Tracking Students and Keeping Students on Track:
Discussion with the combined Graduate Council and Doctoral Council, Fall 2018

This document focuses on suggestions about how to better track graduate students and keep them on track to graduate. The information is the result of discussions on these topics from two meetings with the combined Graduate Council and Doctoral Council. The group first brainstormed approaches to tracking students in their programs and effectively moving them through the program on October 22, 2018. Leadership in The Graduate College then combined and thematically categorized those initial notes and brought back the notes to the second discussion, on November 12, 2018. In that session, the Graduate Council and Doctoral Council continued the discussion, building on the previous work. This document is the summary of those two discussions.

Some of the items are presented verbatim from the discussions and some are composite items; the group made the point that some of the items are specific to particular program structures or needs, while others may be more universal, while still needing to be adapted to local contexts. In addition, while "tracking students" and "keeping students on track" may appear distinct enterprises, there is a great deal of conceptual overlap, such that it may be beneficial to consider them holistically. For example, in the category "Regular Progress Checks," one item that emerged is to "have students complete annual reviews of their program progress and activities." From the "Tracking Students" side, this exercise ensures that students are formally accounted for at least once a year, and from the "Keeping Students on Track" side, the results of the annual review will illuminate areas in which the student needs support or reorienting toward program requirements. For these reasons, the organization of the brainstorming session remains holistic and not split into "Tracking" and "Keeping Students on Track" categories; instead, discussion points are organized by themes that emerged during the brainstorming sessions.

Eight categories emerged:
1. **Tools**: in which faculty discussed making use of university-provided tools and resources to facilitate student tracking
2. **Resources**: in which faculty discussed the need to deliberately provide information about resources to students
3. **Program Structure**: in which faculty discussed program structures that can facilitate movement through the program
4. **Setting Expectations**: in which faculty discussed the need to present program, university, and discipline expectations for students
5. **Virtual Communications**: in which faculty discussed options for communicating with students when face-to-face or individual meetings are not feasible
6. **Advising Communications**: in which faculty discussed the need for regular communication, information sessions, and feedback for students
7. **Regular Progress Checks**: in which faculty discussed the importance of using benchmarks and plans to identify student progress or lack of progress through the program
8. **Faculty-Focused**: in which faculty discussed resources and approaches specific to faculty development of their ability to be effective mentors and advisors

Literature available from the Council of Graduate Schools reflects much of our discussion. For example, CGS (2010) notes the importance of developing or enhancing mechanisms for students and faculty to track students' progress and offer feedback. They also encourage programs to implement annual performance review structures for students. CGS (2013) also emphasizes the importance of maintaining databases of student progress, and also recommend that programs have some type of first-year seminar designed to provide students with guidance about their degree program and future careers. They also suggest using regular student surveys to better understand how program structures (e.g., admissions, advising, etc.) can be improved. In CGS' Occasional Papers series, Bass, Rutledge, Douglass, and Carter (2005) underscore the importance of monitoring students' academic progress at the departmental or program level. In addition, a number of graduate schools publish their own, university-specific suggestions and advice that reflects our own compiled list (see Rackham Graduate School, N.D., as an example). The Texas State Graduate College's own work supports many of these same principles (see Paulson, Dede-Bamfo, Golato, & Rao, 2016).

The categories and strategies are found in the table on the following pages.

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Tools	Resources	Program Structure	Setting Expectations
• Use Excel spreadsheets/database • Use the degree audit/plans/sequence • Use ePortfolio to track progress • Use Logi reports to see who's enrolling in the next term • Use mail merge to create personalized emails • Devise a system to keep track of student accomplishments • Maintain at least a paper file for all student-related work, esp. for committee assignments	• Encourage students to seek university, college, and department resources • Encourage attendance at professional development events • Provide students with information about degree benchmarks (e.g., thesis/dissertation defense and expectations) • Designate an academic mentor • Identify sources of student funding and disseminate that information to students • Provide students with financial information from the university Develop a structure for formal peer mentoring (student-student)	• Create a cohort structure (if possible) • Set internal deadlines before GC deadlines • Consider moving to fall only admission • Create benchmarks and milestones within the program structure • Place overrides so students cannot register without meeting first • Use an intro course to help students plan their degree • Implement lock-step program formats (if possible)	• Hold an orientation or boot camp before beginning program • Provide resources, including a student handbook, that reflects the orientation material • Address time management and financial resources during orientation • Set expectations in terms of work-life balance before students begin the program

Virtual Communications	Advising Communications	Regular Progress Checks	Faculty-Focused
• Send regular communication, i.e. news and notes, reminders, etc. • Grad College emails (help point to students to track) • Use active admin support where available to communicate certain types of information with students • Share resources via email, TRACS, social media, etc. • Engage with students in social media groups • Zoom (or other distance platform) meetings if face-to-face meetings are not an option • Program-sponsored student listservs	• Meetings with advisors throughout the program, e.g. before registration, mid-semester, end of semester • Hold group advising sessions, in-person or online • Hold advising meetings when academic or professional problems arise • Inform students of probation/suspension consequences • Check in with students who are taking longer to progress	• Have students complete regular program evaluations • Use plan of study forms or progress reports • Have faculty complete evaluations • Use an advising form detailing personal goals and campus resources each semester • have students complete annual reviews of their program progress and activities	• Discuss how to encourage students to use available university resources • Discuss common approaches to thesis/dissertation committee chairing • Provide a resource guide to thesis and dissertation advisors • Make use of faculty development offerings (and suggest topics where needed) • Provide a structure for student evaluations of their faculty committee members • Hold graduate faculty meetings throughout the semester

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Summary Points

- Regular communication between advisor/faculty and student is important
- Strategic program structure modifications (internal deadlines, setting benchmarks, overrides on courses) can provide triggers for understanding student progress
- Taking advantage of existing tools (Logi reports, ePortfolio) or program-constructed tools (plan of study) can help with efficiency and awareness
- Students should complete program plans at the outset of the program
- Students should complete regular progress reviews during the program
- The program should use institutional tools to make sure they are aware of institutional requirements not being met by students (e.g., enrollment, minimum GPA, etc.)
- Students should be encouraged to take advantage of existing professional development, academic support, non-academic support, and other resources
- Meet among faculty to discuss student progress
- Meet between committee chair/advisor and student to discuss student progress
- Understand who has and has not enrolled in the next term in order to encourage enrollment and solve potential future registration problems

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References:

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