

Have a conversation with the faculty member after the CUNY-required observation and observation form have been filled out.

If there is a form used for observation, share it ahead of time. This way the person being observed with know what the observer will be looking at.

**Things grad students should do:**

If a graduate student has not received information along the lines of what is mentioned above (sample syllabus, onboarding help, key etc.) in a timely fashion, they should ask for it. Being proactive this way is a requirement of being a professional.
The graduate student should ask for help / suggestions / guidance as needed. This could come from the Chair or from a fellow grad student who teaches the same courses or from another faculty member or from all the above individuals.

The graduate student should respond promptly to all emails and requests. They should be appreciative of feedback on teaching, both positive and negative. When presented with constructive criticism, they should listen carefully and should respond with interest and without defensiveness. This is an opportunity for a graduate student to grow as a professional.

The graduate student should be familiar with the CUNY contract limits on adjunct teaching as well as any limits in teaching for those holding CUNY fellowships.