



Strategic Intervention for Optimal Doctoral Completion

Critique of Research
Series

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Clewell, B. C. (1987). Retention of black and Hispanic doctoral students. *GRE Board Report No. 83-4R, ETS Research Report 87-10.*

Critique by Krista Haynes

Summary

Clewell reports on a study that attempted to determine factors influencing persistence of minority graduate students (particularly doctoral students) and to determine the role of institutional policies and practices in Black and Hispanic students' persistence. She concluded that minority persisters' parents' educational backgrounds were similar, but were higher than the Black and Hispanic population in general and lower than the white population in general. Persisters' families displayed a strong emphasis on the value of education. Persisters were high achievers in high school. Clewell concluded that persisters in this study were those whose comments about their high school or undergraduate achievements showed a high degree of self-confidence. They also maintained that they received a high degree of support from their major advisors. Approximately 75% of this group reported integration into the profession by presenting papers and publishing articles. Clewell suggests that the personal characteristic of having a determination to succeed was prevalent since many persisters reported a desire to leave the program at some point.

Reaction

The report is helpful in identifying some characteristics of and some influences on Black and Hispanic persisters to the doctorate. However, though they attempted to include nonpersisters in the survey sample, none participated, so their voices are not included in the report. This leaves a large hole that continues to be prevalent in studying doctoral attrition. Clewell admits that the sample of 63 persisters they were able to obtain is not as large as it needed to be for strong support of the conclusions.

This can be of some use for attempting to reduce doctoral attrition rates in that none of the persisters reported that they succeeded in spite of little support from their faculty mentor. It also provides some evidence that personal characteristics and family background are important for minority student success in doctorate programs. This may play a role in interviews affecting admission decisions. It does not tell us whether strong faculty mentorship would help a minority student who did not have a positive family influence toward education or high self-esteem.