

MENTORING **SPARK**

Quick ideas to light up your doctoral conversations.

► PROJECT PLANNING



SOLUTIONS FOR STUDENTS

The purpose of this document is to help students develop a project plan to obtain their graduate degree. It is also intended to help students think about how project planning during their graduate school career may translate to their next job or career.

It is possible for students to traverse a graduate degree without having a documented plan. However, students with a plan that is actively managed are less likely to have “insurmountable” or unexpected barriers occur, and more likely to know when to ask for help.

Without a plan, students can feel lost and become anxious regarding graduating by a particular time, timing for their job search, and knowing what remains to graduate.

Developing a graduation plan is excellent practice for a transferable skill that is essential in the workplace.



LEVEL 1: GOAL SETTING

LEVEL 2: BEING PRAGMATIC

LEVEL 3: PROJECT MANAGEMENT



FACULTY FYI

This **Spark** is intended to support students as they develop a project plan that is realistic and useful for finishing their degree, and to help with necessary career skills.

Planning is one thing; proactively managing the plan is another. Post-graduation, students are expected to design and implement a project plan, such as a competitive grant proposal or industry work. Helping students transition from implementing a plan to *developing* a plan that includes budget, schedule, resources, and contingencies is important to help ensure success early in their career.

As students are a reflection of their advisors, helping them be productive day one in a new position is important.



ACTIONS FOR FACULTY

- Provide time for your students to read about/learn about the basics of project management. This may be through the research group, a workshop, and/or reading reputable guidance.
- If your research group does not have a preferred method of capturing project plans, consider having several research assistants document a method.
- Ask students to show you their plan for graduating, not to merely talk through it, but *show* it and be able to defend the **plan** and articulate the areas that are primarily in their control, as well as the areas that rely on others. Have the students state how they plan to manage those situations.

A RESOURCE FROM:



Use this QR code to access this and other *Mentoring Spark* tip sheets:



CONTINUED ...



DIGGING DEEPER

- One of the most common resources for overall project management is the Project Management Institute (*who are associated with the project management professional [PMP] certification*). Their website offers a variety of tools and information on the basics of project management. **Caveat Emptor:** some of their tools are designed for very large programs, so students should be advised not become overwhelmed by thinking all those tools are needed for small projects.
- Review the Level 2 Project Planning **Spark** for the types of tools available to use.
- **Faculty:** Consider having a shared research group folder with examples of project plans by current and former students.
- **Students should have a grasp of:**
 - ▶ a scheduling tool that includes resources needed and how the tasks interrelate;
 - ▶ an action tracker with due date, priority, and comments on what is needed to complete the task;
 - ▶ having a way of noting key milestones and critical items that may be at risk of completing on time or with sufficient quality.
- Workshops on project management or skill development workshops that may be offered through on-campus resources.

Please visit the RDI Mentoring Sparks website for examples and links to these tools and resources!



EXERCISES FOR STUDENTS

1. If a student does not have a documented project plan for graduating, have them think about the requirements (*e.g., courses, research, thesis writing*). Depending on the student, have them develop a high-level plan for each main group of requirements by a set date. This may result in one, two, or three separate plans.
2. Have students integrate the plans developed in exercise 1. They should be able to “see” if the workload is manageable, if the flow of work makes sense, if resources are available when needed, and be able to speak to those topics. Students should look at the integrated plan and determine the top three risk areas, how they will track those risks, and the associated mitigation plans.
3. Have students present their plans to you and/or your research group, and include how they plan to keep themselves on track.
4. Have students think about how their graduation plan fits into their career plans. At this stage, if there is a mismatch, have the student articulate the impact of a mismatch, and a plan to close the mismatch gap.



ACTIONS FOR FACULTY

- Help students understand and think about the level of detail needed for a degree completion plan. Specifically, students should: **1) have a timeline showing how tasks interrelate, 2) know what resources are needed for each task, 3) articulate how they will communicate their progress, and 4) contingency plans for key risk items.**
- **GOAL Setting:** Agree on a goal for the student related to their graduation or research plan. If they are within a year of graduation, perhaps a goal related to obtaining a job.



REFLECTION & NEXT STEPS

- **Student:** What, if anything, was surprising when major projects or activities (*e.g., classes, research, personal obligation*) were integrated?
- **Student:** Is having, (*and actively managing*) a project plan saving you time or stress? Will it make communication easier? If not, why not – what can change so the plan and managing it is a value-add activity?
- **Faculty:** What are common areas of struggle for students at this level of project planning? What activities can you incorporate sooner in a graduate student’s tenure to help them prepare for this level of planning?



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