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# Graduate Student Learning Communities at Iowa State University

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# Graduate Student Learning Communities at Iowa State University

## **Abstract**

Learning communities in higher education and at ISU have primarily focused on small groups of undergraduate students with connections made via linked curricula or living-learning communities. While the student focus may be different, there is a foundation for Iowa State University to further develop and implement graduate student learning communities (GLC).

## **Disciplines**

Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Higher Education

## **Graduate Student Learning Communities at Iowa State University**

Craig Ogilvie, Ignacio Hernandez

### Introduction

Learning communities in higher education and at ISU have primarily focused on small groups of undergraduate students with connections made via linked curricula or living-learning communities. While the student focus may be different, there is a foundation for Iowa State University to further develop and implement graduate student learning communities (GLC).

Several GLCs started at ISU in Fall 2012 and the Graduate College is encouraging other programs and departments to start their own GLC. The cornerstones of a GLC are regular discussion seminars, engaging students in discussions about becoming a successful graduate student in their particular discipline. The seminars are mapped around the milestones of graduate work, research skills, teaching and learning pedagogy, and leadership. Since graduate school is a social as well as an academic experience, the GLCs offer a structured environment for graduate students to develop peer-to-peer mentoring relationships, community building, as well as connections to faculty.

Because GLCs are new, the purpose of this paper is to describe a few of the models that have emerged from the first GLCs. Programs can then adapt these models to their needs.

### Models of GLCs at ISU

#### *Program-based GLC Models*

There are approximately 11 program-based GLCs across campus at different levels of implementation. Program-based GLCs are currently designed around three models that differ depending on the combination of a graduate student organization (GSO) and Director of Graduate Education (DOGE) as well as the breadth of the target audience.

Model A is a program-based GLC led by GSOs. The GSO organizes a range of activities for all students, with some of the activities focused on incoming students. This student-to-student model offers members of the learning community access to information as well as connections to a campus-based student organization.

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*Model A: GSO-led Program-based GLC*

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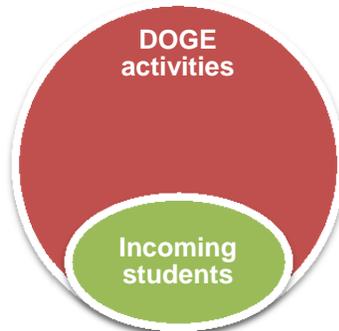
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Model B is a program-based GLC led by a DOGE. The DOGE organizes a range of activities for all students, while focusing some of the activities to the needs of incoming students related to the particular nuances of their academic program.

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*Model B: DOGE-led Program-based GLC*

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Model C is a program-based GLC led in combination by a DOGE and a GSO. Programming is centered on incoming students with a specific focus on their transition to graduate studies. This

model involves partnering with a department as to offer participants detailed and specific resources related to their program of study.

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*Model C: DOGE and GSO Program-based GLC*

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Each of these models draws on a set of emerging practices that can be adapted by new GLCS:

- Mentoring programs for new students which may incorporate senior graduate students and/or alumni.
- The procedural components of transitioning to life as a graduate This may include the practical procedures involving filing paperwork related to the steps taken by students to identify a committee, Program of Study forms, etc.
- Development of Individual Development Plans (IDPs) <http://myidp.sciencecareers.org/>
- The Graduate College's, CELT's and CIRTL's ([www.cirtl.net](http://www.cirtl.net)) professional development seminars, related to research, teaching, etc.

*Practice-based GLC Models*

A different model for supporting graduate students in a learning community is to base the community around developing a set of practices that the students want to develop their skills. This could be teaching, writing, public outreach, etc. These GLCs can cross disciplines and draw their inspiration from writing circles, faculty learning communities on teaching, and expertise groups

within companies, often known as Communities of Practice. At ISU there are currently three topic-based GLCs of teaching assistants. These GLCs are part of the ISU Howard Hughes Medical Institute (ISU-HHMI) education reform in science undergraduate courses. The learning communities each consist of 15 teaching assistants in their first and second years of graduate school. The TAs are involved in introductory courses in biology, chemistry, and physics. The GLC is overseen by a postdoctoral HHMI teaching fellow.

The goals of the ISU-HHMI practice-based GLC are to develop and increase the TAs pedagogical knowledge, to create an environment for TAs to identify and discuss best practices, as well as to create a space of community where TAs may support one another. The TAs are grouped according to courses they teach. Financial compensation for the TAs is paid through funds from the HHMI grant at a rate of \$500 per year.

#### Documenting the Need for Graduate Student Learning Communities at ISU

Graduate school is a major transition process for students. Many enter upon subsequent completion of their undergraduate programs of study while others re-enter the university as working professionals. Graduate students are often overwhelmed in their work while making sense of their transitions from consumers to creators of knowledge. Aspects of community for graduate students are inherently multifaceted. To gain a better understanding of graduate student community building processes at Iowa State University, The Graduate College has developed a series of surveys to assess various student groups on campus.

#### *First-Year Graduate Students*

The Graduate College at ISU surveyed new graduate students to identify their transition behaviors and potentially provide an early alert for students who are having difficulties in transitioning to graduate school. The Early Alert Survey was emailed to first year graduate

students at ISU during the 9<sup>th</sup> week of the Fall 2012 semester. Students were asked about their academic and social engagement with life at ISU, as well as questions regarding possible indicators of financial stress. From a learning community perspective academic and social components are often key indicators of student success in higher education.

Analyses of the Early Alert Survey found that:

- 43% of first year graduate students had not attended a department sponsored seminar or talk. There was a large difference in attendance given a student's graduate level. Ph.D. students displayed higher attendance patterns than master's students; 79% of Ph.D. students compared to 51% of master's students had attended at least one department sponsored seminar or talk.
- 42% of students had not yet found an academic or research adviser. Graduate advisers are essential in developing a graduate student's professional self-esteem, ensuring a student makes academic progress, as well as opening access to opportunities after graduate school.
- Of this group that had found an adviser 15% reported meeting fewer than once a month while 11% had found an adviser but not yet met this person.
- 22% report not doing well in their courses
- 25% are worried they cannot finance their graduate studies

### *Female Graduate Students*

As a step towards improving the services available and work climate for female graduate students at ISU, a committee of female staff and graduate students developed a needs assessment survey in Spring 2012. The instrument included several items and scales related to respondents' feelings about their sense of community on campus.

Some key findings were:

- 76% (n=416) felt a sense of community with male and female students in their program
- This feeling changed when female graduate students were asked if they felt a sense of community among their fellow female graduate students across campus. Only 50% (n=273) of respondents agreed that they felt a sense of community among female graduate students across the ISU campus.
- Respondents were asked if they would like to see more opportunities to make connections with female graduate students to which 74% (n=401) agreed.

#### *Student of Color Mentoring Program*

At ISU the first year attrition rate for under-represented graduate students has been approximately 10% worse than for other graduate students. To address this problem, the Graduate College started a peer-mentor program for first-year PhD students of color. The PhD student mentoring project is a joint partnership, co-developed by ISU's Multicultural Student Affairs Office, the Black Graduate Student Association, the Latina/o Graduate Student Association, and the Graduate College. This program is now in its second year. Incoming students are given the option to select both a peer mentor (typically a more senior student in their program) and a staff/faculty mentor (typically a person outside their program). For the first cohort, 100% of incoming Fall 2011 PhD students in this program returned for Fall 2012. Several programs also provide mentoring for all of their incoming graduate students.

## Recommendations

Based on the analysis of survey results on first-year student engagement, the success of PhD mentoring, and the need established by the women's survey for more community building, we recommend that programs consider establishing Graduate Learning Communities. There are several models described in this paper that can be adapted

- Program-based GLCs
  - Either focused on first-year students with the GLC run jointly by the DOGE and GSO
  - Or reaching more broadly out to all students, with the GLC run either by the DOGE or GSO
- Practice-based GLC Models
  - e.g. focused on teaching skill development

Students can benefit from improved preparation for graduate studies with a structured environment for them to develop peer-to-peer mentoring relationships, community building, and connections to faculty. We believe that participating in a GLC can be an effective way to combat attrition while developing a sense of community among students.