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DISSERTATION HOUSE AS A BEST PRACTICE

CRGE conducts research on how to best support underrepresented minority (URM) scholars in graduate school and beyond. We see Dissertation House, as part of the PROMISE program, as a Best Practice for fulfilling the University's diversity mission and securing UM's role as an institution that produces URM scholars for generations to come. On the following pages, two recent UM graduates, Dr. Alexis Williams and Dr. Sophoria N. Westmoreland, reflect on Dissertation House and explain its value for URM doctoral students' retention and graduation.



Dissertation House as a Best Practice: A Reflection

by

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The PROMISE Alliance for Graduate Education and the Professoriate (AGEP) program is an NSF-funded program that provides multi-level support for completion of the graduate degree. Although the program was initially designed to help underrepresented students of color in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, any graduate student in any discipline can take advantage of the program. One of the major forms of support - and one of my favorite ones - is the Dissertation House program, which was co-founded by UMBC faculty, Drs. Renetta Tull, Janet Rutledge, and Wendy Carter-Veale.

The Dissertation House began as an actual in-house experience at yearly graduate student overnight retreats hosted by the PROMISE program. Advanced graduate students were provided with separate living spaces for several days, and gently coached and encouraged by an expert through the various challenges that they faced, both individually and as a group. Today, the Dissertation House is brought to the University of Maryland system campuses more often as a daytime retreat, and although there is no literal "house" component, the mentorship and support are as strong as ever. The dissertation coach, Dr. Carter-Veale, is still a gentle, no-nonsense encourager that gets students through rough patches. Graduate students make unbelievable progress in a short amount of time and emerge with renewed energy despite - or perhaps due to - the intensity of the the program.

I started participating in the program before I defended my dissertation proposal, while I was struggling with my topic. I saw students who were close to obtaining their degree and I was jealous of how advanced they were.

But they sometimes seemed just as unsure as I was. We all needed mentorship outside of our academic advising to get holistic support and learn the often hidden rules of graduate success from start to finish. For example, I learned through the Dissertation House why my advisor's eyes sometimes glazed over when I responded to her questions about how things were going. (Tip #1: While our advisors care about us, most of the time they really just want to know how the writing is going!). I was told about processes that others may have known such as the basics about budgeting to pay high graduation fees, reserving special patience for completing revisions, and actually submitting the finished dissertation to the graduate school according to its specifications (which do not match any formatting manual I have ever seen).

My understanding of why the Dissertation House experience was so helpful was summarized well at an unrelated talk by Professor Evelyn Hammonds, Dean of Harvard College, who came to speak at one of UMCP's ADVANCE program events. She mentioned how, historically, it was difficult for students of color - especially women in the sciences - to receive the same mentorship from faculty and the same home-like student community that seemed to happen naturally for other high-achieving students, the spontaneous informal coffee break, the first recommendation for a fellowship, or the invitation to a study group. It was not always intentional, but often students of color were not aware of the unwritten rules of graduate school that would help them to receive the same opportunities as other students. In my own experiences, I did not feel excluded deliberately, but I often suffered from impostor syndrome, believing that my program had made a mistake in admitting me

and one day I would be “found out” for pretending to be a capable graduate student.

I realized at Dean Hammonds’ talk how important my experiences with Dissertation House had been for empowering me toward the completion of my degree, and I reflected on its importance even more when the College Park campus almost lost the program during the summer of 2012. As part of a petition to the Graduate School, I summarized some of the aspects of the program that were most important for me. I describe them below in terms of best practices.

In general, the Dissertation House provides graduate students the opportunity to benefit from 1) high expectations and 2) high support and accountability in 3) a safe, structured community setting.

High Expectations

- **Commitment required.** The Dissertation House is free for applicants, but they must apply in advance and include a description of their current research progress along with what they would like to accomplish during the program. They also complete an evaluation of the program afterward.
- **Degree completion focus.** Participants are encouraged so that they can and will complete their degree. The coach has worked with students who were ready to drop out, but when these students renewed their commitment to finishing and met regularly with their coach and mentors, they were successful. I met several students who had not spoken with their advisors in months, but by the end of the Dissertation House week, they had communicated with or even met with their advisors and could not believe how much progress they had made in a short time.

Support and Accountability

- **Goal setting and reflection.** The first morning session of the week consisted of planning our achievable goals that we would display publicly and check off throughout the week. We followed this with a group review and tweaking of everyone’s individual goals. We did this because we tended to set writing goals that were too ambitious, so our coach helped us to be more realistic, and the simpler goals motivated us to keep pushing through each day. We also blogged our weekly and daily goals on the Dissertation House

community webpage and worked for the remainder of the morning. In this way, we were accountable to an even broader community of graduate students and mentors that could check in on and support us. This process was so helpful that many of us continued to blog after the week was over. The blog is still active today with regular posts and updates about students’ successes. The blog community loves to celebrate especially the successful defenses.

- **Organized intervals of activity.** The Dissertation House days are designed for both productivity and reflection. When I participated, we were encouraged to learn the daily routine quickly so that we could start immediately and work efficiently each time we sat down. We also had a scheduled lunch break where students had to leave their work behind and take a mental break. It interrupted the bad habit of skipping needed time away from our work and helped us to nurture our physical needs. We realized that we did have time to eat, and that the regular mental breaks made us more productive overall.
- **Dissertation coach meetings.** At the beginning of the week, everyone signed up for hour-long individual meetings with our dissertation coach mentor and added meetings throughout the week as time permitted. Some of our biggest breakthroughs occurred during these intense meetings.
- **Afternoon “insider information” sessions.** We geared up for afternoon mini-lectures and Q&A by our dissertation coach on subjects like advisor relationships, preparing the proposal or defense, and two-minute descriptions of our dissertations.
- **Protected time.** Overall, the opportunity to work consistently and with guidance throughout the day for several days got us in gear for building a writing habit like nothing else had before.

Safe, Structured Community Setting

- **A safe space.** Participants could talk candidly about their struggles and challenges without worrying about their comments or concerns being shared with their advisors or committee members. We learned to support one another as a community; students with similar concerns could meet one-on-one and continue to support each other.
- **Caring mentors.** In addition to Dr. Carter-Veale,

our in-house dissertation coach, one of the other co-founders, Dr. Tull, stopped by often and would lead some of the sessions, such as practicing free-writing exercises to overcome writer's block. She would also express interest in how students were doing overall. During my final year, she connected me with a postdoc mentor who met with me regularly and celebrated my triumphs; she guided me through some incredibly tough times and shared specific coping mechanisms and writing habits that helped me to finish.

- **Dedicated postdocs.** Finally, the PROMISE

postdoctoral fellows would make themselves available to us and share their expertise and experience. They provided us with a unique viewpoint from just beyond the finish line, and their encouragement and answers to our questions were especially meaningful to us.

Overall, the Dissertation House experience provided what Dean Hammonds recommended by changing an invisible system of mentoring that worked for some people into a visible system of mentoring that worked for everybody. The PROMISE Dissertation House provided exactly what I needed: a space that felt like home.

A Post-PhD Reflection on Dissertation House as a Best Practice

By Sophoria N. Westmoreland, Ph.D.

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I once heard that doctoral programs are regarded as crucibles—you certainly won't come out the way you went in. One definition for crucibles is testing circumstances which are forces that make people change. The summer of 2010 was my crucible experience and I was at the bottom of the furnace smoldering in shadowy black smoke. I spent the first month of that summer failing to launch my dissertation. I would come in to my graduate office every day and spend the day planning what I was going to do and failing to do anything. The clock was ticking. When July rolled around I knew I would get at least 1 weeks' worth of dissertation work done because I had signed up for the PROMISE Dissertation House. I was in for a life altering, rewarding, enlightening, awakening, and powerful experience – to say the least. In reflecting on my three stints in the PROMISE Dissertation House I gained many resources of which I will share three here.

Self Confidence. During the Dissertation House every participant has the chance to meet a few times one-on-one with the resident dissertation coach, Dr. Wendy Carter-Veale. I learned from her that I have the confidence to complete the task before me. At the beginning of the summer of 2010, I was at a crossroads and because I did not have the confidence to choose a path, I stayed at the fork. My advisor was waiting on me to get the work done on my dissertation and I was waiting for her to tell me what to do on my dissertation. I sensed that my advisor was growing frustrated with me and vice versa because I wanted my advisor to be more hands on with me. I sat with Dr. Carter-Veale and cried my eyes out telling her all the things my advisor was not doing for me. Dr. Carter-Veale led me to the truth, which was that I was required to do all those things for myself as a doctoral student. Once those words were spoken to me, I knew I was in control of my dissertation and if I did not take action fast I would never finish. After we laid out a plan for the next academic year, I left our meeting knowing I had a vast amount of work to do but I also left knowing that I had the power within me to press forward. In the fall of 2010, I had several follow-up meetings and was kept accountable for making steps to completing my PhD.

Every doctoral student has different needs but seeks the same prize: a done dissertation. Being an African-American woman in a White male dominated STEM field at a majority White institution, I needed access to a program such as Dissertation House in order to assure my retention and success.

Methods Journal. During the 2011 summer Dissertation House Dr. Carter-Veale provided several resources to the participants, one of which is called a Methods Journal. When I first received the journal I was not sure I wanted to use it because it just meant something else that I would have to carry around. After using the journal and signing the contract with myself, which is included in the journal, I was hooked. The contract I signed says "I, Sophoria N. Westmoreland, commit to finishing my dissertation on this date: April 24, 2012," and "I, Sophoria N. Westmoreland commit myself to doing something for at least 12 minutes each day to move my dissertation forward." I completed my dissertation on March 19, 2012 because I used my journal a minimum of 6 days a week until I was done. The journal served as the perfect place for me to plan the tasks I needed to complete each day and prepare me for the next day without getting hung up on specifics. I was able to keep track of the work I had done and check off tasks that I completed. It might sound simple but I needed the Methods Journal as a tool for my success to finally finishing the PhD.

My Village. Advice they tell every new doctoral student, that every prospective doctoral student should heed, is that no one else will care about your research more than you. The natural result of no one else caring about your research is loneliness. My loneliness resulted in unhealthy eating and sleeping patterns and chronic apathy towards my research. I was searching for a specific connection and I was not finding it in my department or even in the College of Engineering. Although I participated in many activities and programs at the College and departmental levels, something major was missing. One of the requirements during the week of Dissertation House is that participants check-in to the on-line blog. After the summer 2010 Dissertation House, I continued to write blog posts every day updating my dissertation writing status and encouraging others who did the same. We became a virtual family. The blog was a connection to my village; it gave me life.

I came out different and I am a better woman because of my experiences at Maryland and with the Dissertation House. Every doctoral student has different needs but seeks the same prize: a done dissertation. Being an African-American woman in a White male dominated STEM field at a majority White institution, I needed access to a program such as PROMISE Dissertation House in order to assure my retention and success. Prior to my first semester at Maryland, the PROMISE program reached out to me. I would not have been retained had it not been for their many programs, especially the Dissertation House. Dissertation House helped me to realize that my truth is looking at me in the mirror every day and because of that my needs are particular. I am forever grateful that the PROMISE Dissertation House is a part of the course of my life.

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