Advancing UTSA as a Great Public Research University through Exemplary Graduate, Doctoral and Postdoctoral Training Through Faculty Mentorship

Implementation Plan

May 2023
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Charge from President Eighmy

As we work to further instantiate national best practices into the fabric of our institutions' operations, I continue to assess ongoing opportunities to foster a culture of respect and accountability on campus and ensure that UTSA, as an institution, values the safety and well-being of students, faculty, and staff. We must continue to do more to establish a culture wherein graduate, doctoral, and postdoctoral trainees are supported and are prepared to succeed as researchers, other professionals and potential future colleagues in the professoriate and beyond. I am especially committed to ensuring that faculty mentor and trainee relationships between graduate, doctoral, and postdoctoral scholar trainees and their supervisory faculty are exemplary, effective and support our culture, educational and research mission, and the success of our trainees.

To reach our aspirational levels of excellence, I am directing you in your various roles overseeing faculty affairs, graduate, doctoral and postdoctoral education, research and human resources, individually and collaboratively together to immediately explore and, where appropriate, implement programs, policies and practices to further strengthen our university community.

There are ongoing national conversations about the need for Carnegie R1 universities to lead in elevating the culture of effective faculty mentor-trainee supervisory relationships – and with our core values of integrity, excellence, inclusiveness, respect, collaboration and innovation, has an opportunity to be a national leader. We should aim to be a premier university where all students can thrive academically and emotionally and reach their potential as fellows and teachers. To achieve this goal, and our strategic destinations, we must continue to adopt national best practices in faculty mentorship. UTSA strives to be a university that can recruit and support the best graduate, doctoral and postdoctoral trainees from across the globe and prepare them to be leaders in their fields to impact our world.

UTSA’s academic and research excellence must be matched by our commitment to trainee well-being and success. By furthering improving graduate, doctoral and postdoctoral education, we can achieve that goal and further elevate UTSA as a place to learn, teach, grow and thrive that benefits our communities, state and nation.

Current State

UTSA was classified as a Carnegie R1 university in 2022, in recognition of our achieving benchmarks among the top 145 public and private research institutions in the United States. Commensurate with this designation has been our desire to continue evolving and maturing our research university culture while growing and enhancing graduate education, particularly doctoral education and postdoctoral opportunities. Additionally, the National Academies, funding agencies and professional associations have focused on advancing highly supportive faculty mentoring of graduate, doctoral and postdoctoral trainees that promote success, including implementing best practices that address appropriate communication and boundaries in the academic context.
Since 2018, we have been working in support of the second destination of our strategic plan and the research excellence presidential initiative. In 2019, Academic Affairs launched the Graduate Student Success for Faculty Excellence initiative to reimagine the graduate, doctoral and postdoctoral educational and training experience at UTSA. The task force’s final report has been an invaluable road map to guide excellence in our graduate students and doctoral programs.

With this designation, additional efforts to promote graduate training excellence have been underway through the Graduate School’s Bold Doctoral Journey program. The focus of this program involves the specification of training milestones, professional development, doctoral support, development of marketable skills, and the use of individual development plans (IDPs) to promote, align and systematize effective faculty mentor-student-scholar trainee supervision and guidance.

Complementary to the graduate, doctoral and postdoctoral education-focused initiatives, Academic Affairs has overhauled its approach to faculty development and support through the establishment of the division of Faculty Success, which is centered on faculty development and administrative affairs. Faculty Success works closely with university partners to support all faculty in their professional development. Activities include developing a faculty mentoring hub, creating a robust new faculty academy and chair orientation, and establishing department chair trainings and a learning community.

UTSA has demonstrated a substantial commitment and taken important actions in these areas, though we still have much work to do to realize our goals.

**Gaps**

Significant issues can sometimes arise regarding non-uniform supervisory treatment of graduate, doctoral and postdoctoral trainees, inappropriate mentor-trainee relationships, and unequal faculty mentoring expectations of trainees. People Excellence and Faculty Success have worked together to review and address any faculty-related concerns they discover, which are often related to appropriate communications and setting professional boundaries.

We have made significant progress toward addressing concerns around faculty mentor-trainee supervisory relationships and have worked to fully respond to specific complaints and broader climate concerns. However, we must identify additional ways to further improve our research culture.

Graduate students and postdoctoral fellows are critical to the research ecosystem, but gaps exist in the environments in which they work and learn. UTSA graduate students’ and postdoctoral fellows’ input was sought and incorporated into the framing of mentor-mentee expectations in several ways: first, in discussions during the 2019 Graduate Student Success for Faculty Excellence Task Force process; second, during the 2019 Graduate Tuition and Fee Committee deliberations; third, in the 2022 Graduate Student Well Being survey conducted by the Graduate School; fourth, during the pilot testing of
the Annual Review/IDP process by graduate students; fifth, from exit surveys of graduating master and doctoral students; and sixth, during meetings conducted with the Postdoctoral Association and its leadership by the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs.

The identified gaps and needs include the following:

- The student experience is not comprehensive and may not always address the mental, financial, or social wellbeing of a student or postdoctoral researcher.
- The structure does not facilitate their full capability to develop professionally and contribute to the research ecosystem.
- The need to re-affirm faculty expectations for graduate student and postdoctoral researcher mentoring, including the expectations for continued training and development.
- The lack of accountability mechanisms related to effective mentorship and graduate and postdoctoral professional development.

Continuous discussions with and outcomes of surveys of graduate students and postdoctoral fellows will inform continued evolution of mentor-mentee contracts at UTSA.

**Faculty Expectations for Advancing UTSA as a Great Public Research University through Exemplary Graduate, Doctoral and Postdoctoral Training Through Faculty Mentorship**

To become a great public research university, continued cultural change is needed to develop effective mentoring behavior that advances ecosystems of supportive mentorship. This change occurs by individual faculty and leadership committing themselves to promoting mentoring and becoming more effective and culturally responsive in their mentorship of students. To reach this goal, a common, shared vision among faculty, chairs, associate deans, deans, and institutional leadership is necessary. This shared vision must be rooted in UTSA’s core values of integrity, excellence, inclusiveness, respect, collaboration and innovation and [faculty rights and responsibilities](#).

Our common vision for mentoring students is the following from UTSA’s Faculty Rights and Responsibilities:

- Hold before them the best scholarly, pedagogical and ethical standards of their discipline.
- Demonstrate respect for students as individuals and adhere to their proper roles as intellectual guides and mentors.
- Make every reasonable effort to foster honest academic conduct and to ensure that their evaluations of students reflect each student’s true merit.
- Respect the nature of the relationship between professor and student.
Advancing UTSA as a Great Public Research University through Exemplary Graduate, Doctoral and Postdoctoral Training Through Faculty Mentorship

- Not engage in any exploitation, harassment, or discriminatory treatment of students.
- Acknowledge significant academic or scholarly assistance from students.
- Protect students’ academic freedom.

Vision for UTSA and Faculty Mentorship Charge

Student surveys and national reports point to excellent inclusive mentorship as the single-most important key to graduate student success. Multiple programs identify that graduate faculty mentors would benefit from structured mentorship training.

Following guidance from President Eighmy and Provost Espy in their February 2023 memo to faculty and Graduate School Dean Mathur’s February 2023 memo to graduate students, UTSA recommends that programs and colleges set expectations for an enhanced culturally-aware mentorship environment with appropriate training. Specific training needs include mentorship philosophy, communication with mentees, inclusivity, respect and transparent communication within mentor-mentee relationships, and creating opportunities for professional development of trainees as well as enhancing research and educational program productivity. In addition to the long-term impact of improving student retention and graduation, the reputational impact on student recruitment and experiences will be enhanced through implementing mentor training programs and similar training for GARs and program staff. In concurrence with the reports from multiple colleges, faculty training can also be further incentivized through faculty recognition to reflect mentoring within annual evaluations as well as other extant mechanisms. Graduate faculty membership would require, at the minimum, earning the Graduate School’s mentorship microcredential.

Graduate mentoring best practices are based on clear expectations of both the mentor and mentee of the training experience. Structured, periodic, and well-documented conversations that lay out these expectations between the trainee and trainer set forth the groundwork for a healthy training environment. Written compacts between mentor and mentee identifying expectations could be customized from existing examples of disciplinary compacts (such as the one for biomedical mentors and mentees developed by a faculty committee for the Association of American Medical Colleges). The compact established within the first year of training should be revisited annually during the mandatory student Annual Review process. In addition, the key responsibilities and roles of the student, faculty, college, unit and GARs should be clearly defined. See the table below (from the Klesse College of Engineering and Integrated Design).
Doctoral students and postdoctoral fellows being trained at UTSA are fundamentally our future colleagues and future leaders of our professions. We, the UTSA faculty, have a
moral and ethical obligation to embrace those fundamental truths and act accordingly. The future is in our hands.

Accordingly, our trainees can and should have the following expectations:

1. They will be treated as individuals whose personal and cultural background is uniquely their own and whose professional and personal success is given high priority.
2. They will work in an environment free of bullying, harassment, intimidation and discrimination, where everyone understands and respects professional and personal boundaries.
3. They will receive mentoring and supervision that is structured and regular as well as appropriate for their career stage.
4. They will receive constructive, timely feedback that is transparent, clear, honest, and factual.
5. They will be supported in establishing and maintaining a fulsome work-life balance, where project work is not expected to be all-consuming in time and effort.
6. They will be offered opportunities for professional development beyond the strict bounds of their project work.
7. They will be acknowledged as co-authors, co-investigators, and contributors for all scholarly work for which they made substantive contributions.
8. They will have their right to academic freedom respected and supported.
9. They will have safe methods to seek help from UTSA administrative leaders without fear of retribution from their direct mentors.

As stated above in the “Gaps” section above, input will be continuously sought from graduate students and postdoctoral fellows annually or/and as needed.

**Action Plan: Scaling Current Programs and Change Management**

The action plan describes how UTSA, as an institution, and all UTSA faculty, as individuals, will actively demonstrate our commitment to those principles, including the following:

1. Specific actions expected from mentors and students.
2. Specific roadmaps for the completion of degrees and/or projects.
3. Specific UTSA-provided opportunities for career development outside of the specific trainee-mentor relationship.

Many of these activities and programs exist; however, a concentrated effort is needed to scale them to all graduate and postdoctoral scholar mentors. In addition, a coordinated effort, including change management practices, is needed for continued systemic and cultural change to occur.
Reimagining the Doctoral Program

The 2019 Graduate Student Task Force issued sweeping recommendations to improve the graduate student experience on several dimensions, which lead to the 2023 initiative “Reimagining the Ph.D.” The initiative’s premise is that quality mentorship is the underlying support structure that creates and sustains enhanced student retention, completion and training experience. All seven academic colleges undertook this exercise to assess their current state, identify gaps and develop an Action Plan that builds on a refreshed vision of graduate programs in their departments driven by high-quality mentorship. While disciplinary differences shaped the vision, the commonalities that emerged were remarkable and provided a detailed assessment of programmatic needs within programs and areas for improvement to reshape doctoral education for the next decade. These include mentors leading the way toward the following goals:

- Setting expectations for an enhanced culturally-aware mentorship environment with appropriate training, including linking evidence of these practices and/or professional development to explicit graduate faculty status criteria.
- Using the Annual Review and Individual Development Plan (IDP) framework to establish student-tailored pathways with a goal of reducing time to degree completion using 9-9-3 enrollment (or more) to match disciplinary norms, in compliance with the 99-hour rule. Specifically, they will address the following:
  - How faculty will mentor trainees in both formal and informal ways
  - How mentoring will be documented and valued in faculty reviews (i.e., annual, tenure and promotion)
  - How students will be funded for the entirety of doctoral training, taking into consideration planned strategic growth in cohort sizes and diversity
  - How faculty will work with programs to foster an increased sense of belonging and community for inclusive excellence amongst students
  - How faculty and programs will create process efficiencies to maximize success and opportunities for completion. For example, outlining the degree pathway, consolidation of duplicative or redundant courses, changing the goals and requirements for qualifying exams, creating interdisciplinary courses/programs
  - How faculty will refresh the existing curriculum to be in line with the 21st century workforce needs, addressing increased demands for skills such as data visualization and analytics
  - How the college and programs will work with faculty to establish how mentors actively support career preparation and professional development (individually or jointly with The Graduate School) for multiple career pathways
Faculty Mentoring Education Program

Based on the National Academies report, *The Science of Effective Mentorship in STEMM (2019)*, mentorship is a learned activity, and developing effective mentoring behavior is key to providing an environment where all students and postdoctoral researchers can thrive academically and emotionally and reach their potential as fellows and teachers. This effective mentoring behavior is based on trust, responsiveness, and career and psychosocial support.

In order to have effective mentoring behavior, there needs to be both mentor and mentee education. Not all individuals have a natural aptitude for mentoring; therefore, instruction, practice, feedback, self-reflection, and intention are necessary for all to become proficient, effective mentors. The division of Faculty Success has two effective programs to support mentors during their development: Advancing a Culture of Respect online training and Becoming a Mentor @ UTSA Training Program. These programs include many tools that can be utilized to support a productive and positive relationship between mentor and mentee.

The Advancing a Culture of Respect online training is an introduction for faculty on setting appropriate boundaries in the research environment and provides advice and best practices from UTSA colleagues.

The Becoming a Mentor program consists of the following core competencies:

- Aligning expectations and maintaining effective communication
  - Assessing understanding and fostering independence
  - Mentoring challenges and solutions
  - Addressing equity and inclusion
  - Cultivating ethical behavior.

This interactive program will support mentors in utilizing tools such as individual development plans, mentorship compacts, and mentoring maps/plans with their mentees.

Faculty currently self-select to complete the online training or attend the Become a Mentor program. For the online training, the expectation is that every faculty member who has Graduate Faculty Status completes this short training along with their annual compliance training. The training can be found on UTSA’s Learning Management System and is easily accessed by all faculty. The Become a Mentor program will be converted to an online format with both asynchronous and synchronous content to scale the program to reach all faculty. The initial focus will be to require all faculty who advise doctoral or postdoctoral fellows to complete the program.

Faculty College Evaluation Guidelines

The Colleges were charged with updating their Annual Review, Promotion and Tenure, and FTT Promotion guidelines as part of the updated College Workload Guidelines in...
academic year 2021-2022. These guidelines set the over-arching university standards for excellence on the full range of activities, impacts and quality that advance the university’s goals. As a part of Advancing UTSA as a Great Public Research University through Exemplary Graduate, Doctoral and Postdoctoral Training, College guidelines will be updated to reflect accountability related to the mentoring of doctoral and postdoctoral fellows. The guidelines should reflect mentoring education requirements to support graduate faculty status and provide accountability for creating a culture of respect and effective mentoring behavior. Additionally, they should provide standards for the faculty badging program to acknowledge the skills developed.

**Onboarding new faculty**

The [New Faculty Academy](#) is a comprehensive program that supports the academic career development of new faculty, particularly early career faculty, to become excellent teachers and fellows. The initial Bold Beginnings at Roadrunner Nation orientation supports new faculty in learning about UTSA’s diverse student body, our innovative vision of teaching, research and learning, and the many tools and resources available to faculty. The Academy is the result of a partnership with Faculty Success, Division of Academic Innovation, and Research, Economic Development and Knowledge Enterprise. Faculty have access to the Advancing a Culture of Respect online training, the Becoming a Mentor program, and numerous other programs to support their development as teachers, mentors and scholars.

**Leadership Training**

Faculty Success partners with People Excellence to provide training for department chairs and associate deans to support them in their roles. There is monthly training on topics relevant to their roles and responsibilities such as Difficult Conversations and Workplace Boundaries. We will continue expanding topics and resources for these leaders so they can bolster the cultural changes needed in their departments to create a culture of respect and inclusion.

**Change Management**

People Excellence is developing change management training to ensure leaders have the support and tools necessary to effectively lead change efforts across campus. The training will help them prepare for change and learn to support students and employees once the change is implemented to ensure success and engagement. People Excellence will partner with Faculty Success to customize these offerings for faculty.

**Workplace Assessment**

Workplace assessments address current climate issues that arise and help when we transition new leaders into their roles to understand the current state and help build a strategy/plan for the team moving forward to ensure a positive working and learning environment.
Graduate and Postdoctoral Scholar Training

Postdoctoral Experience at UTSA

At UTSA, we aim to advance research by maximizing the effectiveness of the research community and enhancing the quality of the postdoctoral experience for all participants. A diverse postdoctoral community has positive effects on research and teaching and improves the work environment by offering broadened perspectives and encouraging critical thinking. With this goal, UTSA established an Office of Postdoctoral Affairs (OPA) in 2019, housed in the Graduate School. The mission of the OPA is to create an environment that promotes diversity and inclusiveness and creates opportunities for both domestic and international postdoctoral fellows. This is achieved in collaboration with Academic Affairs, REDKE, faculty, and a vibrant Postdoctoral Association (PDA) led by members of the postdoctoral training community. With the understanding that postdocs hold a unique dual role as trainee and employee, UTSA has defined a single category of postdoctoral fellows with strict durations of training and job duties and expectations, uniform appointment policies, standardized offer letters and entry-level stipends matching NRSA published rates, and annual reviews and IDP to prepare postdoctoral fellows for future careers.

Graduate Student Experience at UTSA

While graduate students receive excellent disciplinary and didactic training, UTSA has added innovative support structures to partner with colleges to promote excellence in preparing students for future careers. Faculty mentors should strongly encourage their students to participate in such activities. The Graduate School has collaborated with program and college faculty, staff and students to create a series of initiatives to provide students with training in competencies identified as essential by national professional organizations and employers, as well as exposure to careers in multiple pathways and job sectors. Mastery of these transferrable skills are evidenced by digital badges or micro-credentials that can be posted on electronic portfolios and professional social media sites for easy sharing with peers and potential employers.

Graduate School Professional Development Series:

UTSA Graduate School has launched several new initiatives to ensure its graduate students and postdocs achieve state-of-the-art disciplinary research training, professional development opportunities, and tools for success and networking by establishing a strategic and evidence-based development plan, such as:

- Individual Development Plan (IDP) for graduate students and postdoctoral fellows to own their training and work with mentors to customize their intellectual and professional development as they prepare for their careers. We offer one-on-one discussions to help actualize their individualized needs, identify their strengths and needs, and define short- and long-term career goals and tools to achieve success (one-on-one | UTSA postdoc).
• Professional Development Workshop Series: Using the IDP as the guiding principle, the Graduate School organizes monthly workshops/seminars focused on the career and professional development of graduate students and postdocs. These include the following:
  o Mentoring workshop series: mentor and mentee training for postdoctoral fellows to learn the skills necessary to mentor graduate students in their labs and develop their expertise to move to the next level.
  o Grant/Fellowship writing workshops.
  o Competency-building skills as evidenced by electronic micro-credentialing/badging within the Graduate School's Graduate and Postdoc Success series:
    • Communication: verbal and written presentations
    • Leadership
    • Teamwork and Collaboration
    • Research and Ethics
  o Networking and Institutional memberships: The Graduate School has provided resources and free membership for career development and networking (Institutional membership) to all UTSA graduate students, postdocs, and staff to the National Postdoctoral Association (NPA), and National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity (NCFDD).

In collaboration with all stakeholders, the Graduate School has mandated the use of an IDP for mentors/mentees to map the trainee’s career trajectory and what it will take to be successful. A mandatory Annual Review measures the success of graduate students and postdocs based on their unique dual trainee/employee status.

An annual research symposium with poster presentations, the Three Minute Thesis (3MT) Competition, and research talks evaluate individual students’ achievements as researchers.

In addition, individual programs and colleges have created their own initiatives to prepare students specifically for careers in their disciplines.

Future Programs

Center for the Integration of Research, Training and Learning Program, CIRTL
UTSA was recently accepted into the CIRTL network. CIRTL’s mission is to enhance excellence in teaching by developing faculty committed to implementing and advancing effective teaching practices for diverse learners as part of successful and varied professional careers. CIRTL@UTSA will implement several programs, including the Postdoctoral Academy for Future Faculty (PAFF), the Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) Program, and the Teaching-as-Research (TAR) program. CIRTL membership will
increase UTSA’s capacity to increase high-quality programming for our graduate students and postdoctoral fellows and include CIRTL’s Learning Community, monthly seminar series and meet ups, and participation in its annual conference.

**Graduate Faculty Mentorship Badge/Micro-credential:**
The Graduate School and Faculty Success will partner to develop a badging program for faculty. The badges will be used to acknowledge achievements or skill acquisition through the programs offered in Faculty Success, Academic Innovation, Graduate School, and REDKE, such as mentoring, peer mentoring, etc. The badging program will be acknowledged in the faculty evaluation guidelines discussed above.

**Measures of Success**
To ensure success and that a culture shift has occurred, KPIs and other metrics have been identified to monitor our progress. These measures of success will assess advancements in the following broad categories with specific items identified within each category. Outcomes, including data, programs and program impact will be reviewed on a regular basis by the Research Excellence Destination (RED) Team and feedback will be provided to units at scheduled time periods.

- **Campus climate of respect:**
  - The institutional student climate survey and student pulse surveys
  - Number of referrals to People Excellence related to faculty behavior or issues between faculty and graduate students and postdoctoral fellows
  - Workplace Assessment outcomes

- **Graduate faculty mentoring:**
  - Faculty evaluations
  - Graduate student retention and graduation
  - Years to degree for graduate students
  - Graduate student pipeline conversion and matriculation to faculty positions and meaningful research careers
  - Course evaluation metrics

- **Participation of trainees in professional development activities:**
  - Numbers of attendees in sessions
  - Numbers of microcredential/digital badges awarded
  - Pre- and post-course survey of professional development and CIRTL programs

- **College outcomes:**
  - Dean’s metrics related to graduate education
Through a shared governance process with Academic Council and other key constituents, we will set targeted milestones to assess our progress over the next several months.

**Timeline**
The following table provides when the program or activity will begin or be scaled up. Since content is expected to continually evolve as UTSA matures as an R1 institution, activities will occur minimally at the defined recurring frequencies as indicated.

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**Conclusion**
UTSA’s Strategic Plan and Vision focuses on three destinations: Student Success, Research Excellence, and Innovative Excellence. Graduate students and postdoctoral fellows are integral to the success of all three pillars. We wish to build on our successes and also continue to improve by adopting national best practices in faculty mentorship to recruit and support the best graduate, doctoral and postdoctoral trainees from across the globe and prepare them to be leaders in their fields to impact our world. UTSA leadership is committed to ensuring that faculty mentor and trainee relationships between graduate, doctoral, and postdoctoral fellow trainees and their supervisory faculty are exemplary, effective and support our culture, educational and research mission, and the success of our trainees.

This document serves to codify UTSA’s commitment to these principles by creating firm structures, action plans and key performance indicators to demonstrate ongoing and continuing success in advancing UTSA as a Great Public Research University.