

# My Grad Journey: An Innovative Online Individual Development Plan (IDP) Tool

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Ensuring student-centered approaches to graduate education is essential for the retention and success of graduate and professional students. Often, it is challenging for students to navigate the unwritten curriculum, especially early in their program. The importance of mentoring and feedback is well-established for graduate students to thrive in academic settings. My Grad Journey is a home-grown, online Individual Development Plan (IDP) system built to help graduate and professional students succeed in their graduate journey through reflection, feedback, and self-advocacy. Though an IDP is a well-accepted tool to help students navigate their graduate journey, many students remain unsure how to gain nuanced feedback from their committee. The National Institute of Health began requirements for IDPs as part of mentoring plans for students supported by funding (NIH, 2014). Vanderford et al. (2018) found that the IDP is most effective when doctoral students complete the tool with faculty mentors with whom they have a positive relationship. Texas A&M University's My Grad Journey System, launched in Fall 2024, is a collaborative project between the Graduate and Professional School, Information Technology, and a campus-wide steering committee of faculty, staff, and students. Its collaborative and inclusive development process has produced a flexible system to serve 17,000+ graduate and professional students in 290+ degree programs in gaining both formal annual review, informal feedback, and supports diverse stakeholder needs. The system has 3 components: the Student Profile, Student Reflection, and Committee Feedback. The Student Profile includes students' academic milestones from existing university databases and allows them to enter other achievements (e.g. publications, awards, trainings). Students initiate committee feedback by submitting a reflection. The system also provides administrators with comprehensive data about all students across programs. We reflect on the development process of a system that benefits many stakeholders to incentivize universal adoption.

*Keywords:* Individual Development Plan; student profile; reflection; faculty feedback

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## Introduction

Ensuring student-centered approaches in graduate education is critical for fostering both the retention and success of graduate and professional students. These approaches prioritize the unique needs, goals, and experiences of students, creating environments where they feel supported, empowered, and engaged. One of the most significant challenges students face, particularly in the early stages of their programs, is navigating the "hidden curriculum": the unspoken norms, expectations, and institutional knowledge that are not formally taught but are essential for academic and professional advancement (Laiduc et al., 2022; Semper et al., 2018; & Smith, 2015). Without clear guidance, students may struggle with imposter syndrome, uncertainty about expectations, and difficulty accessing key resources.

Mentorship and constructive feedback play

a pivotal role in addressing these challenges. Effective mentoring relationships provide students with not only academic guidance but also emotional support, professional development, and access to networks. Feedback, when delivered thoughtfully, helps students refine their skills, build confidence, and stay aligned with their goals (Semper et al., 2018). Together, mentoring and feedback form the backbone of a student-centered educational experience, helping students thrive in complex academic environments and preparing them for diverse career paths. Institutions that invest in these practices are more likely to cultivate inclusive, resilient, and successful graduate communities (Laiduc et al., 2022; Semper et al., 2018; & Smith, 2015).

## Literature Review

The NIH policy outlined in NOT-OD-14-113 builds

upon earlier guidance (NOT-OD-13-093) and formalizes the expectation that institutions use IDPs to support the career development of graduate students and postdoctoral researchers funded by NIH grants. Effective October 1, 2014, this policy required institutions to report on their use of IDPs in Section B.4 of the Research Performance Progress Report (RPPR). NIH encourages all institutions to implement IDPs as structured tools to help trainees explore career options, set goals, and identify the skills and experiences needed to achieve them. While the NIH does not prescribe a specific IDP format, it expects institutions to adopt a consistent approach that aligns with their training environments. The policy emphasizes institutional flexibility, allowing for tailored implementation that reflects the unique needs of each training context while maintaining accountability.

The core objective of the IDP policy is to promote long-term career success for trainees, whether they pursue careers in academia, industry, government, or other sectors. The IDP process fosters regular, meaningful conversations between mentors and mentees about career goals, progress, and professional development needs. Institutions are required to include a brief narrative in their annual RPPRs describing how IDPs are used, not to submit individual plans, but to demonstrate a commitment to career development practices.

This policy aligns with broader NIH workforce development goals, as outlined by the NIH Biomedical Research Workforce Working Group and supports the preparation of trainees for a diverse range of career outcomes. Additionally, external organizations such as the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB) and the Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experiences in Research (CIMER) offer IDP templates and training resources to help institutions implement the policy effectively, further supporting both mentors and mentees in the career planning process.

A 2018 study by Vanderford et al. explores the use and perceived effectiveness of the IDP among doctoral students in the United States. Through a cross-sectional survey, the researchers assessed how frequently IDPs are used, how helpful students find them in clarifying career goals, and how they influence communication with mentors. The study found that while IDPs can be a valuable tool for career planning and professional development, their effectiveness largely depends on institutional support and mentor engagement. Some students reported challenges such as unclear guidance or lack of time, which limited the tool's utility. Overall, the study highlights the potential of IDPs to enhance doctoral training when implemented thoughtfully and supported by academic environments.

In addition to the findings by Vanderford et al. (2018), several other studies support the use of IDPs as effective tools for guiding graduate students' career development (American Psychological Association, n.d.; Chang & Saw, 2021; & National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2019). Research has shown that structured career

planning tools like IDPs can enhance students' ability to set realistic goals, track progress, and engage in meaningful conversations with mentors about their professional trajectories (Chang & Saw, 2021). Personalized education frameworks, which align closely with the principles behind IDPs, have also been found to significantly improve learning outcomes when instruction is tailored to individual needs and goals (American Psychological Association, n.d.). These findings underscore the value of IDPs not only as planning tools but also as mechanisms for fostering self-reflection, accountability, and proactive career management among graduate students.

The use of IDPs in graduate education is further supported by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2019), which emphasizes the importance of structured mentorship and career planning in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine fields. The report highlights IDPs as a best practice for fostering effective mentorship by encouraging regular, goal-oriented discussions between mentors and mentees. By helping students articulate their career aspirations and identify the skills needed to achieve them, IDPs serve as a valuable framework for aligning academic training with long-term professional goals. This structured approach not only enhances the mentoring relationship but also promotes accountability and self-directed learning, which are critical for success in research-intensive environments.

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) offers a robust framework for understanding how graduate students navigate career development through the interplay of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals. Developed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994), SCCT emphasizes that individuals are more likely to pursue careers in fields where they feel confident in their abilities and anticipate positive outcomes. This theory is particularly relevant in graduate education, where students often face complex decisions about specialization, research focus, and long-term career trajectories. According to Brown and Lent (2023), self-efficacy and outcome expectations serve as psychological precursors to career interests and choices, influencing persistence and satisfaction in academic and professional settings. SCCT also accounts for contextual factors such as institutional support and mentorship, which can either facilitate or hinder career progress (Brown & Lent, 2023). By integrating cognitive and environmental variables, SCCT provides a comprehensive lens for supporting graduate students in making informed and adaptive career decisions.

## Project

Launched in Fall 2024, Texas A&M University's My Grad Journey system represents a significant advancement in graduate education support, developed through a collaborative effort between

the Graduate and Professional School and the Division of Information Technology. This home-grown system is designed exclusively to serve the Texas A&M University campus community, supplanting paper-based IDP systems previously used but not necessarily supported or monitored. Our hope in sharing this inclusive and collaborative development process is to inform other institutions as they work to develop similar platforms to support the individual development of graduate and professional students.

The inclusive and collaborative development process with a diverse steering committee composed of faculty, staff, and students from across the university ensured that the system was designed with flexibility and scalability in mind, enabling it to effectively serve over 17,000 graduate and professional students enrolled in more than 290 degree programs. My Grad Journey facilitates both formal annual reviews and informal feedback exchanges, making it a valuable tool for a wide range of stakeholders, including students, faculty advisors, and departmental or college administrators.

The system is structured around three core components: Student Profile, Student Reflection, and Committee Feedback. The Student Profile aggregates academic milestones from existing university databases from student information systems and allows students to supplement this system information with self-reported

achievements such as publications, awards, and professional development activities. The Student Reflection component empowers students to initiate feedback by submitting thoughtful reflections on their progress, goals, and challenges. This, in turn, prompts the Committee Feedback process, where faculty advisors and committee members can provide structured, timely input. Additionally, the system offers administrators a comprehensive, real-time overview of student progress across programs, enhancing data-driven decision-making and resource allocation.

By reflecting on the development and implementation of My Grad Journey, the university highlights how a thoughtfully designed digital platform can streamline communication, foster student agency, and support institutional goals. The system's ability to meet the diverse needs of its users positions it as a model for other institutions aiming to improve graduate student support and engagement, while its collaborative origins help build buy-in and incentivize widespread adoption.

## Results

Since launching the system in fall 2024, 300 graduate and professional students have logged into the system with 127 making updates to their profile (Fig. 1). Fifty-six students have completed a feedback cycle with their graduate committee faculty within the first months of launching the

**Figure 1**  
My Grad Journey Landing Page



Though usage is limited to relatively small numbers given the size of the institution and limited time since launch, feedback has been excellent from diverse groups of users. Below are quotes from graduate deans, graduate faculty, students, and staff who have used the system

and see potential positive impacts on student outcomes.

Faculty often complain that they are unable to track the progress of students under their supervision. My Grad Journey will offer the kind of one-stop visibility that can enhance mentoring and facilitate better conversations

about paths toward degree completion. Adam Seipp, Associate Dean for Graduate Studies, College of Arts and Sciences

Being on the My Grad Journey steering committee as a graduate student was a gift, as I felt like I was able to provide a graduate student voice in a system that is being designed for us. My feedback was always taken and implemented immediately, and I am grateful to have made an impact that will last for years to come!" Delaney Couri, Doctoral Candidate, Department of Communication, Texas A&M University

The My Grad Journey system provides the tool that we've been missing for graduate program success. Certainly, there is added support for students and faculty to clearly communicate about accomplishments and expectations on an annual basis, but there is an added benefit of access to details that can improve how administrators, faculty, and staff approach assessment of student learning outcomes, program reviews, and strategic planning. David Kessler, Director of Graduate Studies, College of Arts and Sciences

I am excited about the opportunity to use 'My Grad Journey' as a tool to support my students. It is extremely helpful to have quick access to an accurate list of the students I am guiding! Theresa Murphrey, Professor, Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences

The My Grad Journey Steering Committee has been instrumental in guiding the development of this project. This diverse group of faculty, staff, and students meets monthly to discuss current development efforts, provide feedback on direction, and determine future needs. A working group of departmental and college-level users has also been formed to guide the development of data dashboards and downloads. All meetings for these groups are virtual, with agendas, notes, and presentations shared in a Google folder. Feedback from all users is gained through a shared mailbox with anonymous feedback shared through a Google form. Feedback is reviewed by the development team and used to continue to improve the system.

### **Discussion**

Despite strong support in the literature for the use of IDPs among graduate and professional students, actual engagement with these tools remains low—even when mandated by organizations such as the National Institutes of Health (Vanderford et al., 2018; Chang & Saw, 2021; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019; American Psychological Association, n.d.). This gap highlights the need for more accessible

and student-centered approaches to structured mentoring, feedback, and self-reflection. By developing a platform that facilitates meaningful, ongoing feedback between students and faculty, institutions can enhance students' academic and career development, ultimately improving time to degree and overall graduate success.

### **Limitations**

The My Grad Journey system was exclusively developed for the graduate community at Texas A&M University. However, the lessons learned in the development and design process as well as a student-centered approach to driving feedback from graduate committee faculty has implications for other institutions.

### **Recommendations**

Institutions engaging in this type of project development should consider a shared governance approach in order to best meet the unique needs of stakeholders. Creating strong partnerships with service groups such as technology services is critical to the success of the project.

Future development of the My Grad Journey system includes continued refinement of the profile, reflection and feedback cycle, and user dashboards. The team will also consider how to import data from other sources such as customer relationship management platforms for professional development.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, My Grad Journey exemplifies a student-centered innovation in graduate education that addresses the critical need for structured mentoring, feedback, and self-reflection. By offering a flexible, scalable, and collaborative platform, the system empowers students to navigate the often opaque expectations of graduate school while fostering meaningful engagement with their mentors.

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) is vital for supporting IDPs in graduate education because it helps students align personal goals, self-efficacy beliefs, and environmental supports to make informed, adaptive decisions about their academic and professional trajectories (Brown et al., 2023). Grounded in research that underscores the value of IDPs and supported by national initiatives such as the NIH's IDP requirement, My Grad Journey not only aligns with best practices but also enhances them through its integrated design. Its thoughtful development and broad stakeholder involvement position it as a model for institutions seeking to improve graduate student success, retention, and satisfaction through intentional, data-informed support systems.

Phase three of My Grad Journey, which includes the development of administrator dashboards, new data feeds of professional development by students, and additional enhancements identified by the steering committee and users of the system,

remains an important part of serving our graduate community in the future.

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