Bair, C. R., & Haworth, J. G. (1999). Doctoral student attrition and persistence: A meta-synthesis of research. ASHE Annual Meeting Paper, San Antonio, TX. Nov. 18-21, 1999.

Critique by Krista Haynes

Summary

The authors point out the lack of information on students who have already left doctoral programs, forcing the majority of data to focus on characteristics of those who do complete doctoral programs than on characteristics of those who drop out. They attempt to synthesize the literature on doctoral program attrition to include information from and about those who are already gone (cites over 160 sources). Persistence rates are higher in the natural sciences than in social sciences and humanities. Bair and Haworth connect that difference to funding and socialization, pointing out that, not only are there fewer assistantships available, but also that research in the social sciences and humanities is often done alone. Time to degree is also an important factor in whether the degree is completed – the longer it takes to complete, the more likely students will drop out. Students were significantly more likely to complete degrees where there were positive and supportive mentor relationships. Examples of lack of supportive relationships included inaccurate or inadequate advising, lack of advisors' interest or attention, lack of availability of advisor or conflict between student and advisor or other faculty. There is a lack of qualitative studies including input from students who have left their programs. The authors call for longitudinal studies that could include more information on events that occur all along the course of study.

Reaction

I feel that Bair and Haworth made an excellent attempt to synthesize the literature available on doctoral student attrition to include both quantitative sources and qualitative sources. The greatest weakness I see in studying reasons for doctoral attrition is the lack of access to those who have left their program since often there is a significant time lapse before the program realizes students do not intend to return. This paper stresses the need for a database that will include information on and from those who have left, but identifying them and getting them to complete questionnaires may be difficult. I would like to know whether lack of completion results in low self-esteem and depression that might keep non-completers from answering surveys candidly. It may never be possible to understand all of the nuances surrounding reasons students leave doctoral programs, but I think that schools and departments could make an impact by creating policies based on the information available. Even so, there is still the human personality factor to complicate any policies that may be developed – one cannot necessarily make a faculty member whose personality is not outgoing or sensitive to others change her ways.