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## Reflections From the First Year of a Successful AECT Conference Mentoring Program

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### Abstract

This article reports on the successful first year implementation of a new graduate student mentoring program initiated at the 2009 Louisville convention of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology. This program was [developed](#) by the 2008 ECT Intern class, but will be continued at future conventions by the Leadership Development Committee and the Graduate Student Assembly. Information is provided to potential students and mentors interested in applying for the 2010 program.

## **Reflections From the First Year of a Successful AECT Conference Mentoring Program**

The critical benefits provided by mentoring for developing professionals is well known in many fields (Forehand, 2008; Kirchmeyer, 2005; Luna & Cullen, 1998; Wright & Wright, 1987). Within the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT), several organizations identified a need for enhanced mentoring opportunities for graduate student members. This need exists because students are often enrolled in departments lacking a particular area of expertise. Alternatively, students may be enrolled in a strong department aligned to their interests but would benefit from an outside perspective or personal connection related to their research agenda. Finally, enhanced mentoring and networking opportunities can help students make the professional connections that will forward their careers and keep them engaged within the AECT community.

Because of these desires to improve mentoring within AECT, the 2008 ECT Interns developed a mentoring program to enable selected students to meet experienced researchers, ask questions related to the students' research topics and careers in general, and receive advice. In this article, we report on the activities and evaluation of the first year of this program at the 2009 Louisville convention and goals for continuing the program in the future.

### **Purpose of the AECT Mentoring Program**

The purpose of the mentor program was to give graduate students the opportunity to meet faculty members from various schools in order to gain perspective on professional development issues including research, career development, and academic publishing. Students were selected

through an application process advertised through AECT listservs. The students were then matched according to research interests to one of four experienced faculty mentors:

- Ana Donaldson, University of Northern Iowa
- Andrew Gibbons, Brigham Young University
- Michael Hannafin, University of Georgia
- Sharon Smaldino, Northern Illinois University

The program began with a large-group discussion where the panel of mentors discussed broad issues and general advice about finding effective research topics, improving job marketability, increasing productivity, and balancing student workloads. After the panel discussion, each student met in small-group sessions with their mentors and two to three other students. This experience allowed students to have personal access with faculty members from other schools who had strong expertise in their research area. Each discussion was unique, but mentors typically gave time for each student to ask specific questions and receive feedback related to the challenges they had encountered. To help stimulate the conversation, the students sent their mentors brief summaries of their research topics and the challenges they were facing prior to the conference. This presented a great opportunity for students to establish relationships and make connections with scholars (both the mentors and the other students) who could assist them in the future.

### **Evaluation of the Program's First Year**

Feedback about the program was positive from both the mentors and the mentees. One mentor expressed, "It's an excellent idea to initiate this [mentor] program . . . and I definitely see it becoming a new tradition in the coming years of the [AECT] conference." All of the mentors indicated mostly overall satisfaction with the event and a desire to participate again in the future.

As one mentor said, “Personally I would not change anything, even the timing. I enjoyed it a great deal. Don’t hesitate to ask me again.” The only concerns raised by one mentor revolved around the difficulty of providing specific advice to students in the small groups in such a short period of time, and the challenge stemming from each student within the groups working on very different projects. Thus, finding the right balance between general advice-sharing appropriate to all of the students and more specific mentoring is a potential recommendation for the future.

The mentees also felt the experience was successful and expressed gratitude for the opportunity. Students gave the mentor program a perfect overall evaluation score. Comments included: “The panel discussion was great”, “[The experience was] wonderful!”, and “This [program] is great! Thank you!” At least two of the students found the experience so useful that they asked to assist in organizing the program in the future. There was only one critical comment expressed: “[The](#) group mentor session was difficult due to multiple interest areas.” This again indicated a need to balance the level of specific versus general advice as well as the alignment of research interests.

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Insert Pictures 1 and 2 here  
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### **Future Implementation**

Based on the positive feedback from both mentors and students, there is strong momentum for continuing the program at future AECT conferences. Next year the program will be co-coordinated by the Leadership Development Committee and the Graduate Student Assembly, a collaboration that can hopefully organize the mentoring program for many years to come. We anticipate again having a panel session of four to five mentors discussing general

topics (open to all graduate students) and then breakout roundtable sessions (for students selected through the application process). The call for student applications will come via the AECT Graduate Student email listserv, and the deadline for student applications will be September 1, 2010. Faculty mentors will be selected by invitation through the Leadership Development Committee. If you are interested in being a faculty mentor or student participant, or simply would like more information about the program, please email Cindy York at [cindy.york@gmail.com](mailto:cindy.york@gmail.com). We ask that advisors, faculty members, and previous student participants of the program encourage their student acquaintances to apply for the program and take advantage of just one of the excellent opportunities available for expert mentoring at the AECT annual conference.

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## Figures



*Figure 1.* Andrew Gibbons, Sharon Smaldino, Ana Donaldson, and Michael Hannafin answer questions during the panel discussion.





*Figure 2.* Michael Hannafin offers feedback to students during a small-group breakout session.