

Bridging the Equity Gap for Graduate Student Onboarding

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DEI Fellows Project
Executive Summary

Description of Project

How can UNC improve the onboarding experience for graduate students to provide a smoother transition into graduate school and fill equity gaps?

What best practices should the Graduate School employ to create a culture that ensures equity in the experience of graduate students, with particular attention to those who are graduate administrative assistants or graduate teaching assistants?

The purpose of this project is to UNC graduate students unpack the hidden curriculum of Graduate School, understand the resources available to them, and help them move successfully toward degree completion. The Graduate School currently offers all incoming graduate students online orientation prior to the beginning of each semester (fall, spring, and summer), and an all-day in-person orientation experience prior to the beginning of fall semester. Orientation should be one part of fully on-boarding graduate students. There is an equity gap between the resources invested in onboarding and supporting the early experience of undergraduate students and that of graduate students at UNC.

The project I'm proposing is a series of workshops for students to answer questions, introduce the campus/online culture and climate at UNC, and provide graduate students, including students from historically minoritized identities, with resources to support their first-year experience at UNC.

The DEI Fellowship project on onboarding will be the first piece in developing wrap-around support for UNC graduate students, whether they are enrolled in on-campus or online programs.

Theoretical Framework(s)

There are two sources that influence the topics and general direction of the project:

1. The Council of Graduate Schools: resources addressing onboarding, graduate education policies, and mentoring graduate students
2. The Higher Learning Commission: expected practices for online/distance education. Approximately 64% UNC's distance education students are graduate students.
3. CAS Standards for Graduate and Professional Student Programs and Services (GPSPS), provides a theoretical framework based on a whole systems view of the developmental needs of graduate students.

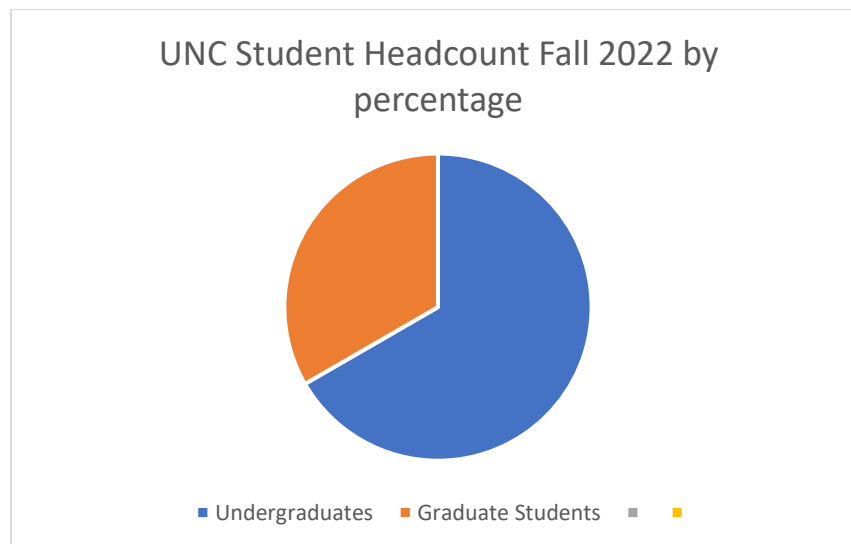
CAS for GPSPS states that orientation activities should:

- ✓ Facilitate the transition and integration of new students into the . . . institution
- ✓ articulate the realities, norms, and expectation of graduate education
- ✓ explain the role of advisors and other personnel and resources that support student success
- ✓ identify relevant academic and administrative policies . . . procedures, and programs
- ✓ introduce resources regarding student rights and responsibilities
- ✓ identify institutional services and programs
- ✓ introduce opportunities for professional development

Intended Audience

The primary audience for this project is UNC graduate students. This means all graduate students, no matter the mode of delivery for their program.

The graduate student population at UNC is 1/3 of the total student headcount. Historically, graduate students are underserved in terms of campus services.



The Council of Graduate Schools highlights the vulnerability of graduate students.

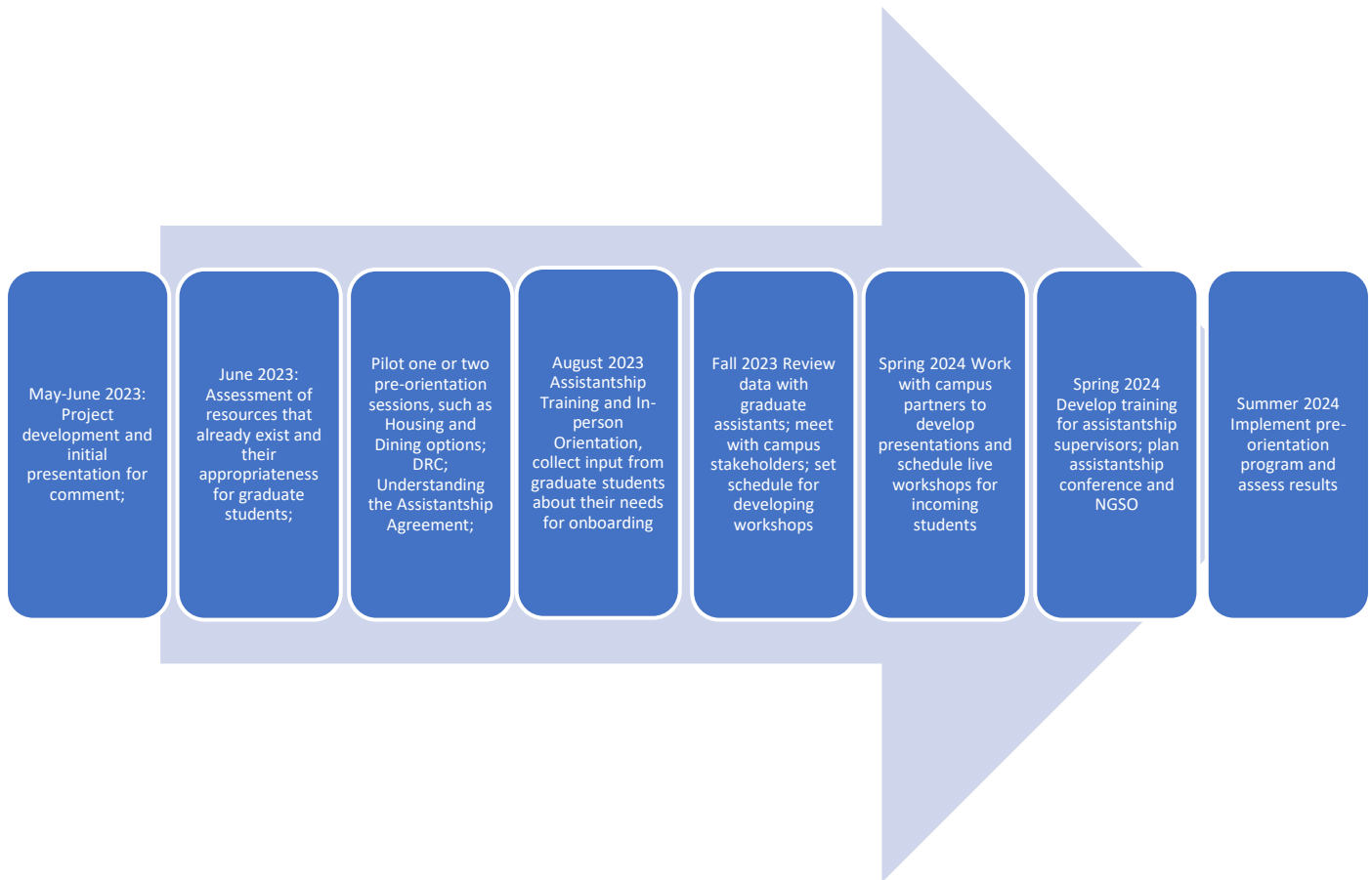
Stakeholders

The stakeholders and collaborators would be:

- Graduate students; Graduate Student Association
- Graduate School staff team
- Graduate faculty and Graduate Council
- Graduate Admissions/Slate team in Enrollment Management
- Extended Campus staff
- University Libraries

- Student services offices (DSA, DDEI, OIEC)

Onboarding Program Implementation Timeline



Impact of Project

The university could make an impact on the onboarding experience for graduate students with a relatively small investment of funds.

- Anticipated budget: \$2,500 to \$3,000.
- Staffing: Associate Dean of the Graduate School, graduate assistants in Graduate School, staff and faculty presenters
- Bridges to other programs: The Graduate School aspires to strengthen existing relationships to offer existing workshops in both face-to-face and online, asynchronous formats. The current Graduate Student Support Canvas shell will house these resources.
- Use resources at hand: use existing presentations on DEI resources, the Student Code of Conduct, Canvas workshop for students, libraries, etc. to introduce graduate students to the resources available to them and the responsibilities they have as part of the UNC community.

Challenges to Implementation

The primary challenges to program implementation will be:

- Lack of buy-in from campus stakeholders/partners (Campus partners have been very supportive!)
- Persistent attitude that UNC campus resources are for undergraduates only.
- Persistent attitude that UNC does not need to provide access to resources for online/distance ed students.
- Insufficient staff time in the Graduate School to develop project.
- Lack of engagement with program on the part of graduate students.
- Further cuts to Graduate School staffing or budgetary resources.
- Staff burnout.

Assessment and Review of Project

There are two easily identifiable tools for assessing the success of the initial run of the program:

- Post-Orientation and Post-Assistantship Training satisfaction surveys – administered immediately after the sessions.
- Graduate Quality of Life Survey – in the first year this would provide a baseline measure for student satisfaction with campus resources.

Measures of Success

- After the program runs for 2 years, improved ratings related to knowledge of campus resources, feeling of inclusion, and general satisfaction with UNC on the Graduate Quality of Life Survey.
- Improved participation and satisfaction with campus climate on the part of graduate students.
- If data is available on graduate student persistence to degree, then we could use the data to assess after 5 years whether there is an increase in overall degree persistence and an increase in degree persistence for students from historically minoritized identities.

Future Project Development

The onboarding process for graduate students is the first phase in a larger project to support students throughout each stage of their degree progression. Other pieces of the project include:

- Mapping the graduate student journey from inquiry to commencement.
- Review and development of communication templates with an eye for equity.
- Development of a communication strategy and yearly plan for communicating information.
- Revision of Graduate School online resources to demystify policies and processes related to important milestones (e.g., the need to schedule comprehensive exams; where to find forms; etc.)
- Implementation of the Cayuse Graduate Education Manager platform, which will remind students of degree requirements and milestones, house forms they need, online approval workflow, etc.
- Development of key-stage workshops for students that help signpost what they need to do to progress toward degree completion.
- Development of a series of workshops on writing at the graduate level and, separately, on research skills.

- Upskilling faculty mentors through a one-day “Entering Mentoring” event led by facilitators from the Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experiences in Research (CIMER) in late fall 2024 or January 2025. The CIMER event will be funded through an innovation grant from the Provost’s Office.
- Enhancement of the Graduate Student Association’s role in creating on-campus and online communities.