PhD Career Ladder Program: An institutional framework for student-led career development

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The Need
• Recent national reports on STEM graduate education (e.g., [1]) highlight the changing scientific career landscape and call for greater attention to career development in graduate education.
• NIH-led BEST institutional transformation efforts have been effective in re-inventing graduate career development, but only at a limited number of institutions and focused in the biomedical sciences (e.g., [2,3]).
• To effect broader change across research institutions, we need a sustainable, cost-effective approach to support student career development.

What is the PhD Career Ladder Program?
• Stony Brook University’s PhD Career Ladder Program, or PCLP, developed by PhD students, for PhD students, shows promise as a nimble, affordable option easily adapted at any institution.
• PCLP is a network of small, graduate-student-led career mentoring groups that follow an IDP-like curriculum.
• Because the program is peer-to-peer:
  o Creates a supportive, learner-centered space career exploration inside and outside of academia; and
  o Fosters confidence, self-efficacy and preparation in the pursuit of diverse careers.

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Curriculum

Structure

- Small group size (5-8 students is best)
- Multi-discipline, multi-career interest
- Held at lunch- or dinner-time, and participants are always fed
- Adaptable for postdocs and non-STEM
- Meets bi-weekly, no longer than 1 semester
- Led by student peer leaders (ideally two co-leaders)
- Participants share their progress each meeting
- Leaders recruited from among participants

Two Year Findings

Participation
• Greatest continuing participation from Biomedical Sciences (39%), followed by Social Sciences (21%), Physical Sciences (18%).
• Participants attend much more regularly with course version

Student Outcomes
• After two years of pre/post testing, participant knowledge and preparation for careers show increases, all significant.
• Participants indicate a greater engagement with and awareness of professional development opportunities at Stony Brook

Institutionalization

PCLP Leadership Program: Meet monthly with student leaders to debrief, address challenges, and foster professional development.

GRD 510: Career Planning for Graduate Students: We piloted a course version that will now be offered by the Graduate School every semester.
• 0 or 1 credit, S/U grading
• Individual sections led by PCLP group leaders
• Reduces participant attrition
• Provides evidence on transcript of student’s commitment to career development

Development Your Own PCLP
PCLP can easily be adapted by student groups or institutions. All it takes is: the curriculum, a student moderator, a room, and some pizza.
To try it at your institution, contact us for a copy of our forthcoming Moderation Guide through our website: stonybrook.edu/phd-career-ladder OR SCAN CODE HERE.