

Do you remember your first semester as a graduate student? Or are you there right now? Most new graduate students soon find that they are expected to be more independent in their programs than they were as undergraduates. In graduate school the "rules of the game" are considerably different than they are in undergraduate studies. While faculty advisers are excellent resources for forms, deadlines, discussions about research and many other academic aspects of graduate student life, who can help you with the social side of graduate school, navigating campus and the culture of the department? Establishing a peer mentoring program in your department can provide several benefits for new and advanced students.

In *Creating a Mentoring Culture*, Lois Zachary defines mentoring, discusses how to create a mentoring program and outlines the benefits of mentoring. She says, "Because mentoring combines the impact of learning with the compelling human need for connection, it leaves individuals better able to deepen their personal capacity and maintain organizational vitality in the face of continuous challenge and change" (page xxi). Challenge and change are two things Sharon Zumbrunn, a doctoral student in educational psychology at UNL, remembers well from her first semesters as a graduate student. She recalls her strong desire to connect with advanced students who could help her with questions about navigating the program from a student's perspective. In the fall of 2008, she started a peer mentoring program for cognition, learning and development (CLD) graduate students in Educational Psychology.

Kim Marxhausen, a first year educational psychology doctoral student and participant in the mentoring program, commented that "it has been a long time since advisers have been students, but mentors know what is going on and how to get things done. There are always things that people tacitly know, but in the fast-paced world of graduate school you do not have time to learn them as you go. You need to know now what is expected of you and how typical your reactions and concerns are." Marxhausen appreciates having someone to contact about questions and to encourage her to attend campus activities she may not have tried otherwise.

For Zumbrunn, the first step to creating the CLD peer mentoring program was meeting with a focus group of students to better understand their needs. She then met with Dr. Laurie Bellows of the Office of Graduate Studies, as well as CLD faculty to gather ideas about designing a program that would meet both the needs of CLD students and expectations of the department. Advanced students were asked to volunteer as mentors and paired with new students, who had completed an information sheet during the summer.

Zumbrunn describes the benefits of the CLD peer mentoring program: "The benefits of our peer mentoring program are twofold. First, mentors offer new students support, guidance and encouragement. New students seem to appreciate the unique perspective (and empathy) the advanced students can offer. Second, the program offers advanced graduate students an opportunity to mentor students. This valuable experience likely proves beneficial, as many of our graduates continue their careers in academia." Despite some of the challenges that come from starting a new program, Zumbrunn and Marxhausen are excited about the future of the CLD peer mentoring program. Marxhausen plans to become a mentor when she is ready for the task, and Zumbrunn believes that the student-led aspect of this program is an important component in "keeping students interested and passionate about carrying the mentoring torch."

If you are interested in starting a peer mentoring program in your department, please contact Dr. Laurie Bellows at lbellowsl@unl.edu for more information.