



# Strategic Intervention for Optimal Doctoral Completion

Critique of Research  
Series

Volume I, Issue 10  
Fall 2008

**Nelson, C., & Lovitts, B. (2001). Ten ways to keep graduate students from quitting. Retrieved July 18, 2008, from: <http://chronicle.com/free/v47/i42/42b02001.htm>.**

*Critique by Krista Haynes*

## Summary

The quickest way to relieve the doctoral student attrition rate and assure enough future teachers, according to Nelson and Lovitts, is to encourage students currently pursuing doctoral degrees to finish them. They claim that institutions have been wasteful in failing to support students and that doctoral dropout damages people, forcing them to rework their lives when they feel most demoralized by their sense of failure. The authors feel strongly that it is more likely institutions that have failed at retaining good students. The article offers several solutions to doctoral attrition including the following:

- Provide balanced information about program requirements
- Encourage prospective candidates to visit campus
- Require prospective students to provide more detailed reasons for choosing their program prior to admission
- Expect students not working in labs to teach
- Pay a living wage to research and teaching assistants
- Monitor advising relationships
- Offer opportunities for professional growth
- Create a hospitable departmental environment
- Conduct exit interviews

## Reaction

This is a clear and concise plea to institutions of higher education to take doctoral attrition seriously while offering some viable ways to fix it. Some of the steps would be easy to do at the University of

Georgia. The authors ask that department web sites not only advertise their attributes, but also that they be honest about attrition rates, time commitments, degree requirements and cost of living in the area. It is not unreasonable to expect doctoral applicants to spend some time visiting campus and to write a detailed statement of why they chose the program in which they will spend five to seven years of their lives. It should not be too much to ask departments to monitor advising relationships and to identify current students to act as student mentors. Asking departments to offer hospitable environments should not be difficult, but this depends on the personalities of faculty and staff, which is not always easy to judge at hiring or to change afterward.

The financial commitments would be difficult in a climate of educational budget cuts. I fear the only way we could support each and every doctoral student as teaching or research assistants with a living wage would be to force some departments to admit fewer applicants. Part of relief for students' financial burdens would be for departments to pay for subscriptions to professional journals and membership in professional organizations. This would help students to feel a part of the culture and assist with contacts for professional development and future careers.

Conducting exit interviews would be very helpful if we could only identify those who are dropping out before they are out of reach. Interviews with those who have just graduated may still not yield completely honest answers, since graduates are still dependent on faculty mentors for letters of recommendation.