Dornsife Faculty Curriculum Caucus  
2016-2017 AY Final Report

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During AY 2016 – 2017 our caucus worked closely with faculty throughout Dornsife College, members of the Dornsife Faculty Council, and the administration to prioritize topics for consideration. Given ongoing efforts to create a “Dornsife Common Core”, our caucus decided not to focus on curriculum composition but on ways by which the dynamism of Dornsife faculty can be employed in student mentoring. Mentoring here is broadly defined to include support for career advancement, professionalization, research support, and experiential learning. We believe that by better incorporating student mentoring in the undergraduate student curriculum Dornsife will improve both student recruitment and retention. This report’s focus is on mentoring needs of our undergraduate students but increasingly graduate students are expressing interest in non-academic careers. Thus, it is important to investigate the degree to which our departments stand ready to advise and support graduate students in Dornsife seeking professional, non-academic careers.

The aim of our caucus was to examine how Dornsife undergraduates are mentored. We surveyed current mentoring opportunities and how student needs are served. We also noted current best practices, deficiencies and prepared recommendations for improvements. To better address the topic, our caucus charged three subcommittees with investigating different aspects of the aim. The aspects investigated were: formal departmental mentoring plans, mentoring opportunities through dedicated classes and online access to information regarding mentoring and research opportunities.

Departmental Mentoring Plans Subcommittee

Aims
This subcommittee took on the task of evaluating strategies for undergraduate mentoring explicitly developed by Dornsife departments and programs. The goal is to provide an assessment of how student mentoring is incorporated into the undergraduate Dornsife curriculum. To better assess what strategies departments are implementing, we reviewed memos outlining mentoring activities as commissioned by the office of the Vice Dean for Academic Programs. We also pooled Dornsife Faculty Council members’ own description of what their respective departments do to respond to the mentoring needs of students. The section below summarizes observations of current and best practices, followed by a set of recommendations for ways in which our undergraduate mentoring could be improved.

Observations
- There is recognition that mentoring includes a variety of activities supporting multiple
student needs. These activities include supporting student research and training, providing practical/experiential learning opportunities and assisting students with career development.

- Departments generally seem committed to undergraduate mentoring as shown in the mentoring reports they have produced and informal conversations with faculty representatives from various Dornsife departments. However, only 6 of the departments and programs have explicit mentoring plans which summarize the variety of strategies they implement for this purpose. That is not to say that mentoring does not happen in other departments but the shortage of reporting and accounting of mentoring activities may be a sign that more attention could be devoted to strategically promote mentoring of students and to also advertise the same to future and current students.

- Departments recognize that best mentoring is achieved by creating close relationships between faculty and students, advisors and students, as well as among peers. To this end, an important component of all mentoring strategies involves organic approaches to developing relationships that can be helpful for mentoring purposes. While these processes seem unplanned and ad-hoc, they are also most customizable when it comes to serving individual student needs. The immediate constraint for this aspect of mentoring is shortage of faculty and advisors. Some departments have a high faculty-student ratio, such as School of Religion, while others are less well-positioned to promote close contact between faculty and students outside of the classroom setting. To alleviate this problem, departments have responded by nominating mentoring committees, which are groups of faculty advisors that will hold additional office hours for students interested in receiving more information specifically related to mentoring. However, students do not know that such committees exist and they are generally reluctant to reach out to faculty members in office hours. In other words, while the one-on-one mentoring support is extremely important, our faculty and staff numbers are often not large enough to undertake significant expansion of mentoring efforts.

- Other than developing one-on-one relationships, there is a great deal of variation in terms of what departments do to promote mentoring. To some extent this reflects the fact that departments and programs serve different student needs. These activities include:
  - Research seminars showcasing faculty work
  - Seminars showcasing careers in related fields run by faculty or alumni
  - Workshops on career related topics such as networking, scholarships, fellowships, internships, and CV/resume building. These workshops are organized and include students, advisors, faculty or alumni
  - Use of dedicated courses such as freshmen seminars, faculty research colloquia which introduce students to faculty and peer research, Passports Without Problems courses, internship courses, research courses and independent research study courses
  - Research opportunities with faculty in and out of labs
  - Promotion of events and information via web/social media and internal documents and flyers

- A particularly effective and rewarding strategy is the outreach and engagement of
recent alumni. Departments capitalize on their willingness to return to campus to inform, inspire and motivate undergraduates to explore careers in related fields. Alumni are invited to speak in classes, participate in meet-and-greet events, and participate in career-related panels. At minimum, these individuals are important for demonstrating to students what careers can be obtained with a specific Dornsife degree. More than this, however, they help establish a mentoring relationship for current students and future graduates, as well serve as an important link in the network of potential employers for our students.

- A related and also highly effective strategy is to capitalize on existing research institutes that are affiliated with select Dornsife departments. For example, the Political Science Department capitalizes on the Unruh Institute for Politics to offer a unique mentoring opportunity to its students. The institute organizes a Job Forum program, a bi-annual, 3-day event which showcases various professionals who speak directly about career opportunities for political science students.

- Departments recognize that delivering information to students is important but there is little agreement as to what constitutes the best means of communication. Some departments utilize list-servers and targeted emails, some use flyers and physical posters while others chose to advertise using departmental sites and social media. As noted elsewhere in the report, very few departments make use of web pages dedicated to mentoring activities.

Recommendations
- Departments should continue to promote and assist with one-on-one mentoring by faculty and staff. For this, encouraging students to attend office hours is a first step. At minimum, posting office directories with regularly scheduled office hours for the semester should be required across all departments. In addition, students should be encouraged by faculty members to discuss not just course-related matters but mentoring issues defined broadly. Faculty members should be encouraged to ask students whether they have thought about their career trajectories and then to recommend opportunities that might be appropriate for students to explore in addition to completing coursework. The Environmental Studies Program implements a policy which requires all students seeking letters of recommendation to meet with faculty members on several occasions to discuss career interests and potential trajectories. This is an interesting commitment device that brings students through the doors of faculty offices and helps build mentoring relationships. Departments have noted in their mentoring reports that in some cases, research faculty expertise may be limited when it comes to issues of non-academic careers. In this case, departments can utilize RTPC faculty, who in many cases have professional experiences, assignments or positions in the respective fields outside of USC. Examples would include writing instructors with careers in publishing and writing, professors of practice such as seasoned diplomats, political campaign operatives and pollsters. These individuals are well-positioned to serve as a bridge between enrolled students and the community of scholars and professionals outside of USC, which can help establish regular channels for mentoring and networking. Departments should view RTPC faculty as a uniquely positioned resource for the purpose of establishing mentoring and recruitment
networks in the community.

- Departments should consider providing students the support from a dedicated career advisor. In some cases, such as the School of International Relations, a career advisor meets with students to discuss research and internship opportunities, to help draft and edit cover letters and resumes, and offer a wide array of career-related support on an individual student basis. When such an advisor is not available, departments could recommend that academic advisors at least encourage students’ thinking in this regard by incorporating career-related questions into academic advising discussions. When advisors are helping students develop their course plans, they receive feedback from students related to their interests, strengths, weakness and possibly future career goals. This information can be utilized by advisors to make some elemental recommendations on opportunities that students can explore outside of required coursework. Advisors could recommend specific experiential learning courses or methods coursework that can set the student on a path of successful and comprehensive mentoring. Another way to integrate career-related advising into academic advising is to form closer ties between existing advising staff and “Career Pathways” – a Dornsife career student services office. Not a single submitted mentoring report mentioned the use of this Dornsife career advising office. Exploring ways to collaborate with this office may be a fruitful strategy for programs and departments whose staff is already well-impacted and who may need assistance bridging academic advising with career-related needs of their students.

- Departments should actively engage with their alumni to develop and maintain networking opportunities on behalf of their students. This is not a strategy that seeks financial support from alumni. Instead, this strategy emphasizes using alumni in encouraging student career interests and helping them reach out to the professional world to gain information and experiences. This is where the departments will need the support from the University Development offices in order to identify individuals who have expressed interest in returning to campus and/or networking with students. Such individuals can be brought in as guest speakers, panel participants, career advisors or to assist with off-campus trips as in the case of ENST 495 and SIR's SSEM 200 (no longer offered) capstone seminars. A notable example of alumni recruitment is done in Environmental Studies. There, Dr. Sohm worked directly with the Development Office to develop an interactive and searchable alumni database, which once fully functional, will serve the department to link Alumni to current students for mentoring, job networking and tracking student success.

- Suggestions mentioned above highlight the need for increased financial support to continue to improve mentoring activities. Financial support is needed to maintain the current offering and to expand the assortment of career-related panels, talks, dinners and social events. In addition, many faculty have expressed concern that to attract high quality speakers and guests for their students, in some cases may require paying a nominal honorarium. Resources for this purpose are not available in most Dornsife departments.

- Departments need to better coordinate their mentoring activities with the work of student-run undergraduate associations. Such organizations could help with some of the logistical support and advertising efforts by recruiting own members to attend
events organized by the departments. This is especially important for the events that include alumni in order to express gratitude for their support and to maintain their interest in getting involved in the future. In addition to advertising and bringing members to events, student organizations can offer programming that coordinates with the departmental mentoring activities. A past example of this is the work of the School of International Relations Undergraduate Student association. This group used to run mini-seminars showcasing faculty research and teaching which helped establish mentoring relationships with those students who are not enrolled in the specific professor’s courses. Also, SIRUA would promote one-on-one advising by organizing “Cookies with Professor” events where students meet professors over coffee and cookies and feel encouraged to ask career and research related questions in a less formal setting. Departments should seek out and promote these student organizations as strategic partners in their mentoring activities.

**Dedicated Classes Subcommittee**

Our subcommittee concentrated on assessing the presence and utilization of 2-credit research/apprenticeship courses across the various Dornsife departments. As professional schools continue to attract relatively higher major enrollments, we believe utilizing these courses to show students how they may generate their own undergraduate research programs or parlay their degree into a lifetime career is a worthwhile endeavor for Dornsife. In our survey of 2-credit courses, we collected data from all Dornsife programs and schools through the USC Schedule of Classes website (https://classes.usc.edu/) for the 2016-2017 academic year. We assessed the number of courses per program/department, their enrollment and their type of course (i.e., directed research vs. apprenticeship). Based on the data we have collected and through informal discussions with faculty leading some of these courses, we have provided a set of observations and recommendations for improving these courses Dornsife-wide.

**Observations**

1. **Research Courses**
   - Not all majors offer a 2-credit research, such as a XX490 Directed Research course.
   - Anecdotal evidence and informal discussion with faculty members indicate that these courses (i.e., 499) lack standardization across majors in terms of hours of instruction/meeting, hours of student reading and work, and type and quality of work required to complete them.
   - There is concern that some students are conducting human-subject research without Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.
   - Many of the listed 2-credit courses have very low or no enrollment.

2. **Professionalization / Apprenticeship (P/A) Courses**
• Very few majors offer 2-credit P/A courses. Examples of these courses include POSC 395 Directed Governmental and Political Leadership Internship or ENST 298 Introduction to Scientific Diving, where these courses either take students into the work field or provide interaction with professionals in their field of major.

• Advertising for 2-credit P/A courses is limited or varies across majors.

Preliminary Recommendations

• As increasing desire for undergraduate research opportunities by students continues to rise, all majors would benefit for some type of 2-credit undergraduate research course. The type or format of that course should be major-appropriate and left to the various majors’ discretion.

• Dornsife should consider creating standard policies and grading requirements for these courses, specifically Directed Research courses, in order to advise faculty of their roles and to set student expectations.

• Dornsife should do more to educate students on the purpose and importance of participating in such classes. While the college does have an Undergraduate Research Opportunities website (https://dornsife.usc.edu/undergraduate-research-opportunities/) it only provides links to funding opportunities and/or centers or institutes within the college. It does not direct students to the research opportunities via credited courses. We suggest that amendments on this page to this effect could help increase exposure to these opportunities.

• We suggest that Dornsife host end-of-the-semester research fairs where all 2-credit research students come together to present their research. These fairs could include poster presentations and/or oral research presentations (similar to conference talks).

• Encouraging interdisciplinary studies and research continues to be a goal within Dornsife and academia writ-large, yet there are logistical and procedural barriers to implementing this within the college. We request to know the possibility of creating a common Dornsife course code, similar what has been done for GSEM courses, for these 2-credit research courses.

• Dornsife should embrace the competencies learned by engaging with the Institutional Review Board and incorporate this into the appropriate majors and 2-credit research courses.

Future Steps

We hope that our sub-committee’s work has served to provide a “lay of the land” of 2-credit research and professional/apprenticeships courses, as they existed across various schools and programs in Dornsife in the 2016-2017 academic year. Below we provide some suggestions of future research and assessment steps for next year’s DFC Curriculum Caucus:

• Conduct surveys or interviews with faculty who teach all forms of 2-credit research or professionalization courses, specifically:
Attempt to collect professional development course syllabi to assess similarities/differences and collect reports of best practices.

Interview faculty who teach directed research to see how they run them in efforts of standardizing them in the future.

**Online Access to Mentoring Opportunities Subcommittee**

Our subcommittee was tasked with assessing the web presence of mentorship opportunities across Dornsife departments and programs. We believe that for mentorship to achieve its full potential in retention and recruitment it needs to be clearly visible and easily accessible for current and prospective students. To better assess how mentorship is publicized, we conducted a survey of all mentorship-focused activities visible to students via departmental and program web pages during February 2017. Based on the information compiled we compare current practices, offer suggestions on how to better promote mentorship opportunities, and propose avenues of improving interdisciplinarity.

**Observations**

1. There is a “lack of consistency” in what qualifies as "mentorship." In our research, we found great variety of mentorship-focused activities, including:
   - career advisors/advisement
   - extracurricular activities (clubs, honors programs)
   - experiential learning opportunities (summer programs, semester abroad opportunities)
   - Research programs
   - Hands-on mentoring (laboratory groups, for example)

   This apparent “lack of consistency” is, up to a certain degree, expected since “mentorship” could include several student-faculty/staff interactions aimed at improving the outlook of the student in a field. One unexpected finding, however, was that many departments / programs did not organize the above mentorship activities in a single cohesive student resource webpage. In fact, only a few departments had dedicated mentorship pages.

2. Career advising is only visible in a small subset of departmental web pages. Specifically, out of 52 Departments / Programs surveyed, only 8 programs had a website on mentoring, and only 9 programs had a mentoring program.

3. The scope of career advisement varies from department-to-department, with some departments offering peer-to-peer mentoring (such as Ocean Sciences, which pairs up undergraduates with alumni who are currently working in the field)

4. There is a general dearth of information about faculty-to-student research and mentorship opportunities.

   The following were noted regarding research opportunities:
   - Only 18 out of 52 department/program websites surveyed offered clear links to
undergraduate research opportunities. In general, the display of these opportunities is not streamlined and the depth of information offered varies greatly. Departmental web pages might offer multiple different research-focused pages with links to various research opportunities under various headings depending on the department / program.

- 10 out of 52 department/program websites did not clearly address research opportunities but offered related mentorship opportunities through honors programs, travel abroad and other experiential opportunities.
- Despite the prominent role of USC as a research institution 25 out of 52 department / programs surveyed did not display a clear indication of research opportunities, even though in many situations the focus of faculty research was on clear display. This is an impediment for Dornsife undergraduate student involvement since students in general look for obvious research opportunities.
- In general, only a small subset of departments / programs identified individual faculty interested in involving students in their research.
- Only a small subset of departments / programs offer a link to the Dornsife research opportunity webpage (http://dornsife.usc.edu/careerpathways/research/).

The following were noted in regards to mentoring opportunities

- General lack of information regarding mentoring programs.
- Serious inconsistency regarding services being offered (e.g. advising, contact numbers, resources, study programs, etc.)
- The only program that is currently offering mentoring/job opportunities/partnership opportunities is EARTH SCIENCES.
- Links are seldom visible/readily accessible.
- Mentoring opportunities vary from department-to-department and might include forms of “practical training” (conversational practice groups for language students in the Japanese Department, for example (http://dornsife.usc.edu/ealc/jpnconvo-partner/)).

Recommendations

- All Dornsife departments and programs should have separate, dedicated pages for both career advisement and mentoring opportunities including research (when such opportunities exist). Where applicable, multiple pages addressing similar opportunities should be consolidated under clear links presented on the homepage of the department / program. The webpage should have a clear and carefully edited list of services provided, organized in categories and subcategories. Links should be updated and provide information regarding services on campus and future opportunities. Advisers should be members of the department and not in charge of multiple programs. Furthermore, adviser’s names, phone numbers and photos should be accessible through the web page.
• When no intradepartmental career advisement services are available, departmental web pages should provide a link to Dornsife’s main advisement page (https://dornsife.usc.edu/advisement/).

• Dornsife would most likely attract and retain more students if each of the departments / programs creates a “career prospects” webpage under the “mentoring” section of their website. The Departments of Political Science (http://dornsife.usc.edu/politicalscience/internship-and-career-resources/) and Psychology (http://dornsife.usc.edu/psyc/undergraduate-research/) serve as two leading examples. Each post information on available internships, research and career possibilities. Such information should facilitate enrollment and completion of studies at Dornsife by providing a confidence framework for students. Additional points that could be included would be alumni testimonials on what they have accomplished with a degree from Dornsife.

• Departmental web pages should provide a link to Dornsife’s main research opportunities page (http://dornsife.usc.edu/careerpathways/research/). This main page should be reorganized to include research opportunities offered by the various departments / programs in the college. If this practice were to be implemented, students would be informed about research opportunities across departments and as such could improve interdisciplinary learning and collaboration through active research.

• If research opportunities are offered by a department then a clear list of faculty interested in hosting students should be posted under the “research opportunities” webpage. This would greatly facilitate direct undergraduate involvement in research since identifying faculty interest is a great impediment to student participation. Examples of departments / programs which clearly indicate the availability of undergraduate research positions by faculty member include the Department of International Relations (http://dornsife.usc.edu/sir/undergraduate-research-program/), the Human and Evolutionary Biology section (http://dornsife.usc.edu/bisc/heb-undergraduate-research-opportunities/), and Middle East Studies (https://dornsife.usc.edu/mesp/student-research-opportunities/).

• If a department offers separate Graduate and Undergraduate mentoring / research opportunities, these should be clearly labelled as such. This will allow students to focus on opportunities pertaining to their current academic standing.