



Strategic Intervention For Doctoral Completion

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Strategies for Admitting the Right Students to Doctoral Study

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BACKGROUND

This publication is a product of a larger study to improve doctoral completion. The study was funded by Pfizer and the Ford Foundation, sponsored by the Council of Graduate Schools, and piloted by The University of Georgia in partnership with the University of Florida and North Carolina State University. Thirty seven programs from the three universities participated in the study. All intervention activities, supporting the study, were framed within four conditions which are necessary for doctoral completion. The conditions, which were drawn from the existing literature on doctoral completion are:

- the right people apply for doctoral study;
- the right applicants are admitted as doctoral students;
- students and faculty form productive working relationships;
- students experience social support from other students.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this publication is to provide valuable strategies to doctoral programs, for admitting the right students to doctoral study (Condition 2). In this case, “right” students pertains to applicants who were properly screened and oriented to their programs (Strategic Intervention for Doctoral Completion Grant Proposal, 2004).

METHOD

These strategies were developed from the activities implemented by the 37 programs participating in the study. Analyses of the activities revealed programs implemented an eclectic mix of strategies to meet or improve the four previously stated conditions. The central theme that emerged from the analyses was: *creating opportunities for improvement*. This publication addresses only the strategies for improving Condition 2. Strategies for Conditions 1, 3, and 4 are addressed in separate

publications. Italicized quotes are excerpts from the programs’ reports.

STRATEGIES FOR ADMITTING THE RIGHT STUDENTS TO DOCTORAL STUDY

1. Provide opportunities for prospective students to evaluate the program for “fit”. Programs implemented a number of strategies to help potential students determine if the program of their interest is appropriate based on their life situations, personal interests, career aspirations, and the program’s offerings. For example, at least a third of the participating programs invite applicants to visit their campuses. Programs use these occasions to provide applicants with as much information about: faculty research; program support, structure, and expectations; sources of funding; university social life; and potential career opportunities. Potential students are encouraged to ask questions from and about faculty and, in some cases, the programs invite current students to act as hosts or guides to prospective students. This is an invaluable strategy as it gives prospective students the opportunity to evaluate the programs via the perspective of current students. Conversely, these visits also give program administrators and faculty the opportunity to better assess a prospective student’s compatibility with the program.

2. Consider applicants’ interest and needs. It is a common assumption that interest sparks enthusiasm. It is also an equally common belief that when people’s interest and needs are met, they are likely to be more satisfied. Programs are applying this reasoning in their admission decision process. One program has gone so far as to “*revise program applications to include more details about students’ interests*”, so that faculty and administrators are better equipped to admit students to the programs that are most beneficial to them.

3. Involve applicants’ support system. Programs are aware doctoral study is a monumental investment of personal and financial resources. Consequently,

students cannot do it alone. Completion of the doctorate requires a “team effort” by faculty, students, advisors, university personnel, and students’ other support system outside of the university. In the admission stage, program administrators and faculty have very limited personal knowledge about applicants and may not be as fully equipped to help them make that important decision about program choice. Programs need the help of others who have closer and longer relationships with the applicants. These individuals are likely to have insiders’ knowledge about the applicants’ interests, plus a keener perspective of the applicant’s compatibility with the program. Thus, they can provide valuable insights to help the applicants make the most informed decisions. Therefore, some programs are involving student applicants’ families, friends, and key supporters in the process. They are creating opportunities for inclusion so that students’ supporters can visit and participate in university campus events. This strategy has dual benefits. It helps applicants choose programs that are in synch with their interests, and simultaneously encourages and build much needed student support outside the program.

4. Establish early communication between potential students and faculty. Faculty members are some of the key sources of information about program characteristics. In some instances, they are also heavily involved in admission decisions. To make better admission decisions, programs are opening lines of communication between potential students and faculty members, earlier in the application process. The logic is that early and frequent interaction between student applicants and faculty members, who are knowledgeable about the workings of doctoral study, will lead to better admission decisions.

5. Involve current students in the admission process. Increasingly, programs are becoming more aware that students’ involvement in program management generates enormous payoffs for students, faculty members the programs and the university. One program has taken the unusual step of involving current students in the admission process by soliciting students’ feedback about their admission experiences, through focus groups. The aim is to help faculty and program administrators “*determine success needs of future students.*”

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