



Strategic Intervention for Optimal Doctoral Completion

Critique of Research
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Attiyeh, G. (1999). Reflections Determinants of persistence of graduate students in Ph.D. programs. Princeton, NJ: GRE Board Research Report 95-18R.

Critique by Krista Haynes

Summary

The focus of this report is a longitudinal database of students enrolled in doctoral programs from 1989 to 1993. Attiyeh expects to determine patterns of persistence in doctoral study in five disciplines (biochemistry, economics, English, mathematics, and mechanical engineering). The range of this study covered the first four years of doctoral study for 8,138 students in 31 schools in the Association of American Universities/Association of Graduate Schools (AAU/AGS). The data was retrieved from the AAU/AGS database. Attiyeh reports that Ph.D. program persistence depends on three primary variables (aptitude/achievement, financial support, and demographic variables). He concluded that:

- Students in more selective programs are more likely to persist to graduation,
- Higher GRE quantitative and verbal ability scores are indicative of success,
- Students holding master's degrees are more likely to persist than those who enter doctoral programs without a master's degree,
- Greater financial support in the first year are more likely to persist,
- Within the financial support category, assistantships yield higher persistence rates than fellowships
- Older students have slightly higher persistence rates

There is no consistent pattern of persistence based on demographic characteristics (citizenship, gender and ethnicity).

Reaction

The conclusions of this report are not surprising since the same characteristics that were reported to produce higher persistence rates are those with which we equate success in life in general. Those who have more money are more likely to succeed at their goals. Those who make better grades are rewarded in a myriad of ways that lead to greater self-esteem and more opportunities. I would like to see more information on personal interaction within academic disciplines. Would it not be reasonable to assume that departments that can support students on assistantships would be able to choose applicants with the highest GRE scores and that these students would be held in the highest esteem and, therefore, receive more positive attention from mentors and other students? And would more positive attention support persistence?

This is a GRE Board Research Report. Does that influence the data that showed that aptitude/ability influences whether a student can persist in doctoral study?

The data was reported by schools; therefore, conclusions are being drawn on quantitative data which is certainly pertinent, but it does not include any opinions from students. I think a study that takes both longitudinal data and qualitative data into account may give the most complete information about reasons for doctoral program completion.