Mentoring Assessment Report: Ph.D. Program in Speech-Language-Hearing Sciences

Spring 2020

The Speech-Language-Hearing Sciences Ph.D. program has several mechanisms in place to assure effective processes of student mentoring. All students are advised by the Executive Officer (EO), who meets with each student at least twice a year, often several times a year. As well, each doctoral student joins a research lab and thus has the director of that lab as their advisor. Some students join more than one lab and benefit from the mentoring of two advisors. Thus, all students are advised and mentored by at least the EO and one faculty member.

As students participate in lab activities, such as lab meetings and joint research projects, each student enjoys mentoring not only from their advisor but also from more senior students in the lab. Topics of professional development are addressed regularly in lab meetings.

In addition, all our students are required to enroll in a Professional Issues Seminar (SPCH795). The course covers mentor-mentee relationship, career development, seeking funding, publication, collaboration, and related topics.

Whereas there is no written policy regarding the frequency of meetings between the students and their mentor/advisor, we encourage our students to meet with their advisors regularly. Many students meet with their advisors as frequently as once a week, and all students meet with their advisors at least once a semester. Most lab directors hold regular lab meetings so they have a chance to check in with their students regularly. Some level III students are less likely to attend lab meetings regularly, in which case direct regular communication between the advisors and the students is important.

The advisement process, both by the EO and the primary advisor, continues as the students continue through the dissertation process. Often, the student’s advisor is also their dissertation committee chair. If another faculty member takes over the role of the chair of the dissertation committee, students may benefit from the mentoring of their lab advisor as well as dissertation committee chair.

The EO explains the mentoring process to all incoming students. A discussion about mentoring is part of the New Student Orientation held during the first week of every fall semester. The Program Handbook contains paragraphs pertaining to advisement, and relevant resources and links. Continual information about resources that are available at the Graduate Center is disseminated via email and during lab meetings and dissertation seminars. Because
students are affiliated with at least one lab, they work directly with their advisor - the lab director - and no additional process of assigning a mentor to each student is needed. Faculty members are aware of their responsibilities as mentors. Mentoring and student issues are discussed in the department’s Executive Committee meetings and in conversations between the faculty members and the EO.

The program reviews students’ progress every semester during the Executive Committee meetings. As well, regular communication between the EO and the faculty members assures that the EO is aware of students’ progress concerns. Also, each semester before advisement all students submit a progress note to the EO, after having discussed it with their advisors. The EO reviews the progress with the students during their advisement meeting every semester. During those meetings, any concerns that may have come up are communicated to the students.

The SLHS program does not have a separate mentoring system for teaching but teaching is addressed in the professional issue seminar as well as in special training seminars which meet once or twice a semester for all interested students.

In the Winter/Spring 2020, we surveyed our faculty and students regarding their experience and satisfaction with student-advisor mentoring. The survey included questions such as “How often have you met with your advisor this semester? Do you find these meetings useful? Why or why not?” and “I am satisfied with the amount of time I spend with my advisor” (1 strongly disagree, 5 strongly agree). All six central faculty members and 13 of our students responded (3 level I, 6 level II, and 4 level III students). The survey raised the awareness of both faculty and students regarding the process of mentoring and the differing needs of the students. Whereas the responses obtained for the ten questions included in the survey varied across responders, a brief summary of the results is presented here.

Students’ responses to the question about how often they met with their advisors/mentors this semester ranged from three times a week to once a semester. This aligned with the faculty responses. When asked about the optimal meeting frequency, most responders stated that once a week or once every other week would be ideal, and several responders stated that this may depend on the student’s level and needs. The student responders endorsed that these mentoring meetings are helpful. Faculty responses were similar to students’ responses here and they reported that they discuss with their students their expectations regarding meetings.

Faculty members as well as all but four students indicated that they prefer not to have a firm policy about student/advisor meeting schedule, mainly because the needs vary depending on the student and their level. Four students thought a policy could make the process more efficient.

Because of anecdotal differences in expectation regarding written communication, we included in the survey a question about the time frame for receiving written feedback on written drafts. Students and faculty members agreed on the time frame here, with small variations. It was helpful to inquire about these expectations and to make sure they align.

Most students agreed that they are satisfied with their relations with their advisors and that they get the support they need. A few students, however, disagreed, and appeared to have some dissatisfaction with their advisors. On average, students’ ratings about their mentors were positive, ranging from 3.5 to 4.9 (5=strongly agree; 1=strongly disagree).
On the basis of the survey, we have identified several opportunities for improving the program’s mentoring process. These include:

- New students will have the opportunity to be paired with a more senior student from their lab or another lab, starting their first semester.
- The program will plan to establish a process that will allow student to express their dissatisfaction from their mentoring experience and for the advisors to discuss ways to improve the relationship with their students.
- The program will plan to continue to inform faculty and students about resources available to the students regarding career and professional development.
- We will not institute a set policy for mentoring but will continue to have a flexible dynamic mentoring process.
- We will plan to engage in further discussion regarding ways to enhance student/advisor relationship.

In conclusion, the SLHS program has a comprehensive mechanism in place to assure that the students in our program benefit from on-going mentoring. A survey conducted earlier this semester revealed areas of strength as well as opportunities for changes that can be implemented in the future.

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