Mentor teams ease 'dissertation dread'

More professional schools are trying a mentoring tactic that's long been a staple of research programs: the research team.

By Bridget Murray
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When Jenny Huwe started her dissertation, her research team helped her focus her topic - mentoring among Naval officers - and polish her research proposal. In return, Huwe helps her five team members with their dissertations by offering suggestions for their hypotheses and research methodology and aiding in their data collection.

And they all contribute to research on mentoring by professor and team leader Brad Johnson, PhD, who directs each of their projects.

"With the intensive connection we have with one another and our mentor, Brad, the pace of our dissertations is much more rapid than usual for doctoral students," says Huwe, a third year student in the PsyD program at George Fox University in Newberg, Ore.

And that outcome is exactly what George Fox faculty hoped for when they set up a system of Research Vertical Teams two years ago. They sought to ease dissertation dread among students and to improve the research mentoring students receive. Back then, faculty struggled to teach each student the research process and still pursue their own research. And students viewed the dissertation as "an enemy to be avoided as long as possible," says Johnson, the PsyD program's director of research.

Now, research teams tackle both problems, Johnson says. With the new team system - in which up to six students work on projects related to a professor's research area - faculty can successfully mentor several students and simultaneously produce more research. In turn, the mentoring prepares students to take on their dissertations.

Traditional research and counseling doctoral programs have always been proponents of such research teams. But the teams are relative newcomers to professional schools such as George Fox and the Antioch New England Graduate School.

Applied and professional programs increasingly recognize that, in addition to mentoring students and gearing them for their dissertations, teams prime students for internships and jobs, says Gene Pekarick, PhD, director of Antioch's Center for Research on Psychological Practice. "Not only do employers want competent clinicians, but they want people who can do research on quality assurance, treatment outcomes and customer satisfaction," says Pekarick. His program recently added research teams in those areas, and he says other professional schools' interest in starting such teams is growing.

Team setups

Also driving professional programs' interest in teams is a concern that PsyD graduates don't get as much mentoring as PhD graduates. Johnson finds evidence of such a trend in preliminary results of a survey of almost 800 psychology graduates. He attributes it to the fact that the PsyD students don't usually work with other faculty and students on research.

Johnson says teams can right that imbalance by fostering regular exchange of research expertise, ideas and support. His team, for example, meets every other week for two hours to brainstorm, advise one another about projects and take on new tasks. The team often meets less formally, too. They had a pumpkin pie party to help a team member stamp and send off research surveys.

Most teams run much like Johnson's. At Indiana University's counseling psychology PhD program, for example, a research team led by Rex Stockton, PhD, meets regularly to discuss projects in group-dynamics areas. Stockton starts off the younger students with the easily learned research tasks of library searches, literature reviews and data collection. After mastering those tasks, they can handle the more rigorous work of structuring experiments and analyzing date, he says.

Many teams also allow advanced students the chance to supervise younger team members. Taking this approach is Puncky Heppner, PhD, in the University of Missouri's counseling psychology program. Heppner, whose current team is working on a measure of psychotherapy outcomes, encourages students to help younger team members write up their data.

Team Skills

In fact, says Heppner, expertise in writing and rewriting manuscripts is just one of the many skills students glean from research teams. According to team leaders and members, other invaluable skills include abilities to:

*Design and setup experiments- Students learn how to develop research questions and hypotheses, where to find subjects and how to cut costs, says Dawn Seidner Speckhart, one of Stockton's former students.

*Manage data- Students gain experience at surveying participants, following up by mail, and organizing the data in a database, says Amy Mulholland, a student on Heppner's outcomes research team.

*Analyze data- Students learn to run statistical analyses. "If I hadn't been on a team, I'd never have learned it myself," says Lisa Flores, another one of Heppner's students.

*Present the results- Students talk about the research at conferences, which prepares them for future presentations at work and professional conventions, says Speckhart.

Team Benefits

Students also reap less tangible benefits from research teams, says Stockton. They learn how to overcome such glitches as missing subject data, he says. And Felito Aldarondo, PhD, a former student of Stockton's, says that students on research teams are much more likely to "get moving on their dissertations and focus quickly" than those who aren't.

The benefits of research teams also linger well after graduation, students say. Jeffery Lucas, a George Fox student and member of Brad Johnson's team, says teams help practitioners fully understand the research articles they read and bolster students' sense of professional identity.

"The research team is a welcome into the field," says Lucas. "Through it, students build relationships that they hopefully can maintain throughout their professional lives."