

A three pronged approach to address professional development needs among graduate students and post-doctoral scholars at Duke University.

Statement of the problem:

Duke University has many resources to enhance professional development among graduate students and postdoctoral fellows. Nevertheless, postdoctoral and graduate students at Duke University express needs for more professional development opportunities such as, opportunities for networking and interviewing skills, conducting job search and access to alumni network. This suggests that there is an existing gap between the available professional development opportunities at Duke and utilization/awareness by the target population.

We hypothesized that there is an existing communication gap of the existing professional development opportunity at Duke among the postdoctoral and graduate students. To address this gap we recommended a three-pronged approach. This include conducting a communication effectiveness survey, E-newsletter and student ambassadors. The following sections will discuss each of the approaches in details

Approach 1:

The following section provides a detailed description of the communication effectiveness survey.

Duke Graduate School and Office of Postdoctoral Services Professional Development -Communication effectiveness survey

Purpose and Design

The main aims of conducting the communication effectiveness survey include:

- To provide baseline information regarding the effectiveness of existing communication strategies for professional development opportunities among post-doctoral fellows and graduate students at Duke University.
- To assess the willingness for buy in for potential new communication strategies such as introduction of student ambassadors and an E-newsletter

The survey is designed into two main sections based on the above aims and a minor section for basic demographic information.

Section 1

The following questions will assess the effectiveness of the existing communication strategies for professional development among the graduate and post-doctoral scholars

1. From which of the following sources do you receive most of your information about professional development resources, opportunities, and events run by the graduate school/office of post-doctoral services?
 - Graduate School/ post-doctoral services professional development email
 - Departmental emails
 - Social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc.)
 - Website searches
 - Word of mouth (by instructor, advisor, friend etc.)
 - Other please state _____

2. Overall how satisfied are you with the graduate school's/office of post-doctoral effort to keep you informed about professional development opportunities at Duke? (very dissatisfied to very satisfied)
 - Very satisfied
 - Satisfied
 - Neutral
 - Dissatisfied
 - Very dissatisfied
3. How much of a typical professional development email sent from the graduate school/postdoctoral services do you read?
 - Generally read all of it
 - Read most of it
 - Read some of it
 - Only skim through it
 - Don't read it at all
 - I don't receive professional development emails from the graduate school
4. How satisfied are you with your ability to find answers to questions related to professional development at Duke? (very dissatisfied to very satisfied)
 - Very satisfied
 - Moderately satisfied
 - Neutral
 - Slightly satisfied
 - Not satisfied
5. Given the availability of professional development resources at Duke, which of the following has presented you with the greatest challenge in terms of meeting your professional development needs?
 - Demand more time than I can devote
 - Limited awareness regarding existing professional development opportunities
 - Falls short of my expectations/needs
 - Are not easily accessible
 - Are not relevant to my job/career path
 - Existing resources adequately meet my needs
6. Do you have any suggestions for the graduate school/office of post-doctoral services to help improve existing communication strategies for professional development opportunities at Duke?

Section 2

The following questions explore the willingness for buy in of new communication strategies for professional development opportunities among graduate students and post-doctoral scholars

1. In a scale of 1(least) to 5 (highest), please indicate how likely you are to interact with a student ambassador trained to disseminate professional development opportunities at Duke (e.g. by attending office hours run by the ambassador) -

1	2	3	4	5
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2. In a scale of 1 (least) to 5 (highest), please indicate how likely you are to read a E-newsletter designed to disseminate professional development opportunities at Duke

1 2 3 4 5

3. Rank the following in terms of your potentially preferred communication platform for professional development opportunities
 - Student ambassadors
 - E-newsletter
 - Graduate professional development emails
 - Social media
 - Faculty/ advisors guidance
4. Do you have any suggestion about an innovative communication strategy to enhance awareness of professional development opportunities at Duke?

Section 3

Demographic Information

1. How are you affiliated with Duke
 - Masters Candidate
 - PHD Candidate
 - Post-Doctoral fellow
2. How many years have you been at Duke?

<1 1 2 3 4 5 >5
3. Please select your gender below
 - Female
 - Male
 - Other

Approach 2:

The following section provides details of the E-newsletter

**Duke Graduate School and Office of Postdoctoral Services
Professional Development Email Communications
Email Redesign Plans**

Issue Summary

Duke's Graduate School and Office of Postdoctoral Services currently communicate professional development news through weekly emails that appear in students' and scholars' inboxes every Wednesday or Friday morning. These emails, which usually range in length from 2000-8000 words (5-25 pages of text), provide a comprehensive digest of the following week's opportunities and events, including links to the latest posts on the Graduate School's Professional Development Blog, Graduate School and Career Center events, and additional opportunities on and off campus.

While these emails are well organized and incredibly detailed, they can also be overwhelming, especially since they're reliant on lengthy paragraphs of block text and extensive scrolling. As such, these emails do not allow for quick or easy scanning that might help recipients assess interest and relevance; nor do they encourage sustained engagement through interactive (i.e. clickable) components, such as photos, graphics, or calendars, that could drive users to new resources and/or better sites for information (i.e. the Graduate School's and Postdoctoral Office's websites). Because recipients may find these important emails daunting or unwieldy, they are easily disregarded or overlooked by two of the most important recipient communities they're trying to reach: those who desire information and guidance regarding professional development opportunities and events and those who are unclear as to what professional development is and how it's relevant to their scholarly lives.

Though the Graduate School's and Office of Postdoctoral Services' emails contain the raw materials to help students become more aware of professional development opportunities at Duke, their format and design seems to deter rather than invite recipients to engage with the essential information they seek to communicate. This represents a roadblock to effective dissemination of news and information and a missed opportunity to create community around professional development at Duke. Redesigning these emails and packaging this critical information in more accessible, visually-appealing e-newsletter format, however, could potentially help administrators communicate with their intended graduate student and postdoctoral scholar audiences more effectively.

¹ This document draws heavily from on an e-newsletter redesign planning document created by Aaron Welborn, Director of Communications for Duke University Libraries. The general format and several of the planning and implementation ideas have been used and modified with his permission.

² The conclusions outlined in this paragraph are based primarily on personal interviews with current email recipients, expert interviews with communications professionals at Duke Libraries and the Duke Office of Communication Services, and Emerging Leaders Institute stakeholder interviews whose ideas were compiled into an affinity diagram. Importantly, our team is also developing a communications survey that will help administrators further evaluate the effectiveness of the Graduate School's and the Office of Postdoctoral Services' email communications. This survey will provide essential quantitative data that may strengthen or complicate these conclusions.

E-newsletters are well-established digital “direct marketing” tools that help businesses connect directly with customers in order to introduce new products, increase brand awareness, or incite customers to specific kinds of action.

If the goal of the current professional development weekly email(s) is to connect directly with students and scholars to make them aware of new opportunities, prompt them to sign up for events, and help them to understand the essential role of professional development in their present and future careers; and if the Graduate School and the Office of Postdoctoral Services seek to strengthen the prominence of their professional development programs, a well-designed e-newsletter could represent a powerful tool for direct contact with their primary user audiences and an important opportunity to develop and convey the unique culture of Duke’s professional development services.

Proposed Redesign Plans

Target Audience: Graduate Students and Postdoctoral Scholars

Target Distribution: Weekly, preferably every Wednesday

Goals

- Increase awareness of professional development events and opportunities
- Increase attendance at professional development events
- Increase usage of professional development resources and services
- Direct more digital traffic to Graduate School, Office of Postdoctoral Services, and Career Center websites, blogs, and social media

Regular Content

- Upcoming Events (forums, workshops, talks, etc.)
- From Our Blogs: Featured blog posts (perhaps organized around particular theme of newsletter?)
- Check This Out: Featured article from higher education newspaper/journal
- Did You Know: Featured advice or professional development resource or tool (ex. LinkedIn, Teaching/Mentoring, Networking, etc.)

[Potential Sources of Content: Professional Development Blog, events calendar, online resources, Versatile PhD, Versatile Humanists, Career Center, Chronicle of Higher Education]

Potential Occasional Content

- Alumni Profiles
- Awards and Honors (Recipient Profiles)
- Interdisciplinary Scholarship Opportunities/Profiles (in connection with Provost’s Office?)
- RCR Opportunities/Updates/Highlights
- Chronicle of Higher Education articles ‘of interest’

Guiding editorial principles

- Keep it useful: Give subscribers a short, clickable version of the comprehensive list of information that already goes out to students and postdoctoral scholars. Make sure the initial focus is on events, opportunities, and resources of broad/general interest, and make sure the e-newsletter directs traffic back to the Graduate School and Office of Postdoctoral Services’

websites. Eventually, depending on feedback, there might be opportunities to tailor the e-newsletter to particular audiences either through a specialized design and/or themed issues.

- Cultivate a Professional Development Voice: By developing a unique voice or “personality” for these e-newsletters, we can try to build community around professional development news and opportunities. This voice will help students/scholars identify the relevance of professional development for their unique educational/career pathways.
- Keep it short: Make it quick and easy to scan (rather than comprehensive); and make it quick and easy to assess relevance.

Performance Measures (analytics)

- Clicks: How many people are clicking links in the email? Which links are getting clicks? How can we modify the letter to highlight those links that seem most interesting? How can we rebrand particular kinds of information to make it seem more interesting? (Ex. Can we use a different word for blog?)
- Bounces: How many people don't get the email because it's been rendered undeliverable and/or spam? (Can we assess this?)
- Web Traffic: Are there bumps in the Graduate School and the Office of Postdoctoral Assessment's web traffic based on the e-newsletter?

Budget Considerations

- iContact/MailChimp: These e-newsletter platforms are free to users with less than 10,000 subscribers and should be relatively quick and easy to use. However, these platforms might require more up-front work in order to design emails and/or reformat content.
- Pay-by-subscriber: These platforms require an ongoing per-subscriber fee but often provide designers with better, easier to use “drag and drop” templates.

³The choice of e-newsletter platform will likely affect editorial workflow. Editorial workflow might include identifying and creating content, developing a unique voice/personality, and integrating artwork and/or photos (among other things).

Approach 3

The following section discusses the ambassador program

Duke Graduate School and Office of Postdoctoral Services Professional Development -Ambassador Program

Issue summary:

One major category of issues raised from the ELI stakeholder interview is the lack of opportunities in professional development for graduate students and postdocs. With these issues in mind, our ELI group initially set out to gather information of current running programs from the graduate school, the provost's office, and the postdoc office and career center. During this process, we find there are already many programs implemented with the focus on professional development and preparing students for multiple career options. Therefore, we think the communication between graduate students and the graduate school professional development staff could be enhanced in order to increase student awareness of all the professional development opportunities the graduate school offer.

Background research:

In order to propose a practical program to enhance student-graduate school communication, we reached out to three experts- in communication and student advisory board. The experts included: John Zhu, Senior Public Affairs Officer and Communications Strategist of Duke Graduate School; Emily Daly, Librarian of Perkins Library, who currently leads the graduate and professional student advisory board of the library; and Meredith Casper, who leads the DukeEngage guiDEs program. They all offered insights, regarding marketing strategies and managing a student advisory board, that informed the following proposed plan:

Proposed Plan:

An ambassador program focusing on communication and professional development is proposed here. Basically, every semester/year 15-20 students are recruited for the graduate school professional development advisory board and serve as ambassadors for in-person communication on campus, especially for the students from the program they are currently enrolled in. For implementing this program effectively, a staff member from graduate school is needed to lead this group.

- Potential Recruitment routes:
 - Current student representatives of different programs/GPSC
 - Students actively show-up for graduate school events
 - Student/postdocs receiving career development newsletters
 - Program description on the Graduate school website
- Participants pool: ideally, students from different programs/majors are recruited to represent the majority student/postdoc body of Duke.
- Program contents:
 - Ice-breaking event: introduce the whole program, set the tone for interdisciplinary communication and time commitment to executing the whole program
 - Routinely meeting/training:

- usually 3-times/ semester, 60-90 minutes per meeting is efficient
 - Topic for discussion and timing can be decided and send out before the meeting
 - Potential topics include:
 - website design
 - communication strategies(facebook, e-newsletter, posters)
 - ongoing student concerns
 - feedbacks from events/programs held in that time period
- Holding student/postdoc-only office hours:

This is an official time for student ambassadors to talk about personal experience with professional development at Duke and give other students advice and introduce all the ongoing programs on campus. This can be set for two hours per semester for one ambassador. Each one or two sits in a consistent location in a consistent time, such as Friday afternoon 3-5pm. In total, 15-20 should fit in the schedule of one semester. Students with different concerns can go to talk to student ambassadors. We assume talks between students are easier and more relaxed.
- Incentives for student/postdoc participation:
 - Build personal connection by interacting with dean/ vice dean of the graduate school
 - Make actually changes to the graduate school to serve general student body
 - Develop communication and leadership skills
 - Prestigious program, as ELI
- Potential concerns:
 - Workload of being an ambassador
 - Voices being heard by the graduate school
 - Representation of the different programs (15-20 ambassadors)