

Doctoral Dissertation Advisor/Mentoring Award

Personal Statement

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Mentoring doctoral students is one of the most rewarding roles of any faculty member at a research university. The responsibility for developing knowledgeable and skilled researchers is daunting, but seeing the metamorphosis that occurs during a student's doctoral program makes the effort required worthwhile.

In addition to the goal of preparing students to be experts in the field, I see it as my responsibility to usher doctoral students through the door of academia—to introduce them to the worlds of research, teaching, and service in a way that will prepare them to navigate these worlds successfully on their own. I recognize that academia is a world very different from any other, and the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required are not ones that those outside academia typically have or understand. I do not expect that a student enters a doctoral program already possessing these competencies, recognizes the need for developing them, or masters them independently. I see it as my role to ensure that the doctoral students I work with are prepared in these areas – for whatever career path they will pursue upon graduation.

Perhaps the most important aspect of my approach to this preparation is explicit teaching. In the field of special education, explicit teaching is a cornerstone in the education of students with disabilities, but I find that it is just as effective, powerful, and necessary with gifted and talented doctoral students. I view all instruction along a continuum from very explicit, teacher-regulated learning to quite implicit, student-regulated learning. The goal for all students is to become self-regulated and self-directed, but I have found that while students enter a doctoral program with research interests and goals, few students enter ready to assume responsibility for directing their own learning. They benefit from explicit instruction to promote this readiness and mentoring and inspiration to motivate them to become self-sufficient.

Students share with me how much they appreciate the time that I take to explain in detail the processes involved in tasks such as reviewing literature, developing research questions, or designing studies. My explanations are paired with examples and, often, demonstrations of the various components of research. Doctoral students value this degree of explicitness and scaffolding which results in higher levels of skill and confidence when approaching and completing research projects. My collaborative work offers many opportunities for students to learn about conducting research, and I view these apprenticeship activities as a crucial part of their doctoral programs. Students participate in every phase of research before they conduct studies independently.

Another critical area of mentorship with doctoral students is learning to teach in higher education, which they should do with systematic guidance and a gradually increasing level of responsibility. Many of the doctoral students I work with are former K-6 teachers who decide to pursue a doctoral degree to address the problems of practice in the field. While they have years of teaching experience with children, transitioning to be an instructor with adult learners requires a different skill set. Therefore, they gradually take on instructional responsibilities beginning with shadowing and supported presentations as a teaching assistant, co-teaching a course, and eventually teaching a course with minimal supervision. They should learn to present their work at professional conferences, but they should begin by presenting alongside a faculty member, first as an assistant, then as the lead presenter, and eventually as an independent presenter. Much of my work involves providing professional development workshops and webinars for practicing educators. As the doctoral students I work with have an interest in being researchers and preparing our next generation of teachers, their participation in these activities is important because provides insight into the needs of teachers and children.

I have found that learning to write in an academic style can be a frustrating experience for some students, and helping struggling writers can be a hair-pulling experience for faculty mentors.

My background in special education, especially my knowledge about teaching reading and writing to students with learning disabilities, has been extremely helpful. Many students who struggle, even those who do not have learning disabilities, benefit from the type of instruction that is effective for students who do have disabilities. For example, I have used a student's writing difficulties as a reason for that student to learn a specific writing strategy that has been effective for teaching students with writing disabilities. The doctoral student learned an effective, research-based practice that she could use to teach prospective teachers in her future role as a teacher educator. At the same time, she learned and practiced effective techniques to improve her own writing. Her writing improved dramatically, and I attribute this improvement to the time she spent learning this writing strategy. I saw it as my responsibility to maintain very high standards, but also to ensure the necessary supports were in place for this student to meet those standards. She, and others like her, have met and exceeded my expectations.

Providing students with time to explore and discuss issues and concerns is another critical aspect of my mentoring. I currently have a high number of doctoral advisees, and managing the time they need to spend with me can be a challenge. I meet with them as a group every week to discuss issues that pertain to them all, and I meet with each of them individually at least once a month to discuss their unique issues and concerns. I use these meetings to help them plan their program, inform them about opportunities available to them, work through problems in writing or studying, or any other concern that may arise. The weekly meetings with our research team also provide scaffolded peer support, especially for those advisees newer to the doctoral program.

My work as the director of UFLI provides plentiful experiences in study design, proposal development, data collection, data analysis, and dissemination, as well as teacher preparation and professional development. Doctoral students have many opportunities to participate in planning and implementing workshops, webinars, and online courses with educators all over the world. These opportunities provide critical presentation and consultation experiences that aide doctoral students in their own research agendas and professional networking opportunities. Current and former doctoral students have been involved in the development of *UFLI Foundations*, a phonics program that was published in 2022. The program is now being used by nearly 250,000 teachers around the world, and this provides these current and former students with numerous opportunities to study the program and its effects.

I also view securing financial support for students as an important role of a doctoral mentor. Through professional development, program royalties, donations, and grants, UFLI generates substantial revenue that is used to support doctoral students' needs, including funding for research, travel, materials, and books. Since 2006, I have been the PI or co-PI on 5 doctoral training grants from the US Department of Education. These grants provide a stipend, tuition, and other funding for doctoral scholars.

Preparing future researchers, teacher educators, and leaders in K-12 literacy education is what I value most in being a UF faculty member. I take the responsibility quite seriously, and I do not see it ending at graduation. My advisees are now in positions at research intensive universities, teaching colleges, and research and professional development centers, as well as in the private sector. I keep in close touch with my former students, and I continue to collaborate, offer advice, and assist them in making professional connections to advance their own work and careers. They become friends and respected colleagues and some of my best scholarly work has emerged from these collaborations. I view these continued connections as a privilege and a joy.