



Strategic Intervention for Optimal Doctoral Completion

Critique of Research
Series

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Smallwood, S. (2004). Doctor dropout. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved June 8, 2008, from: <http://chronicle.com>.

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Summary

Smallwood feels that attrition from Ph.D. programs is claiming a high price on the academy, funding programs and non-completing students. He is convinced that many faculty feel that doctoral attrition is necessary to insure the quality of their professions and that those who *should* finish *do*. He reports that the Council of Graduate Schools has recognized that attrition is a serious problem and that correcting it would be important to the academy overall. He cites the work of Dr. Peter Diffley, Associate Dean of the Graduate School at Notre Dame, who reported that 10 years of data show that there is no academic difference between students who complete and those who do not, concluding that there must be reasons for attrition that can be corrected. In addition to great financial investments, attrition takes a terrible toll on the students who do not finish. Special populations of concern are women and minorities. Both groups drop out at a higher rate than white males, depleting the diversity of the resulting workforce.

Reaction

Smallwood did a good job of pulling together concise information and conclusions from several studies to make his point: Some attrition is necessary, but much can be avoided if universities stop blaming students and take responsibility for change. He makes a strong impact at the very beginning by pointing out that "On the first day of Graduate School, everyone is still a success." It is true that doctoral students are the cream of the applicant pool – only the best are chosen based on undergraduate gpa, entrance test scores, recommendations of faculty peers, and, sometimes, interviews.

So what is wrong with the process? There must be something that colleges can do to keep more students until they graduate.

How it helps us: Smallwood suggests that data on attrition rates by program should be available to prospective students. Perhaps the selection process needs to be expanded by focusing more on informing students about programs than selling programs in order to insure better fit. Studies have shown that science programs have lower attrition rates than humanities. This may be due to the relationship with a mentor from the very beginning. Many humanities do not establish a faculty mentor relationship until the student has completed much of the program and sometimes there may be not be a good fit.

Funding is an important factor. Washington University in St. Louis reports that completion rates in the humanities doubled after the school shifted to a practice of admitting only as many Ph.D. candidates as they could support on fellowships or teaching assistantships. Administrators need to understand that most students cannot sustain self-support for the length of time it takes to complete a doctorate and adjust budgeting to help.