



The University of Georgia

The Graduate School

TECHNICAL REPORT

Reasons for Doctoral Attrition

by Krista N. Haynes

July 2008

BACKGROUND

Doctoral student drop-out represents an immense waste of both individual and institutional resources (Smallwood, 2004). Taking a macro-political view, Gilliam and Kritsonis (2006) suggest that “higher education must be committed to the success of its doctoral students, who collectively represent a stronghold on the nation’s progress and superiority” (p. 3). On a more personal level, with competition increasing in job markets, an undergraduate degree is a minimal requirement; higher degrees are required for better-paying jobs and those that provide opportunity for self-actualization.

Although there has been much attention given to *undergraduate* completion rates in U.S. universities, prior to the 2000s, little has been paid to doctoral student completion (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008; Haworth, 1996; Lovitts, 2001). In 2008, the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) reported that, although there had been no nationwide longitudinal studies over a wide range of disciplines, smaller studies indicated that close to half of all U.S. doctoral students failed to graduate. Completion rates varied by field of study, from approximately 33.4% in the humanities and social sciences to 76% in the biomedical and behavioral sciences.

There are many factors that may correlate with doctoral completion, including GRE scores, financial support, selectivity of program, and student age (Attiyeh, 1999). Ali and Kohun (2007) proposed a framework for reducing feelings of isolation in doctoral students in an attempt to reduce attrition. Bair and Haworth (1999) also noted isolation as a factor in doctoral program attrition. Other

reasons for doctoral drop-out include student frustration with academic policies, disappointment with advising, and alienating departmental climates (Haworth, 1996).

A major gap in the study of doctoral attrition is an adequate understanding of why doctoral students drop-out (Bair & Haworth, 1999, Lovitts, 2001). The majority of available data focus on characteristics of students who *do* complete rather than those who drop out. Many studies have simply counted numbers, while some include feedback from faculty and/or current doctoral students. Only one, Lovitts (2001), employed a significant amount of feedback from students who had left their programs. The purpose of this study is to understand reasons why doctoral students fail to complete their studies at the University of Georgia (UGA).

METHODS

Population

The population of interest for this study was 144 students identified by administrative records as being non-completers of doctorate programs at the University of Georgia. A non-completer is defined as having more than two semesters of non-registration. The population of respondents for the study consisted of the Graduate Coordinators (GCs) for each of the 144 students identified as non-completers. GCs are appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School upon recommendation by the heads of their academic departments and the Deans of their academic colleges. The GC’s role is to implement policies and procedures adopted by the Graduate Council related to graduate education at UGA, including recommendations for admission, maintenance

of files on graduate students, and monitoring student progress toward degree completion. In some universities this position is known as the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS).

Data Collection

Data were collected twice: once in January 2008 to cover fall 2007 enrollment and again in September 2007 to cover spring and summer 2008 enrollment. Once the 144 non-completing students were identified, the GC of each of the doctoral programs was contacted in writing (Appendix A) by the Dean of the Graduate School and asked to supply a reason for non-completion using a form on a password protected Web site. Rather than provide a checklist that would result in facile responses, open-ended questions were asked and data categorized after the fact. GCs who did not respond were contacted a second time.

After two mailings, we received reports for 82 of the 144 students, a response rate of 57%. The data were compiled into an Excel spreadsheet and prepared for analysis. The reasons provided by GCs for student attrition were subjected to qualitative content analysis, allowing responses to be assigned to meaningful categories.

FINDINGS

The single largest category “non-completers” consisted of 21 individuals who had not actually left their programs but were misidentified by errors in the administrative data. Most of the students in this group had re-enrolled or were late enrolling for the term during which the data were gathered, placing them in violation of the Graduate School’s continuous enrollment policy. Others had actually graduated previously, and one person had never matriculated.

The second broad category that did not further the purpose of the study comprised responses that provided no clear reason for non-completion. There were 15 responses in this category. Some of these students were reported to have “disappeared” while others suggested *possible* reasons for leaving but provided no definite information.

The rest of the reports did supply reasons for non-completion that produced useful data. These findings are summarized in Table 1. A more detailed discussion of the reasons follows.

Table 1. Reasons for non-completion

	Number	Percent
Change of career goals	11	23.9
Transferred schools	11	23.9
Health	8	17.4
Family demands/conflicts	8	17.4
Counseled out or dismissed	6	13.1
Financial issues	2	4.3
Total	46	100

Eleven students changed their career goals. There was a wide range of reasons given for this shift, and GCs presented most in a positive light. Two of the most often-cited reasons were the decision to stop with a master’s degree and the acceptance of a job.

Eleven students left to attend another institution. This category included two subgroups: six students who followed their major professor to another institution and five who transferred to an institution that better matched their research interests.

Eight students left for health-related reasons. Some of the statements in this category were vague and some very specific. Examples of health problems included cancer, substance abuse, and two students were deceased.

The next category consisted of eight students whose study was interrupted by family demands or conflicts. GCs described several situations such as the desire to get married, the needs of a child, or caring for a disabled relative.

There were six students who were counseled out or dismissed from their programs. Most of these students were identified during first or second year reviews. One person was dismissed for academic dishonesty.

Finally, two students were reported to have financial difficulties.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

There were three broad areas of importance detected during this data analysis. First was the recognition that systems for compiling, maintaining, and retrieving enrollment and graduation data for doctoral students are imperfect. This resulted in a reexamination of these procedures in the Graduate School in the hope of rectifying the imperfections.

Second, the revelation that a number of students were unknowingly in violation of the enrollment policy led to greater awareness of the need for students to register when working toward their degree. Prior to the inception of the graduate continuous enrollment policy in 2006, there existed a culturally accepted practice of refraining from enrollment between admission to candidacy and final defense to save money.

The unintentional result was that there were students who could not be counted for years between candidacy and graduation, and departments sometimes lost track of students who did not return. With the new continuous enrollment policy and the Ph.D. Completion Project, it is becoming easier to identify and contact students who have not registered for at least two consecutive terms so that they may re-enroll or provide information that may allow for intervention if they have decided to drop out.

The third broad area recognized is a new effort by the Graduate School to increase awareness about the progress of graduate students. For 15 students, no clear reason was given for non-completion. This indicates that at least some students manage to slip away unnoticed or simply do not respond to communication from faculty. It is also an indication that there may be other students who are considering leaving the program but for some reason are not talking to faculty.

Some of the departments have large student populations, making it difficult for faculty advisors to maintain close relationships with all of their students. This initiative represents a changing culture in graduate education at the University of Georgia. As this culture changes, we believe

GCs will become ever more aware of student progress in their programs. It is important to discuss each reason for non-completion to ensure all possible improvements are considered.

Better funding options for doctoral students may ameliorate some attrition. One of the most often provided reasons for leaving was a change in career goals. The majority of these students left their programs to take jobs. This is not unusual and may be considered a positive termination in cases where students were offered the jobs they wanted as a result of their education. However, the most common reason given when graduate students petition for an extension of time to complete degree requirements at the University of Georgia is interference from work. In some of those cases, students took a job because they could not manage to find funding from the University or because they began the program while pursuing a full-time job. Sometimes students took jobs having reached All But Dissertation (ABD) status and then had no time to pursue degree completion. They later discovered that they could not advance in their field because they had not completed their degree. Sincere counseling from mentors is important to help students understand the possible negative results of making a choice to take a job instead of finishing the degree.

Of the eleven students who left to attend other institutions, six followed their major professors. This is fairly common since the choice of a particular research project or advisor may be the primary reason for attending UGA. This choice is also often tied to funding through the professor's grant, and students may not be able to find another funded position at UGA when their major professor leaves. Any suggestions for changing this outcome would have to concern ways of retaining faculty, which is beyond the scope of this project.

Five students who left to attend other institutions were seeking a better match for their research interests. Sometimes applicants do not realize just what their research choice entails or may decide, after being in the program for a while, that they wish to pursue

other options. While it is not possible for all types of research to be represented at one institution, it is possible and desirable for applicants to receive more guidance during the application process allowing them to make more educated choices among degree programs and positions available for applicants who are a better fit. This might be accomplished by a comprehensive visitation to the department, including interviews with faculty and students. The departments may also wish to provide more information on their web pages for prospective students.

Likewise, those students who were counseled out or dismissed may have benefited from more comprehensive information or interviews at the time of application. Another possible intervention might include assigning a peer mentor as well as a faculty mentor upon admission. Perhaps departments could provide seminars for improving study habits and managing time.

Health problems can arise for any number of reasons. However, in some cases it may be possible for faculty and/or student mentors to detect problems early enough for some intervention to occur. In the case of the student who was having problems with addiction, it is unknown whether the student was referred to the University's counseling center. Stress can contribute to health problems, and doctoral education is known to be stressful. Again, supportive relationships with both faculty and peers may reduce stress.

For students who left because of family demands or conflicts, it is difficult to suggest alternatives. Many graduate students are already married with children when they begin their programs while some pursue these relationships during their studies. The effort involved in maintaining personal relationships simultaneously with doctoral studies can take its toll.

REFERENCES

- Ali, A. & Kohun, F. (2007). Dealing with social isolation to minimize doctoral attrition – a four stage framework. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, Vol. 2, 33-49.
- Attiyeh, G. (1999). Determinants of persistence of graduate students in Ph.D. programs. Princeton, NJ: *GRE Board Research Report 95-18R*
- 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.
- Clewell, B.C. (1987). Retention of Black and Hispanic doctoral students. *GRE Board Report No. 83-4R, ETS Research Report 87-10*.
- Council of Graduate Schools (2008). *PH.D. Completion and Attrition: Analysis of the baseline program data from the Ph.D. completion project*. Washington, D.C: Council of Graduate Schools.
- Gilliam, J.C. & Kritsonis, W.A. (2006). National implications: The hidden nature of doctoral student attrition. Doctoral Forum, *National Journal for Publishing and Mentoring Doctoral Student Research*, Vol. 3, No. 1.
- Golde, C.M. & Dore, T.M. (2001). At cross purposes: What the experiences of today's doctoral students tell us about doctoral education. *Science*, 291, 408-409.
- Haworth, J.G., Editor. (1996). Assessing graduate and professional education: Current realities, future prospects. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, No. 92.
- Lovitts, B.E. (2001). *Leaving the ivory tower: The causes and consequences of departure from doctoral study*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- 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>
- Smallwood, S. (2004). Doctor dropout. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved June 8, 2008, from <http://chronicle.com>

Appendix A

Request for Information on Non-completing Students from Graduate Coordinators

To: [[GC Email]]
From: "Maureen Grasso" mgrasso@gradshc.uga.edu
Subject: Non-completion Report
Attach:

Dear Graduate Coordinators,

In January 2008 the UGA Graduate School launched the Initiative for Optimal Doctoral Completion. As part of this ongoing initiative, we are asking all Graduate Coordinators to complete a brief report for each recent non-completer from their program. Ultimately, we will provide feedback to departments to allow them to make necessary improvements. We know that this will require some investigation on your part through talking to the student's major professor. We would like the reason for non-completion to be as specific as possible in order for all of us to better understand the issue of non-completion.

Our records indicate that the following student recently dropped out of your doctoral program per the Graduate School's Continuous Enrollment policy: [[Name]]

Please go to <http://www.gradsch.uga.edu:5080/cgs/non-completion.htm> and complete a Non-completer Report for this student. If this student is currently enrolled, please log on to this site and indicate the student's status in the 'comments' section (e.g., currently enrolled).

Please complete this form within the next two weeks. Thank you for your time.

If you have any questions please contact Katie King-Vogel at kkv@uga.edu.

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia