



# Strategic Intervention for Optimal Doctoral Completion

Critique of Research  
Series

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**Lovitts, B. E. (2001). *Leaving the ivory tower: The causes and consequences of departure from doctoral study*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.**

*Critique by Krista Haynes*

## Summary

Lovitts presents a view of doctoral student attrition as being extremely complex, a departure from what she states is a fundamental misconception about attrition: That it is the fault of the student who was under-qualified, disinterested or unfocused. This misconception has resulted from the difficulty in hearing from those who do not complete because they are gone from the midst of the academy and because they feel responsible for their failure and so refrain from raising their voices to accuse academia itself. She conducted a study that included surveys of non-completers and concluded that attrition is largely due to a breakdown in the academic integration that needs to occur to support doctoral students to completion. Academic integration includes having enough information about program requirements and department processes as well as socioemotional support systems involving faculty and other students.

Lovitts proposes that universities must change their cultures and climates to reduce doctoral attrition rates. This can only be done by opening channels of communication with current and exiting students. Ways of achieving better communication include ongoing focus-group discussions with current students, comprehensive maps of graduate education provided at pre-admission interviews and at face-to-face orientations, and better integration with faculty and professional organizations at the department level. She places a strong emphasis on the student/advisor relationship, stating that students need more information about advisors and assurance that they may change advisors. In addition, institutions must raise faculty consciousness regarding their role as supportive of their students and police faculty

conduct, responding when graduate students are abused.

## Reaction

Lovitts' has provided the most comprehensive description of reasons for and solutions to doctoral attrition that I have read to date. It is unfortunate that any study of this type will be somewhat incomplete since it is never possible to receive responses from all non-completers of doctoral programs. Lovitts' devotion to her topic because of her own experience is obvious and has succeeded in creating a noteworthy position.

I believe this work has provided some sound advice for an institution to use as a starting place to tackle doctoral attrition. Certainly student personalities and personal situations need to be considered in acclimation and integration to graduate programs. It is not realistic to assume that all high-achievers will react the same way to all educational climates or that all faculty members will treat students the same, but adjustments to university climates should affect the drop-out rate positively. Disciplines need to examine their norms, values and beliefs about how to conduct graduate education as well as the social structures fostered by departmental relationships in order to determine whether more supportive cultures can be created.