Graduate education is a key activity of higher education, contributing to the creation of new knowledge and advancing our society (Tinto, 1993). Yet nationwide, only 50 percent of all doctoral students complete their programs (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). The graduate education process involves myriad opportunities for miscommunication, misunderstanding, and conflict to occur, which contribute to this low success rate. As a student progresses through his or her program, the guidance committee or the major professor or faculty advisor become the locus of the educational community (Tinto, 1993). Not surprisingly, doctoral students regard their relationships with faculty members as the most important element in the quality of their graduate experience, but many also have reported it as “the single most disappointing aspect of their graduate experience” (Hartnett & Katz, 1977, p. 647).

Research has also shown that students who are given useful and explicit early information about program expectations develop better working relationships, are more committed to their programs, and are more productive as measured by numbers of future publications (Bauer & Green, 1994; Green, 1991). Hartnett and Katz (1977) postulated that clarity about expectations results in increased accountability on the part of both graduate students and faculty members. Studying students who did not complete doctoral degrees, Lovitts (2001) reported that doctoral degree completers identify academic integration (interactions with faculty and other graduate students, and a connection with life in the discipline) and an understanding of informal expectations as the most important factors contributing to successful graduate education. The lack of mutually understood expectations and the conflicts that may subsequently arise between faculty members and graduate students damage these fundamentally important relationships and contribute to the low completion rate.

There is increasing national recognition of the serious nature of interpersonal conflicts between graduate students and faculty. Holton’s 1995 book, Conflict Management in Higher Education, did not mention conflicts between graduate students and faculty. In her second volume in 1998, however, this issue received attention, and most recently Warters (2000) highlighted the importance of conflict resolution in graduate education.

Conflict inflicts heavy costs on graduate students, faculty members, and administrators, as well as on the department and university. Whether the lost time and opportunity for the graduate student who does not complete his or her degree; the lost institutional investment when students depart; the damage to departmental culture and reputation; or the time and energy that conflict diverts from the university’s core missions of teaching, research, and outreach, all are real costs that can be avoided, or at least, minimized.

However, many of the strategies for conflict resolution in higher education, such as peer mediation and formal grievance processes, are based on the needs and experiences of undergraduates. The results of the application of many of these strategies to graduate education are inconsistent because of the huge differences between what these strategies offer and the context in which they are applied. They are not designed to maintain the faculty-graduate student relationship, but rather are set in the process of fact finding, mounting an evidentiary rationale one against the other, assessing blame, and staking a claim for redress. The close working relationship between a graduate student and an individual faculty member or a small group of faculty that characterizes graduate education does not readily lend itself to the easy use of strategies such as going through formal grievance procedures or simply leaving the relationship or program. Exit may mean the end of a student’s career at the specific institution. Furthermore, personal rancor, resulting from either exiting or formally bringing
forward a grievance (even a successful grievance), may lead to problems that follow the person to other institutions, either as a student or as a professional. These processes are inadequate because they often run counter to the ongoing important relationship and communication requirements that link advisor and advisee. In fact, graduate students often avoid these processes for that reason.

On our own campus at Michigan State University (MSU), graduate student and faculty focus groups, surveys of current graduate students, and a survey of Ph.D. alumni, as well as input from the ombudsman, the university’s Intellectual Integrity Officer, and officers of the Council of Graduate Students, indicated that the lack of mutually understood expectations creates great potential for interpersonal conflict in the graduate education process. Our survey results also underscored that students’ greatest dissatisfaction was with departmental, mentor, and advisor-related communication issues. They reported specific concerns about orientation, guidance committee interactions, appropriate student progress, faculty feedback, quality of advising, and faculty receptiveness to student input. We suspect that this pattern of concerns is similar at other “research-extensive universities” (Carnegie, 2000), a conclusion that has largely been supported by Golde and Dore’s (2001) national survey data (see Chapter Two) and Nerad and Cerny’s (2000) study, Ph.Ds—Ten Years Later (see Chapter Seven).

Both students and faculty in focus groups at Michigan State University cited interpersonal conflicts as formidable barriers to success in graduate education and recognized these conflicts as posing a different and more difficult set of challenges than students face as undergraduates. The graduate students in the focus groups expressed the belief that because they are quite vulnerable, conflicts they face with faculty supervisors are either irresolvable or resolvable only by their paying a high price for voicing their concerns, especially in a formal grievance procedure. The students were very conscious of the power differential between them and faculty members; they believed that even winning a “victory” could result in irreparable professional harm with respect to financial support, letters of recommendation, and entry into the disciplinary field. Faculty, department chairs, and others cited concerns about the time required to resolve conflicts and the resulting reduction in both faculty and student productivity.

Recognizing the human and institutional costs of conflicts involving graduate students and the limitations of available avenues for successful resolution of conflicts, the graduate school at MSU initiated a program in 1996 designed to recast conflict resolution from the confrontational, positional approach—based in blaming and right-wrong dualities—to an interest-based approach that lays the basis for more creative and amicable problem solving. This chapter describes our experience with this program at MSU, our change in focus to avoiding conflicts through better setting of explicit and mutually understood expectations, and our conviction that the program presents a transferable model that may be used to affect retention positively on other campuses as well.

Program Description and Purposes

Michigan State University’s interest-based approach, although not new in the practice of general negotiation and conflict resolution, had not been applied to graduate education. We believed that it held great promise as an alternative to high-stakes grievance-driven and position-based methods. As we developed the program, however, we realized that the technique of conflict resolution was not the sole determinant of our program’s possible success. The interest-based approach needed to be part of a shift in emphasis away from the resolution of conflict between faculty and graduate students to its avoidance through proactive setting and communication of mutual expectations. We termed this process “making the implicit explicit.”

We initiated the program—entitled Setting Expectations and Resolving Conflicts—to see if we could transfer to the enterprise of graduate education the systematic use of interest-based approaches employed in environmental disputes, labor-management negotiations, and international relations. Program development was supported by the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) (from 1997 to 2000) and by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (from 1997 to 1999) and was a team effort that included the two authors, graduate students Julie Brockman and Jennifer Eyelans Oxtoby, and R. Sam Larson, Ph.D., an independent consultant specializing in organizational change. Janet Lillie, Ph.D., of the MSU Department of Communications, designed and now presents our companion workshop in communication skills.
We developed a set of workshops that used short video vignettes as conversation triggers to teach faculty and graduate students interest-based approaches to setting expectations and resolving conflicts. We also developed a workshop for graduate students alone (without faculty members present), in which they could try out the approach in a safe and supportive environment. In designing the workshops, we ensured that the necessary content was included, but we were also sensitive to time constraints for both faculty members and graduate students.

**Strategies**

Interest-based approaches involve several steps: the individuals agree on the issue needing resolution; they identify the underlying *interests* they believe are linked to the issue and the outcome they desire (the "position" they hold); they identify all other individuals who have a "stake" in the resolution of the conflict and their interests; and finally, they craft options that meet the individual and mutual interests of everyone involved and form the basis for successfully addressing the issue in a way that each person will find acceptable. These strategies counter traditional "positional" approaches used in bargaining, in which the focus is the position of each individual rather than the underlying interests and concerns of all persons, positions that each may strongly defend from attack and to which they become increasingly committed (Fisher & Ury, 1991). With traditional approaches, agreement may reflect a mechanical "spelling out" of the differences between final positions, rather than a solution to the issue in dispute that is carefully crafted to meet the legitimate interests of the individuals. Not infrequently, positional negotiation strains and sometimes shatters the relationships between the individuals—relationships that are of fundamental importance for doctoral education.

Often, the best option for resolving a conflict may not be a simple compromise between stated positions. When two individuals share their underlying interests, it moves them from a linear argument—in which usually inflexible positions are stated, often fixing all possible solutions between the stated desired outcomes—to a comprehensive discussion approach that can result in a wider and more creative set of solutions.

Interest-based approaches rely on five main strategies: the discussion is focused on the problem and not on the people involved; the focus is on the needs, desires, interests, and fears underlying the stated positions; a variety of options are generated that advance shared interests and creatively reconcile differing interests before a final decision is made; the participants engage in a fair testing of the options to determine their goodness as complete or partial solutions to the issue and how well they meet the stakeholder interests (truly the test of the goodness of any solution); successful decision making and ongoing evaluation lead to a negotiation process whereby the individuals are willing to be flexible and to reenter the process again later as the context changes.

In our two- to three-hour Setting Expectations and Resolving Conflicts workshops—which are attended by both faculty members and graduate students in departmental settings or by graduate students alone in groups that span disciplines—we use thirty- to ninety-second video vignettes to spark discussion and teach the basic principles of interest-based approaches. We designed more than fifty vignettes depicting a wide range of issues that can lead to conflicts or describing implicit expectations not made explicit. Issues highlighted include changing guidance committee members, “even more” revisions to a dissertation, authorship issues, data access, working with faculty, teaching assistant issues, and balancing family and graduate studies. Video vignettes are more lively than reading a case study. Furthermore, the venues portrayed by the vignettes, as well as the physical attributes and mannerisms of the characters, also provide “teachable moments.” Following is an example vignette script and related questions that are used in the workshops.

**Professor:** Gloria, why did you cancel your discussion section of my course yesterday?

**Graduate student:** My daughter, she woke up with a temperature and she was sick. I didn’t have anyone to take care of her at the last minute, so I had to stay home. I’m a single parent. There was nobody to call at the last minute.

**Professor:** Do you realize that this is the third time that this has happened this semester and that undergraduate students are beginning to complain? If you don’t take care of this situation soon, it may affect your ability to be assigned a section next semester.
General Questions Related to This Vignette

1. What is happening in this interchange?
2. How realistic is the interchange?
3. What does each of the characters want from the other person, or from the situation?
4. Are there others, not in the vignette, who are affected by the situation? What do they need in the situation described?
5. What questions do we need to have answered to analyze this situation?
6. What policy or expectations might have helped avoid this situation?
7. What are the emotions portrayed in this vignette? Where do they have their origin?
8. What can we reasonably expect to be the next step in this situation?

Specific Questions Related to This Vignette

1. What are the various responsibilities being explored in this vignette?
2. The title of this vignette, “Double Bind,” implies that there are dueling priorities or responsibilities at play. Discuss who is in a double bind and what the dueling priorities are.
3. What constitutes a professor’s responsibility to the students in his or her course? Is the graduate teaching assistant’s responsibility any different? If so, what are the differences and where do these get articulated?
4. What are the possible consequences facing all players in this situation if it is not resolved?
5. The professor makes a statement about Gloria not being able to “be assigned a section next semester.” Is this a threat? How does this statement affect the situation?
6. How does the location of the interchange affect how we view it? What are some other “locations” where this issue could be discussed? How might the change of location affect the situation and the interchange?

Selecting vignettes that are closely aligned with the interests of the specific participants—for example, lab-based vignettes on ownership of scientific data—are relevant to those in the sciences—allows the facilitator to focus on those important, and perhaps even contentious, issues most likely to provoke discussion. Participants can then safely explore the issues presented in the vignette, as well as learn interest-based approaches to resolve them. In our experience, participants often generate creative solutions to the conflicts depicted in the vignettes and begin to discuss expectations that might be made explicit in order to prevent the conflict in the future.

The Setting Expectations and Resolving Conflicts Program has several facets. Participants learn interest-based approaches and skills for negotiation and conflict resolution. They participate in the facilitated discussions that use the video vignettes as triggers to conversations about specific areas of possible conflict and differing expectations in disciplines, or more generally, in graduate education. In situations where faculty and student groups work together, participants have used interest-based approaches and skills to establish collective departmental understandings of expectations and responsibilities. Written materials provided in the workshops describe the philosophy and skills of interest-based negotiation strategy. Participants practice these skills by developing frameworks for setting expectations and applying these frameworks to scenes depicted in the vignettes.

The workshops highlight a number of key concepts. We emphasize that early attention to setting expectations can help avoid conflicts. We show that early attention to resolving conflicts is a key to success, because, as time passes, things are said and done by students and faculty members that often significantly limit options for satisfactory resolution. We also spend considerable time discussing how expectations are set and who sets them. We believe that explicit, shared expectations are the fundamental keys to improving retention.

We are also careful to define our own assumptions early in the workshop, such as these: Not all issues are negotiable. Conflict itself is neither good nor bad (and is, in fact, how we advance knowledge in the academy), but rather it is how conflict is handled that may be defined as good or bad. The power differential between faculty members and graduate students will never be equalized, because faculty have expert power as well as other forms of power. Finally, we should not expect 100 percent graduate student retention and completion.
As noted earlier, we also have added a workshop on communication skills for graduate students alone, at their request and by recommendation of our national advisory committee. This workshop, which uses the same video vignettes as the Setting Expectations and Resolving Conflicts workshops, provides additional practice, skills, and information to help the students talk effectively with faculty members. It reinforces the practice and use of the interest-based approaches to setting expectations and resolving conflicts.

Outcomes

Program participants gain skills in communication, conflict resolution, and teamwork that improve the quality of graduate education and serve students and faculty members throughout their careers. The program also increases graduate student participants' academic integration and socialization into the disciplines. To date, outcomes can be determined both from evaluation data and from observations of institutional impact.

Evaluation Data

The MSU program attracts approximately one hundred students to the workshops offered by the graduate school each semester. In addition, the approach and vignettes have been used by MSU's Intellectual Integrity Officer, Women's Resource Center, Office of the Provost Teaching Seminar series, and faculty members in orientations and doctoral seminars. Going beyond MSU, we have presented workshops to deans and assistant and associate deans during the Council of Graduate Schools preconference programs.

We have also conducted workshops and train-the-trainer sessions at Kansas State University, Pennsylvania State University, University of Minnesota, University of Michigan, and other institutions.

At the beginning of each of fifty-seven workshops we sponsored at MSU and elsewhere during a three-year period of FIPSE evaluation, we asked participants to complete a registration form. We calculated that 561 faculty, 737 graduate students, and 30 postdocs—for a total of 1,328 individuals—attended the interest-based Setting Expectations and Resolving Conflict workshops. To evaluate the immediate impact of the workshops on cognitive and affective learning goals, we administered a survey to participants immediately following the workshops. In addition, we measured long-term understanding and use of the approaches through a survey administered to workshop participants several months after they attended a workshop.

The surveys administered at the conclusion of each workshop provided useful findings: 65 percent of the participants could correctly state an expectation as a well-defined interest; 62 percent could articulate an expectation that would meet the needs of both parties; 89 percent were ready to use the interest-based negotiation skills presented in the workshop; and 88 percent said they would use these skills if they had an opportunity to practice them more. In addition, 94 percent found the workshop to be somewhat or very helpful in recognizing their own expectations of graduate education; 88 percent found the workshop to be somewhat or very helpful in their understanding of what others (depending on the respondent, either their major professors or their graduate students) might expect of them; and 92 percent said the workshop was very or somewhat helpful in their thinking about the long-term impacts of relationships with major professors or graduate students.

In the survey administered several months after students attended the workshop, many reported sharing their expectations with their major professors, identifying parties associated with expectations, and considering the interests of parties associated with expectations.

The observations of a few student participants, taken from the project evaluation for FIPSE, also illustrate some of the outcomes of the project:

I was exposed to this workshop during my first semester on campus and I think it's one of the best things I did in terms of shaping my expectations for my doctoral plan of study. It helped me to realize that conflict is inevitable and that even though I'm a student I can negotiate with faculty. I learned to look for the [reasons underlying] positions... I've used these skills in setting expectations for my assistantships, and thus far, conflicts have been handled before they escalate.
I was very hesitant to confront my advisor about my needs in terms of comps and/or thesis. As it turned out we negotiated a compromise that was much more helpful to me in both my professional and academic goals, and the end result means I have negotiated several new opportunities. I think these workshops were very helpful.

Institutional Impact

The focus on how explicit expectations are set also has influenced graduate program review at MSU. While acknowledging that many expectations about graduate education are implicit (a core tenet of our program), the workshops highlight how clear communication of formal expectations reduces the guesswork for students and prevents conflict. Graduate program review, therefore, includes an examination of graduate handbooks for explicit language about formal, and even informal, expectations. Further, training sessions conducted every fall semester for new and returning graduate program secretaries and coordinators pay considerable attention to the key role that clarifying expectations, while considering the interests of all stakeholders, plays in student retention and success.

Overall, from 1996 to 2002, the doctoral retention-completion rate at Michigan State University has improved from 53 percent to almost 59 percent, although the retention-completion rate for doctoral students nationally has not changed in thirty years. We believe that the frequent opportunities provided for students and faculty to participate in this program, the consistent use of the interest-based language and process by the graduate school personnel, and the focus on the improvement of doctoral student retention throughout all of our activities (for example, a graduate handbook template and use of completion rates in our formula for allocating fellowship funds) have all contributed to the improvement of this measure at MSU.

Recommendations

The experiences at MSU, as well as at other institutions that have adapted the strategies discussed here, indicate that a program specifically designed for graduate students and faculty members that focuses on setting expectations and helping participants develop skills in conflict resolution makes a significant impact. We urge other institutions to initiate such programs, and we offer here some final recommendations:

- Use graduate school-sponsored workshops on setting expectations and conflict resolution to provide safe contexts for students to discuss issues of concern. The workshop setting provides a context in which students can strengthen social connections with one another. Graduate school-sponsored workshops also increase the visibility of university personnel, who can provide a safe environment for students to discuss issues of concern and seek advice outside the context and power structure of any particular department. This safe environment is particularly attractive to international students, nontraditional students, and students from underrepresented groups.
- In addition to graduate school-sponsored workshops open to all graduate students, situate interest-based conflict resolution training in departments as well. Departments are the place where implicit understandings and organizational folklore often affect the lives of graduate students and faculty members. Interest-based approaches can be useful to departments in several different ways. First, faculty members working as a departmental group without graduate students can use interest-based approaches to discuss their understandings of key departmental policies and goals. When departmental faculty have agreed about a framework—a safety net of common expectations—they can build on this framework to talk with student advisees about setting individual expectations and goals. A second approach, which we believe holds great promise, is a joint training and expectation-setting experience involving both graduate students and faculty in a single department, unit, or subspecialty. Graduate students and faculty can gain a common understanding of the problematic areas in graduate education (authorship, financial support, and so on), explore areas that may not be sufficiently explicit, and build a web of departmental understandings and expectations inside which faculty and students are expected to operate. Absent departmental meetings of faculty, or of faculty members and students together, individual faculty members who are knowledgeable about the cultures in their departments can still use interest-based expectation setting to interact with their own advisees.
Articulate compelling incentives for students and faculty members to participate in an interest-based workshop on setting expectations and learning conflict resolution skills. The incentives for involvement in this program are to improve the climate for graduate education in the department and to avoid miscommunication and conflicts that can take faculty and student time and attention, as well as other resources, away from more productive endeavors. In addition, we have found that individual faculty members are more likely to participate in this program if there is discussion of the research that links early and explicit communication to productivity for faculty and for their students (Green, 1991). Good working relationships between faculty and graduate students contribute positively to perceptions about the quality of departments and institutions.

Conclusion

The setting expectations and resolving conflicts program initiated at MSU and adopted at a number of institutions helps graduate students and faculty members set mutual expectations and place interests, not positions, at the center of joint discussions. When implicit interests and desires are made explicit, the creation of multiple options and solutions becomes more likely when conflicts arise. Although an interest-based negotiation strategy or approach is not "rocket science," it is more complex to teach than one might expect. The approach represents a fundamental change of culture as well as a habit of mind that requires multiple experiences with the process in order to break away from the positional mindset. The results are worthy of the effort, however. Students and faculty who participate report increasingly positive departmental climates and improved retention and completion rates. This modest program, not requiring extensive resources, has the potential for significant impact in improving graduate education.

Note

1. Published materials further describing this program, including all program vignettes on videotape, are scheduled to be available in the near future. Currently, more information, including sample vignettes, is available at the following Web site: http://grad.msu.edu/conflict.htm.

References


