

Diversifying Graduate Student Experiences Through Campus Connections

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Need for Innovation

The graduate student experience can be a challenging, complex process that can be isolating, demanding, and stressful. However, in recent years, research suggests supporting graduate students needs within their program is beneficial for the individual, as well as their home department (Collier & Blanchard, 2023). This project stemmed from a call to action by international students who have never experienced American agricultural practices. Providing a variety of experiences to all graduate students supports the mission of graduate studies at The Ohio State University (OSU). Beyond academic related work, experiential learning can benefit adult learners who will enter a career or faculty position post-graduation (Morris, 2020).

The Department of Agricultural Communication, Education, and Leadership (ACEL) Graduate Student Association (GSA) identified the need for diversification of their graduate school experience. Often, graduate students are siloed into their home departments throughout the duration of their graduate program, limiting the diversity of experiences. To help solve this issue, ACEL GSA members proposed a day trip to the Wooster campus of OSU.

How it Works

A GSA committee was created to plan, organize, and execute this day trip. The trip incorporated visits to academic departments, research facilities, and local industry partners. The ACEL GSA took point on planning, organizing, and implementing this experience, with faculty support from both campuses. ACEL GSA used one of their monthly meetings to gather ideas and recommendations from members on what they would like to experience. This exercise was important for student buy-in and personalizing the experience for the group (Evans & Boucher, 2015).

ACEL graduate students met on the main campus the morning of the trip and loaded two vehicles that were rented for the day. ACEL GSA officers were volunteer drivers for the day trip. Students arrived on the Wooster campus where they were met by a local graduate student and ACEL faculty member. Students were led on a tour of the academic campus, including classrooms, laboratories, and student resource centers. Along the tour, students had the opportunity to interact with Wooster campus faculty, staff, and students. After tours of the academic campus were complete, students had lunch at a local farm-to-fork market to experience regionally produced agricultural products.

In the afternoon, students were taken on tours of the Wooster campus agricultural research facilities, including facilities for horticulture, dairy, beef, and equine. At each facility, students interacted with local staff and faculty to learn about the workings of the facility, as well as future teaching and research opportunities. As students drove back to the main Columbus campus, group discussions took place about what they learned and what they would change for the next graduate student day trip.

Results to Date/Implications

In the spring of 2023, 12 graduate students from ACEL signed up for the graduate professional development experience to travel to the Wooster campus of OSU. Students were able to interact with faculty and graduate students during their time spent on the satellite campus. One graduate student stated:

I knew the Wooster campus existed, but I didn't realize the extent of facilities, research, and opportunities students had on this campus. I enjoyed talking to the dean of the campus and exploring. It is very different than OSU's main campus. (Student 1)

Students also reflected that this trip was memorable and a favorite part of their graduate experience thus far:

The Wooster trip I took with my cohort is one of my favorite graduate school memories so far. It was an incredible learning experience to see all the different aspects that Wooster campus has to offer. There's so much to see from exploring the arboretum to touring its several livestock research and production facilities. I look forward to any opportunity to go back for a visit. (Student 2)

Graduate students who participate in diversifying experiences are competitive against other candidates for future careers and graduate school opportunities (Hansman et al., 1999). Additionally, graduate students who have varying degrees of experiences tend to have a broader world view (Hansman et al., 1999). One student reflected on the innerworkings of the Wooster campus:

We need more of these trips! I am glad the trip materialized after two years of talking with graduate students and faculty. I have a better understanding of the Wooster campus operations. As I go into my final year of my graduate program, this trip will help me as I interview for a faculty position at other universities. (Student 3)

Future Plans/Advice to Others

GSA plans to make the Wooster campus trip an annual event for any graduate student who wishes to attend. Plans are also in the works to expand the program to additional departments, facilities, and campuses to continue to add diversity into the graduate experience.

It is advised to others to keep this a student-organized program where students contribute heavily to the planning and executing of the experience. Allowing students the opportunity to take ownership of the experience increased participation and motivation to engage in the graduate student day trip.

Costs/Resources Needed

This program did not have a cost for graduate students in attendance. GSA funds covered the cost of two rental vehicles and fuel for the day. The cost of lunch was covered by a graduate organization grant provided through the university.

To successfully implement this program, departments will need an active GSA or graduate student body to take ownership of planning and execution. Faculty support and participation from both campuses is also required to provide a successful experience. Also, planning the event on a day when most graduate students are available to take a day away from their home campus. We suggest the use of a university in-service day or equivalent.

References

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