CUNY Graduate Center, PhD Program in English
Overview of Mentoring and Advising Practices
16 March 2020

Introduction

Mentoring and advising are important aspects of the PhD Program in English’s overarching mission to support and guide students in their development as scholars and teachers. We understand advising generally to refer to guidance in navigating the program and Graduate Center’s requirements for the PhD degree, and mentoring generally to refer to support maneuvering through and demystification of the demands and expectations of the profession writ large. We recognize that advising and mentoring often overlap and must be thought together.

We value the heterogeneous ways our faculty conducts mentoring and advising. We are also aware of the need for program and institutional structures that provide such support independent of individual styles and skills. Moreover, the shifting landscape of higher education, including especially the dramatic reduction in tenure-track positions available to our students upon graduation, contextualizes our broad sense our mentoring and advising must be attuned to such conditions.

This report summarizes our existing practices and describes our current efforts to improve the advising and mentoring we offer at the program level along these lines.

Personnel, Resources, and Current Practices

The PhD Program in English, which numbers some 200 currently enrolled students and about 42 faculty members, is administered by an Executive Officer (EO), a Deputy Executive Officer of Admissions (DEOA), a Deputy Executive Officer of Placement (DEOP), a Satisfactory Progress Officer (SPO), an Assistant Program Officer (APO), and a part time College Assistant. We typically enroll a class of 20 students annually, all of whom receive five-year Graduate Center Fellowship funding packages. Each cohort also typically includes one or two students who receive the Provost’s Enhancement Fellowship and the mentoring that accompanies that program.

The vast majority of advising is handled by the APO. Students consult with the APO on matters ranging on everything from matriculation into the program, assessment of degree requirements, and constitution of exam committees, to dissertation defense and graduation. The APO plans and conducts the orientation for incoming students and remains the first point of contact for the majority of program affairs throughout a student’s graduate career.

The program’s Practical Guide for Students supplements the Graduate Center’s Student Handbook, and both of these serve also as advising resources for students. The SPO, whose primary function had been to confer with students whose registration was held by the Registrar’s office, has recently begun also to check in with students in the fourth year whose progress is out of sync with normative time to degree. The EO also advises students, typically around such
matters as an unsuccessful attempt at passing the first exam, constitution of exam committees, and academic professionalization.

The first exam, which is a portfolio exam, was revised in recent years to be more specifically oriented toward professionalization. It is now comprised of various genres of professional academic writing, including a conference paper, an annotated bibliography, and a syllabus, among other elements. The first exam is graded by committees of three faculty members and substantive feedback is provided students who do not successfully pass a part or parts of the exam. The second exam emphasizes scholarly development. With a committee of three faculty members, a student develops three reading lists together comprised of about 75-80 texts. Successful passage of a two-hour oral exam on the texts on the list fulfills this program requirement.

The Placement DEO, along with the Placement Committee, which is comprised of faculty members, are the primary guides to students through the academic job professionalization and search process. The DEOP, along with other faculty members, reviews application materials and offers mock interviews. The program also hosts practice job talks and this year, is experimenting with a placement workshop, designed as a semester long, structured opportunity for students nearing degree completion to prepare for professional life after the degree (more about this course is in the next section).

Students also receive guidance from faculty mentors. Currently, students are assigned faculty mentors as they enter the program. They are also assigned to a different faculty member as a Research Assistant. The English Student Association connects incoming students with a student mentor as well.

These assigned faculty mentors are expected to work with their designated mentees at least until the students identify other faculty members to serve in such capacities. More organic mentoring relationships regularly develop between students and program faculty, especially as students enter the second examination and dissertation stages. Dissertation committees are expected to meet at least annually with the dissertators to assess progress. Dissertation committee members and especially supervisors typically provide active guidance and feedback from the development of the prospectus, the drafting of chapters, and to the dissertation defense. Students receive substantive feedback on the prospectus from a faculty member external to the dissertation committee, in addition to those on the committee.

As students move from their RAships (in their first year) into their Teaching Assistantships (in their second and subsequent years), they take the Teaching Practicum, ENGL 79000. This course is offered at and by the consortial campuses (usually the senior colleges) to which students are assigned for teaching.

The Program also regularly offers public sessions on such subjects as preparation for the first and second examinations, and publicizes information about the Wellness Center, the Dean and Office of Student Affairs, the Doctoral Student Council, the Teaching and Learning Center, and other GC units that can offer support and guidance.
Looking ahead

In the course of reflecting on mentoring and advising practices and structures, we conducted informal surveys of our students and faculty members. While the numbers of responses, especially from students, are too small to be considered representative (16 out of some 200 currently enrolled students), they, along with other informal input from students, identify ways we can improve the advising and mentoring we offer. Key ideas offered include:

- more structured occasions for faculty mentors to meet with their assigned students;
- more proactive outreach by faculty members and the program generally;
- attentiveness to the structural inequities across faculty labor precipitated by the consortial model and how student awareness of such inequities creates reluctance to ask for assistance;
- regularization of advisement of each student by the EO and/or other officers on an annual basis;
- and, more particular attention to the transition period between coursework and second examination, as well as to and through prospectus to dissertation.

We note a general sense of desire for more specific guidance as to program navigation, especially as related to preparing for the first and second examinations. Some students made note of strong mentoring and advisement throughout their graduate school experience, which seemed closely related to the mentoring capacities of specific individuals rather than program offerings per se.

The program has already begun to renovate our advising and mentoring practices and structures in ways we believe will strengthen our support of students. These include the following:

1. **A shift to a cluster model of mentoring.** Innovated by the program’s APO and approved by our Executive Committee, this model involves moving from the assignment of a single faculty mentor upon matriculation, to a group including a current student, a faculty member, and a program graduate. This group model would allow mentoring duties to be shared, and enable students systematic contact with people able to speak to different aspects of graduate school and the academy. Because of concerns with faculty and student labor and to support peer-to-peer contact, this model might involve two incoming students per group rather than one. While still under development, this model is due to be piloted with the incoming Fall 2020 cohort. Our pilot year will help us assess what works best for our communities.

2. **Substantive and sustained contact with program graduates is one of the benefits of the cluster model of mentoring.** Such contact is helpful in relation both to illuminating academic career paths and to our efforts to broaden our sense of professionalization to include non-academic trajectories. Connecting current students with graduates who pursued such avenues strikes us as an important part of showing students the range of possibilities afforded by a PhD in English.
3. In this way, it aligns closely with our program’s efforts to re-envision the scope and aims of the degree and our curriculum. The placement workshop referred to above, for example, is imagined as one element of a three course structure that would allow, first, students early in graduate work to begin identifying both academic and non-academic itineraries; second, to revisit and explore such possibilities by means of activities like internships; and finally, through the placement workshop, which already features opportunities to meet with people in publishing and non-profit foundation work. This, we have developed in consultation with Bianca Williams and Stacy Hartman of the PublicsLab, and Jennifer Furlong of the GC’s Office of Career Planning and Professional Development.

4. We will begin to host either annually or once a semester a “mentoring day” in the program – i.e., a day designated for meetings between students and mentors.

5. We will hold both an open program meeting and one for faculty only, focused on advising and mentoring. Among the topics of discussion will be student concerns regarding (consortial) faculty workload and uncertainty regarding faculty expectations, as well as “best practices.” The open meeting will allow us to share findings and ideas, and to review expectations of both students and faculty, while the faculty-only session will afford frank discussion of mentoring and advising needs and challenges.

6. Mentoring and advising will become a part of the EO’s regular communication with the program, to supplement the information already provided by the APO.

In all these ways, we commit to sustaining and improving mentoring and advising toward the ends of providing strong guidance and support to the students with whom we are so fortunate to work in the PhD Program in English.