PhD Program in Theatre and Performance
The Graduate Center, CUNY

ADVISING AND MENTORING REVIEW AND REPORT

Prepared by Peter Eckersall, Executive Officer
With input from Ryan McKinney, Doctoral Theatre Students Association Officer on Curriculum and Exams

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PhD Program in Theatre and Performance

ADVISING AND MENTORING REVIEW AND REPORT

This report has three parts: (i) the background and details of the advising and mentoring activities undertaken in the program, (ii) a summary of findings of a review of related programs undertaken by the DTSA and the EO, (iii) recommendations and concluding remarks.

1. Program background and details of the advising and mentoring activities

The PhD Program in Theatre and Performance offers PhD study in fields of study and research in historical, modern, and contemporary theatre and performance. It is ranked among the top five graduate programs in theatre and performance nationally and is ranked in the top two programs for placement of students into tenure-track jobs.1 We have identified that one of the reasons for our success is our focus on mentoring and advising, and we have given dedicated time and specific resources to developing programs and practices of mentoring over many years.

Broadly, we offer advising and mentoring in three ways:

(i) formal mentoring and advising of students during their course work and in their dissertation work;
(ii) our professionalization program; and
(iii) specific student activities and informal mentoring organized by the student body and the Doctoral Theatre Students Association (DTSA) and supported by the faculty and by the program office, including the Executive Officer (EO) and the Assistant Program Officer (APO).

Each of these activities is interwoven into the teaching and research and research training activities in the program to ensure a coordinated and consistent approach to mentoring and advising.

Further explanation and details of each of three approaches are below.

Formal mentoring and advising of students during their course work and in their dissertation work

The program has three levels of study, each with designated advising and mentoring practices.

- **Level I**: Course work. New students are mentored by the EO and Deputy EO in their course selection and study program.
- **Level II**: Reading fields. Each student develops three reading fields (one major and two minor) in consultation with three faculty members who are the advisors for these fields. In most cases, the advisor of the main field becomes the dissertation advisor at Level III.
- **Level III**: Dissertation. Each student works with a dissertation advisor and selects additional faculty to be on their dissertation committee. The dissertation advisor is responsible for shepherding the student through the dissertation process and bringing it to completion. The advisor is also active in helping their recently graduated students prepare for the job market and gives advice and support on job interview techniques and preparing applications (this is in addition to the professionalization program described below).

The **scope and range of these mentoring activities**, including expectations for faculty and students, are outlined in the Program Handbook that is available via the Theatre and Performance home page at: [https://www.gc.cuny.edu/Page-Elements/Academics-Research-Centers-Initiatives/Doctoral-Programs/Theatre-and-Performance/About-the-Program/Program-Handbook](https://www.gc.cuny.edu/Page-Elements/Academics-Research-Centers-Initiatives/Doctoral-Programs/Theatre-and-Performance/About-the-Program/Program-Handbook).

This is supplemented with information about the **“sample pathway to degree”** that is available via the Theatre and Performance home page at: [https://www.gc.cuny.edu/Page-Elements/Academics-Research-Centers-Initiatives/Doctoral-Programs/Theatre-and-Performance/About-the-Program/Sample-Path-to-Degree](https://www.gc.cuny.edu/Page-Elements/Academics-Research-Centers-Initiatives/Doctoral-Programs/Theatre-and-Performance/About-the-Program/Sample-Path-to-Degree).

It is further supplemented with information about **learning goals** that is available via the Theatre and Performance home page at: [https://www.gc.cuny.edu/Page-Elements/Academics-Research-Centers-Initiatives/Doctoral-Programs/Theatre-and-Performance/About-the-Program/Learning-Goals](https://www.gc.cuny.edu/Page-Elements/Academics-Research-Centers-Initiatives/Doctoral-Programs/Theatre-and-Performance/About-the-Program/Learning-Goals).

Students are regularly briefed on these expectations and goals in their mentoring and advising sessions, and through specific professionalization sessions that focus on questions about mentoring and advising.
Our program of mentoring and advising also benefits from our partnership with Martin E. Segal Theatre Center (MESTC). Our students work as interns on publications and can develop and produce their own events, with mentorship from the executive director Professor Frank Hentschker. Students may also work as commentators, editors, panelists, dramaturgs, and curators on MESTC events and projects. See: https://thesegalcenter.org/home/about-us/.

(ii) Professionalization program

Our professionalization program is an important part of our approach to mentoring and advising. A member of faculty (currently Professor James Wilson) works on developing this program in partnership with a student officer who is elected annually to represent the area by the DTSA. A program is announced at the beginning of each semester. Weekly meetings cover topics including (but not limited to) student health and welfare, preparation for exams, conference presentation, publishing, research ethics, research and funding opportunities, alternative career pathways, preparing for teaching, and preparing for the job market. All central faculty members contribute to the professionalization events by leading workshops and discussions. Additionally, we invite presentations from colleagues in the relevant centers for teaching and learning, digital humanities, research ethics, and other relevant areas of expertise at the Graduate Center as well as alumni and other outside guests with unique perspectives.

Beyond co-curating the weekly events, the professionalization officer offers workshops for students preparing CVs, cover letters, teaching philosophy statements, sample syllabi, and other materials for the job search. They organize mock job interviews based on real job advertisements and with faculty roleplaying the work of a search committee, thus giving students (both those on the market as well as auditors in earlier stages of the program) an insight into the pressures and strategies of a job interview.

Professionalization activities are listed on the program website at: https://www.gc.cuny.edu/Page-Elements/Academics-Research-Centers-Initiatives/Doctoral-Programs/Theatre-and-Performance/Profession-Related-Events. These are updated each semester.

While some of these activities have been interrupted by the COVID-19 emergency, we have maintained the most important and time-sensitive - such as exam preparation workshops - via online sessions. We are planning to have a full semester of activities in the future either online or in person.
(iii) **Doctoral Theatre Students Association (DTSA) mentoring**

A range of student mentoring activities, including group events and informal mentoring, are organized by the student body and the DTSA. Each new student is assigned a mentor from among the more senior student cohort, who offers advice drawing from their own experience of the program. The DTSA reports that this is an effective and valued system of mentoring that offers an important peer-to-peer, student-led mentoring experience. It has the twin advantage of enabling a pathway for students to seek informal advice from their peers and to gain experience in being a mentor. While this program is informally overseen and supported by the office of the EO and with input from faculty, an important factor in the success of this program is its student-led custodianship and oversight, a structure based on the proactive approach that experts have shown to have long-term benefits.²

During the COVID-19 emergency, the EO and the DTSA have given particular attention to this mentoring program as an unobtrusive way of providing support to the students and making sure that everyone is staying safe. Events have included peer-to-peer check-in’s, weekly group events streaming theatre performances, and cohort-based supportive gatherings.

In 2017, we also introduced an annual student-run conference led by the Doctoral Theatre Students Association (DTSA) in partnership with the Martin E Segal Theatre Center (MESTC). While an important aim of this project is to develop, promote and showcase student research, it also has a significant professionalization outcome. Students work in a collaborative way to draw up a theme, develop a CFP and conference program, invite visiting speakers, and organize logistics related to the event. The professionalization aspect improves student capacity to develop innovative scholarship and research infrastructure as well as builds their professional connections with other emerging and established scholars in their fields of research. The student conference is supported by faculty mentorships and funds from the EO, Chairs, and MESTC budgets.

Details of the two most recent conferences are at:


Programs and video-recorded sessions from past conferences may be found at

2. **Review of professionalization, advising, and mentoring**

Professionalization, Advising, and Mentoring are considered to be vital components of the PhD Program in Theatre and Performance. With that in mind, current PhD students in their first, second, third, and fourth years of study (representative of the three levels of the program) gathered on November 14, 2019 to discuss the state of advising and mentoring in the program. The meeting was convened by Ryan McKinney, DTSA Officer on Curriculum and Exams, at the request of the EO. Below is a report on observations and comments that were shared.

**Professionalization**

- Overall, it was agreed that the professionalization sessions were valuable and important.
- There was some desire for more international student programming and discussion of issues related to international job placement.
- The suggestion was made to include more events for Level II students.
- Students were curious about the process for student input (on topics, dates of events, integration into courses, etc.).
- Lastly, there was an extended conversation regarding the program’s interest/commitment to practice and practice-as-research and how it could be integrated as one aspect of professionalization.

**Mentoring & Advising**

- Students in the program value the availability of faculty and the quality of mentorship between faculty and students. They feel well cared for in comparison with students in other programs.
- There was a desire for greater clarity around best practices for completing the number of required coursework credits (transfer of MA credits, certificate programs in relation to theatre electives, curriculum offerings and forward planning, practice-based work).
- Students also expressed a desire for updates to the student handbook and for greater clarity related to degree logistics (such as submission of field statements and the composition of the Standing Exam Committee).
- Lastly, there were several valuable observations surrounding first-year advising related to teaching placements, more robust advising for students entering the program without an MA or MFA, and timelining the degree with each student.
It is important to note that, overall, student response was positive. Students feel empowered by these discussions and take them seriously as a chance to share observations and suggestions for the future of the program.

3. Recommendations and concluding remarks

Recommendations in response to Professionalization

- Better responding to international students. International students make up approximately one-quarter of the program cohort, and we are committed to responding to their needs. We will recommend to have sessions on the international job market included in future professionalization events. We will also work to make our alums who are working internationally more visible and, where relevant, include them as mentors for international students.
- Professionalization topics for Level II students. We will recommend that the professionalization officer work with students to develop appropriate programming for Level II students.
- Selection of professionalization topics. The topics are selected at the beginning of each semester with input from the faculty officer and the student representative. Students have input into selecting topics via their student representative and/or directly in conversation with faculty. We will endeavor to make this more widely known to the student body.
- Practice-as-research. We now include a session on practice-as-research in the professionalization calendar and have expanded our work in this area through our partnership with the MESTC. We also have students participating in the PublicsLab and are working with the Lab to raise the awareness of PhD pathways into working in the arts. We commit to further these conversations and linkages with students.

Recommendations in response to Mentoring and Advising

- Students in/completing coursework. The regulations regarding the determination of the transfer of credits are included in the program handbook (https://www.gc.cuny.edu/Page-Elements/Academics-Research-Centers-Initiatives/Doctoral-Programs/Theatre-and-Performance/About-the-Program/Program-Handbook). The stipulations are that courses can be credited when they are “equivalent to work in the Ph.D. Program in Theatre.” The regulations
also state that 9 points of credit can be transferred from courses in creative practice. Students are briefed on these points in their orientation, conducted by the EO. Extra care will be taken to make sure that students are clear on these points. As of Spring 2020, the DEO has begun timelining the degree with students transferring credits. We will recommend that students entering without an MA or MFA contact the DEO if they want to develop an individualized timeline to degree.

- Advising on submission of exam, field statements, and booklists deadlines. These dates are distributed the students in a semester calendar document that is available in the first month of semester and prominently displayed in the student common room. We can additionally recommend that the calendar of program dates be added to the website along with the announcement of the examination committee (although we need to reserve the right to change the membership of committee as needed).

- First-Year advisement on teaching placements. This role is the responsibility of the EO, and we will recommend that the information be expanded to include a discussion of allocation of placements, teaching and curriculum, and rights and responsibilities. Additionally, there is already a professionalization session on teaching that includes participation from the Teaching and Learning Center. We will recommend to the professionalization officer that we expand this section of the presentations.

**Concluding remarks**

Advising and mentoring are an important part of the PhD program in theatre and performance and are incorporated at all levels of the program. This is seen in the mentoring of students by faculty, by an expansive professionalization program with dedicated faculty support, in internships and training with the MESTC, PublicsLab and other Graduate Center organizations, and in a highly successful peer-to-peer mentoring program coordinated by the DTSA. The report underscores the importance of having a dedicated professionalization and placement officer. We aim to continue to support the role and resource the program.

The success of our advising and mentoring can be measured in our rankings as a preferred program and placement of graduates into academic and non-academic employment. Successful aspects of advising and mentoring are confirmed in a positive student response in their review.
At the same time, we have identified ways to improve our advising and mentoring. This includes improving the visibility of program governance, and to expand our training and information about aspects of the program including preparation for teaching and a wider purview of the needs of different student groups, including international student and students working in methods involving practice-as-research. The recommendations above will be considered by the faculty and students and will be implemented in due course.