



Strategic Intervention for Optimal Doctoral Completion

Critique of Research Series

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Ali, A., & Kohun, F. (2007). Dealing with social isolation to minimize doctoral attrition—a four stage framework. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 2(1), 33-49.

Critique by Krista Haynes

Summary

This study proposes a framework for reducing feelings of isolation in doctoral students in an attempt to reduce the current rate of doctoral attrition (approximately 50% overall). The authors draw from Beeler's (1991) model of the stages of doctoral completion, positing that if social isolation occurs, it will usually cause attrition between completion of course work and anticipation of the comprehensive exams. The point when the comprehensive exams are taken and the dissertation proposal is required is a highly stressful time and feelings of social isolation may cause the student to feel defeated. Reasons for social isolation include vague information about program requirements, lack of administrative support, and lack of policy for social integration.

According to the authors, one solution to attrition caused by social isolation may be to offer face-to-face orientations during the first semester so that students would receive in-depth information about expectations as well as make contact with department faculty. Another means of reducing social isolation is to create a cohort experience in which the students become a team, working through the program together. The stress of facing the comprehensive exams may be lessened through a focus group structure where students study together for the exams. Dissertation writing may be less stressful if isolation is reduced by structuring so that students work through stages, receiving feedback from mentors and other students during each stage.

Reaction

I appreciated the in-depth treatment of the topic by the authors. There was discussion of what social isolation is and how it impacts progress toward the

Ph.D., as well as reasonable suggestions for solutions. The timeline given seems appropriate. It is known that doctoral attrition increases with the length of time in the program. There was no discussion of funding. I think it is likely that university funding of graduate students provides opportunities for relationships with mentors and other funded students that would reduce the sense of isolation. Students that do not receive funding or do not receive enough funding to provide adequate support for daily life may feel isolated by being unable to stay on campus for social meetings and study groups. These students would most likely not have opportunities for working closely with faculty mentors as teaching or lab assistants do.

The solutions presented seem like good advice for universities and there is some evidence that they produce results as specific examples of their use were given. But these examples were specific to individual institutions and no studies involving more than one institution were cited. Each institution or academic department would have to work out situations that are manageable within their own time and resource budgets. Above all, individuals who are responsible for mentoring doctoral students must care enough to provide information and support that is needed. In my experience, some departments have a climate that support students well, but others expect the student to be responsible for finding information and asking questions that will lead to successful completion on their own. Perhaps a more integrative approach by all departments can be mandated by university administration.