

# Professional Development for Graduate Students



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## Abstract

To improve graduate education at the University of Florida, members of the Environmental Horticulture Graduate Student Association, along with departmental faculty, designed a graduate course to cover professional development topics. Some of the topics included interviewing techniques, preparation of curriculum vitae and effective presentations, teaching techniques, and other pertinent topics. Graduate students and faculty cooperatively organized the course. After the first course offering, the course evolved to a college-wide, 2-credit course available to graduate students throughout the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences. While there were several topics that remained constant for the course, others would continually evolve based on students' needs and suggestions. The Graduate Professional Development Series at the University of Florida has become an ideal means to enhance the graduate experience and overall professionalism of our graduate students.

## Introduction

The role of graduate school is to prepare students for challenging careers. Graduate education should not be limited to a specific discipline, instruction on proper research techniques, or scientific methodology but should also include instruction and/or experience relevant to professional development. Topics overlooked in formal classroom instruction often include preparation for professional meetings and oral presentations, interviewing and vita preparation, teaching, grant writing, publishing, and overall professionalism (Fischer and Zigmond, 1998). Students want instruction on these topics to increase their success in finding employment, and for career planning and decision-making (Barker, 1979; Slick, 1976). At many universities instruction on these topics often falls to the student's major professor or committee as few, if any, courses are offered to address professional development topics. However, courses that facilitate students with career and life planning have proven to be effective in assisting

students with career and life planning decisions (Fischer and Zigmond, 1998; Keller et. al., 1991). In a paper entitled "Survival Skills for Graduate School and Beyond" Fischer and Zigmond, 1998 state that graduate students need survival skills to succeed in graduate school and beyond. They divided these skills into four categories, "1) basic skills including how to be a successful graduate student; 2) communication skills, specifically, being able to convey the results of one's work through publications and oral presentations; 3) job skills, for finding and maintaining employment; and 4) advanced skills, including teaching, grant writing, and personnel management." At the University of Florida (UF), no formal course addressing such skills/topics was available so graduate students within the Department of Environmental Horticulture took the initiative to change the situation.

In the spring of 1999, students in the Environmental Horticulture Graduate Student Association (EHGSA) discussed the need for a course addressing professional development topics. They searched for courses and/or resources outside of the department that would fulfill this perceived need. There were a few UF courses that addressed some of the professional development topics, but there was not one course that covered all the desired topics. Members of the EHGSA asked departmental faculty to develop a course to meet the need for professional development instruction. Due to faculty time constraints, members of EHGSA offered to develop the course under the guidance and supervision of the graduate student faculty advisor.

## Methods

The EHGSA began to determine the topics that should be addressed in a professional development course. A survey was sent to all graduate students and faculty in the department to determine if students were interested in a professional development course, what topics they felt should be included, and possible speakers for the course. Survey responses

were compiled, discussed by the EHGSA, and a final list of topics was decided upon (Table 1). Chosen topics were then organized into a course syllabus and dates were set for the course. Students and faculty agreed that the course would meet during the semester one day per week for one 50-minute course period. During each course period an “expert” would present a seminar. Experts were chosen by the EHGSA via consultation with faculty, other students, and administrators. Once identified, the EHGSA solicited their participation in HOS 6932, Graduate Professional Development Seminar Series.

The graduate faculty advisor agreed to serve as the instructor for the course and was responsible for administrative duties, such as securing a course listing in the UF course catalog so it could be taken for graduate credit, and also assigned grades. Students enrolled in the course would be required to turn in a one-paragraph summary and commentary about each seminar. The grade for the course was then based on the number of summaries turned in (10/12 = A, etc.). The EHGSA advertised the course within the department and throughout the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (CALs). Promotion of the course was conducted through college-wide email, flyers, and word-of-mouth.

## Results

The course was first offered in the fall semester, 1999. Eleven students from seven different departments within CALs were enrolled. Overall, students and faculty felt the course was a success, but several problems were encountered. The time allotted (50 minutes) for the seminar and subsequent discussion was inadequate. Little resource information related to each seminar was usually provided. Inadequate criteria were provided for the one-paragraph summa-

ries/commentaries and thus students provided minimal summaries/commentaries.

To address the need for more time, the EHGSA and the faculty advisory agreed the course should be changed to meet twice a week. The first meeting would be for the actual seminar and the second meeting for discussion about that seminar or related topics. A resource list compiled with help from the expert speakers was to be provided to each student prior to each assigned seminar. More specific criteria and guidelines for the student summaries/commentaries were also established so the students would better understand course requirements. Modified criteria included: what students expected to gain from the seminar, what they gained, a critique of the seminar (information and presenter), questions and points of discussion, and suggestions for related topics.

To further improve the course, students in the first course were surveyed at the end of the semester to determine which topics were useful, student satisfaction of topics, what additional topics and speakers should be included, and solicited other suggestions for improvement. Based on the survey, a modified list of topics and speakers was developed for the second offering of the course (Table 2). While many of the topics will become mainstays of the course, this constant review process will allow for an evolution of topics to address the current needs of graduate students.

After the first successful offering of the course, the Department of Environmental Horticulture sought approval for a college-wide 2-credit course (ALS 5934) which would apply to any departmental program of study. Additionally, the Department of Environmental Horticulture mandated that all their graduate students are required to take the course as part of their program of study.

**Table 1. List of topics and experts speakers addressed in the fall 1999 Professional Development course**

Topic	Expert Speaker
1 Roles and Requirements of Graduate Students	Dean of Graduate Education, CALS <sup>2</sup>
2 Curriculum Vitae Development	Career Resource Center Staff
3 Interviewing Techniques	Career Resource Center Staff
4 Interview Dress and Etiquette	Departmental Faculty
5 Free Web Journal Access	CALS Faculty
6 How to Write a Good Thesis/Dissertation	CALS Faculty, Committee member on judging the best thesis/dissertation in CALS
7 Career Accountability	CALS Faculty
8 How to Give Presentations	Departmental Faculty
9 Grant Writing	Research and Technology Office Staff/Grant Writing Course Instructor
10 How to be an Effective Educator	CALS Faculty, Award recipient for outstanding college educator
11 Getting the Most out of your Teaching Assistantship	CALS Faculty
12 The Future of Academia	Vice-president of Agriculture and Natural Resources
13 The Future of Research	Dean of research for CALS
14 Going from a Thesis/Dissertation to an Article	Departmental faculty

<sup>2</sup>CALS = College of Agricultural and Life Sciences

**Table 2. List of topics and experts speakers addressed in the fall 2000 Professional Development course**

Topic	Expert Speaker
1 Graduate Students' Roles and Responsibilities <sup>2</sup>	Graduate Faculty Advisor
2 Interview Etiquette <sup>2</sup>	Departmental Faculty
3 Interviewing Techniques <sup>2</sup>	Career Resource Center Staff
4 Science as a Business	CALS <sup>2</sup> Faculty
5 Giving Professional Presentations <sup>2</sup>	Departmental Faculty
6 Grant Writing <sup>2</sup>	Research and Technology Office Staff/Grant Writing Course Instructor
7 Being an Effective Educator at the College Level <sup>2</sup>	CALS Faculty, award recipient for outstanding college teaching
8 Going from a Thesis/Dissertation to a Published Article <sup>2</sup>	Departmental Faculty
9 Problem Resolution	UF Ombudsman
10 Effective Leadership	CALS Faculty, Coordinator of the UF Leadership Program
11 Selecting a Career or Position	Career Resource Center Staff
12 Politics in Academia	CALS Faculty, former Dean for the CALS
13 Thesis/Dissertation Preparation: Do's & Don'ts <sup>2</sup>	Thesis/dissertation clerk
14 Curriculum Vitae Development <sup>2</sup>	Career Resource Center Staff

<sup>2</sup>Repeated topics based on usefulness and student satisfaction with topic.

<sup>2</sup>CALS = College of Agricultural and Life Sciences

### Discussion

Members of the EHGSA and departmental faculty concur that the creation of the Graduate Professional Development Seminar Series was a success. Students from all departments within CALS continue to enroll in the course and are now able to take it for college-wide credit. Eleven students from five disciplines were enrolled in the course the second time it was offered. The success of this course was further evidenced by members of EHGSA being asked to present a seminar on its development at the UF's CALS 2000 and 2001 Teaching Symposium. Additionally, the Plant Pathology department at UF is requiring its graduate students to enroll in the class as part of their program of study.

There is a need among graduate students to learn about professional development. Based on the experience of creating this course, some suggestions for the initiation and implementation of such a course at other universities follows. The first step is to consult both graduate students and faculty about potential topics. Other sources for topic suggestions would be future employers of these graduate students (industry, academia, etc.) and college alumni. Faculty and graduate students should work together to coordinate, develop, and implement such a course. A faculty member must be assigned to the course to tackle administrative tasks for consistency in grading. Graduate students can assist by helping to determine topics, solicit speakers, and advertise the course.

When looking for expert speakers to address topics, existing resources should be used when at all possible. Find faculty personnel who are knowledgeable and exemplary in their chosen topic, such as award recipients for outstanding teaching or research, members of search committees for outstanding theses/dissertations, college deans and vice-presidents. Seek out the University career resource center for expert speakers on topics such as interviewing and curriculum vita development. The University research and technology office may have experts who can speak on grantsmanship and other

related subject matter. Non-university personnel such as someone from a "headhunter" company may also provide experts to discuss related topics.

The goal of graduate school is to provide/enhance the education and experience of students. Students not only need to learn how to properly conduct research; they also need to learn how to properly conduct themselves in a professional manner. A professional development course for graduate students can provide those much-needed skills and make students aware of resources available to them. As all students are perceived to represent the institutions of higher learning from which they came, enhancing professionalism is a no-lose situation.

### Literature Cited

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