New Data Offer a Rosier Picture of Ph.D.-Completion Rates

By JOHN GRAVOIS

By the time the 10th anniversary of their enrollment in a Ph.D. program has rolled around, about 57 percent of doctoral students have their terminal degrees in hand, according to new data scheduled for release today by the Council of Graduate Schools.

That figure represents the latest and most comprehensive stab at measuring American Ph.D.-completion rates, which conventional wisdom has placed at about 50 percent since the 1970s -- a statistic that some observers in higher education have called scandalous because of the waste of time and resources that it signifies. The new data, which come from preliminary findings of the council's Ph.D. Completion Project, suggest a slightly more optimistic picture.

The most interesting of the council's findings is the suggestion that the 10-year mark may be too soon to write off some students as noncompleters.

In some fields -- mainly engineering and the hard sciences -- most people complete their Ph.D.'s after six or seven years of doctoral study. After that, the percentage of students who have completed their degrees begins to level off. However, in the social sciences and in the humanities, even into the eighth, ninth, and 10th years of study, the percentage of students who have completed their degrees slowly but doggedly continues to rise.

Trends in the data suggest that still more humanists and social scientists may complete their degrees after 11 or even 12 years in Ph.D. programs, according to Daniel Denecke, program director for the project. Those findings may call into question the wisdom of setting time limits on doctoral study, as some universities do, said Mr. Denecke.

This stage of the Ph.D. Completion Project is a study of doctoral completion and attrition rates at about 30 public and private universities across the country. To provide a first glimpse of data from the project, the council has released a set of statistics on Ph.D. completion and attrition rates broken down by field of study, along with a report on exit surveys of doctoral students who have completed their degrees. Later stages of the project will study the effects that different interventions have on completion rates.
The council drew its data from doctoral students who began studying for Ph.D.'s from 1992 to 1995.

**Low Completion, High Attrition**

The humanities have the lowest completion rates of any field, and the social sciences are not far behind, the study found. However, mathematics and the physical sciences have the highest attrition rates. Those may have something to do with the career opportunities that might have lured, say, computer scientists away from academe in the mid-1990s, Mr. Denecke suggested.

Earlier studies have suggested that graduate programs with small numbers of doctoral students yielded better Ph.D.-completion rates than those with large numbers. Not so, say the council's data. Over all, the difference between completion rates for disciplines with large and small numbers of students is insignificant. In some individual fields, however, size does make a difference. In engineering, smaller is slightly better; in the life sciences, smaller is slightly worse.

The same goes for the difference between completion rates at public versus private universities. Higher-education researchers have long thought that private universities yielded better Ph.D.-completion rates than public universities did, presumably because the private institutions tended to have deeper pockets for grants, stipends, and other aid. But the council's study found little difference between the completion rates at the two types of universities. Public institutions, in fact, fared slightly better.

To Chris Golde, an associate vice provost for graduate education at Stanford University and a longtime researcher on doctoral completion rates, that last finding is surprising because it suggests that attrition is not all about money.

Money was, however, high on the minds of the people who completed the council's exit survey after earning their Ph.D.'s. Eighty percent of those respondents said that financial support was the main factor that had enabled them to complete their doctoral programs. In Ms. Golde's mind, those two statistics are not irreconcilable.

Money, she said, "may help people complete, but that doesn't mean that [lack of money] is the reason people leave."