

Faculty of Environment Graduate Student Pilot Mentorship Initiative

1. Background

The Student Teaching Excellence Committee (STEC) was formed in the Fall of 2012 after student representatives on the Faculty's Teaching and Learning Committee recruited fellow students from each department in the Faculty of Environment. The initial mandate of the committee was to organize and lead town hall meetings in order to capture and relay the student body's ideas and concerns regarding teaching and learning to the Teaching Fellow. Since then, STEC has broadened its mandate to enhance the teaching and learning experience of Faculty of Environment students at the University of Waterloo through the development of teaching and learning initiatives, including, but not limited to, workshops and panel discussions, a funding program to enhance students' learning experience, and a regular 'spotlight on student learning' blog series.

2. Why a mentorship program

Mentorship has been a key need raised by the graduate student body in previous town halls, a sentiment echoed by incoming students in subsequent years. Feelings of confusion, isolation, and stress have been noted by many incoming graduate students, the effects of which can be extremely harmful to one's overall academic success. The proposed faculty-wide graduate mentorship program seeks to address these concerns by ensuring an increased level of student-led guidance, student collaboration, and networking, which can provide a more well-rounded university experience. Furthermore, students have expressed a desire to develop skill-building and academic support networks through peer relationships. The proposed pilot mentorship program will expand from the School of Planning's mentorship program that was developed last year by the Association of Graduate Planners. With the increased focus on career-driven graduate students within the Faculty, there is a greater need to enhance student support networks. We would propose that the most efficient and effective way to achieve this is through the development of a graduate mentorship program.

3. What is the mentorship program

The basis for the mentorship program is to have students matched with a mentor based on academic, professional, and personal skills/interests. The basis on which students are paired will be the same for Master's and Doctoral students, however, Doctoral mentees will only be allowed to be paired with Doctoral mentors, unlike Masters mentees who can be paired with Masters or Doctoral mentors depending on supply and need.

Students will be asked to identify skills they either possess (mentors) or are interested in gaining (mentees), as well as academic (e.g. research topic) or professional (e.g. non-academic career) interests, which will serve as the basis for pairing. An automated online pairing program is currently in development, and will be used to create unbiased faculty and/or cross-faculty pairs. We anticipate 60 to 80 students (i.e. 30 to 40 pairs of students) will participate in the fall 2016

Pilot Mentorship Initiative. These pairs will be announced prior to orientation week. Mentoring pairings can be flexible, and if students would like to switch mid-way through the process they are able to do so. Mentors may also have multiple mentees if interested. Note: course-based Master's students will be excluded from the pilot project.

Students are expected to continue the mentorship commitment for 1 year. This program will be available for upper year PhDs that are interested in becoming mentees as well. The mentors will gain leadership, networking, and collaboration skills that will help their individual growth for professional or academic careers ahead.

STEC will run a training session in the summer semester to ensure student mentors are prepared for their roles and any questions or concerns can be addressed prior to the pilot's commencement. There will also be a series of 2-3 events per term that are open to all mentorship pairs which will allow students to mingle, questions for both the organizers as well as other mentorship pairs and strong collaboration between the departments. Lastly, mentorship pairs will be encouraged to meet bi-weekly to ensure both parties are getting the full experience mentorship has to offer.

4. Timeline

Phase 1

Early spring 2016

- Draft mentorship and recruitment material
- Recruit mentors*

Summer 2016

- Hold one mentoring info/training session for upper year students to ensure they are properly prepared through a short lecture and question and answer period, ideally facilitated by a faculty member or graduate student with leadership and mentorship experience.
- Collect information from incoming students by sending out a request through the graduate secretaries for interested students to fill in their information in the online matching system between June-July.
- Pair students with mentors.

Phase 2

Fall 2016

- Release mentorship pairs information (via email 2 weeks before orientation week, through the graduate secretaries)
- Organize mentoring event near the end of September.
- Organize mid-semester mentoring event at the Grad House

Phase 3

Winter 2017

- Recruit Master and PhD students using the same format as spring 2016
- Begin to organize for second round of recruitment, training, and pairing for fall 2017

*If we do not recruit enough mentors, pairing will be on a first-come-first-serve basis, with additional students being placed on a waiting list. At this time, a further call-out will be made for prospective mentors.

5. Potential Outcomes

This initiative will enhance the academic experience of 60-80 graduate students (MA & PhD). The Pilot will contribute to cross-faculty collaboration, networking, and leadership skills for graduate students as well as specific learning and personal skills that can assist in their overall academic achievement.