



# Strategic Intervention for Optimal Doctoral Completion

Critique of Research  
Series

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## **Anderson, M. S., & Swazey, J. P. (1998). Reflections on the graduate student experience: An overview. *New Directions in Higher Education*, 101, 3-13.**

*Critique by Krista Haynes*

### **Summary**

Anderson and Swazey share insight gained from a survey of doctoral students by the Acadia Institute's Project on Professional Values and Ethical Issues in the Graduate Education of Scientists and Engineers. The survey includes 1,440 respondents selected randomly from ninety-nine departments of chemistry, civil engineering, microbiology, and sociology in major research universities in the U.S. Students were asked to report their level of agreement with 5 questions:

- Why do students go to graduate school?
- What do doctoral students think of their academic work?
- How do doctoral students view the climate of their department?
- How does the doctoral experience affect students?
- How do doctoral students view their future degree completion and career?

The results of the survey suggest that there is room for improvement in doctoral programs, both academically and socially. Most students reported that they entered doctoral programs to gain skills to be helpful to others. Many students reported that their experience changed them in ways they did not like. Over a third of the respondents said that they sometimes felt that entering their doctoral program was a mistake. Many students were also dissatisfied with student evaluations and faculty expectations. The majority said that they were bothered by role conflicts, feeling that they had too many people to satisfy and had difficulty prioritizing the expectations of faculty. Anderson and Swazey suggest that

“faculty members collectively and individually have a responsibility for improving the experiences of their graduate students” (p. 12).

### **Reaction**

This provides an overview of what doctoral students in the programs represented think of their experiences. It would be somewhat helpful to faculty members in the majors represented, but it leaves out the humanities, where student experiences may be quite different. While the nature of the survey provided some insight for improvement, it offers only vague understandings of how graduate students really feel since they did not have the opportunity to comment on their answers. The finding that students feel their doctoral experience changed them in ways they did not like is very intriguing and calls for elaboration. The fact that most students' primary goal was to help others indicates that a social climate is important to most doctoral students.

This study did not include any completers or non-completers of doctoral programs. All respondents were actively pursuing their degrees. Therefore, we don't really know if the responses indicate that students will or will not complete their programs. The surveyors did state that ninety-four percent of respondents reported that they were at least somewhat certain that they would finish. I don't think this is surprising coming from those still in their programs. However, we do know that the sciences boast only about a 60% retention rate nationally, so this look at how doctoral students still pursuing degrees feel has some value for showing that there is room for improvement.