

Strategic Intervention for Doctoral Project Conference Participation Evaluation

The following comments were compiled from participants' evaluations of the June 05, 2005 Strategic Intervention for Doctoral Completion Conference held at the University of Georgia. So that the project's coordinators could incorporate participants' input in the project's planning and implementation, conference participants were asked for feedback on the project's merits, to comment on perceived benefits of the conference and to voice their concerns about how the project might affect their programs. The comments are presented in their entirety except in those instances where participant or program identifiers were removed.

Question: Do you believe that the project has merit? Please explain.

Overall, I think this was a very good conference. You and Tom did a great job presenting and structuring discussions to promote faculty "buy-in" which, as you know, will be key to the project's long-term success.

Yes, but it is most important for us to determine variables that predict attrition, then test causal models of attrition, then build interventions based on causal variables. Also, compiling a list of best practices would be important.

Definitely. Reflecting on success rates and completion time in graduate education along with analyzing ways to improve graduate programs are essential.

Yes, in general. I am not sure if the aggregate data collected at the university will reveal much.

Yes, through interchange and cross-fertilization of idea.

Yes and no. Yes - it is possible to focus sustained attention on graduate programs in a climate where there has been neglect, no in the sense that there are some central concerns about data quality and the purposes of the analyses. Presenters were overly apologetic about qualitative analytical strategies instead of articulating a clear case of why they were appropriate and valuable.

Yes, since we can always improve. However, the problem is not as bad as I might have thought. Our attrition seems to have no real solution and may be considered "good". Time to complete is another matter.

Yes. It is important to understand factors that contribute to failure to complete the Ph.D.

Yes, especially if it can help us monitor and track our students and compare ourselves to other programs. We really needed the Exit Data. Thanks for including it.

Yes, especially given the dialogue it has created between similar institutions and departments. Also it will most benefit those participants who take all of this back to their departments and think about their program. Without projects like this, graduate education in USA will falter to both Europe and Asia.

The proposal to promote graduate performance is a good one. However, the ability of the graduate school is fairly limited to do so. There are few policies that graduate school can implement because of the tremendous heterogeneity across departments. One area that was frequently mentioned where the graduate school can help is health care. Also, the grad school can convey information on effective practices. One of the worst results of things the grad school can do is to begin to implement certain measures based on this project. I don't think one can observe any of these variables and infer anything about the quality of the programs.

Yes. It is great to talk about common and uncommon problems and practices to enhance Ph.D completion and to relate our own situation. Solutions may not be "cut and dried" but at least the consciousness to find solutions and use data from others will be most helpful to our programs.

The project certainly has merit as long as the individuality of various program types is maintained as much as possible. Otherwise, I fear that in comparing apples to oranges much truly valuable information will be lost.

Attrition rates by themselves convey little information. You should focus more on when attrition occurs and why.

It is good to review department programs; however, if the department is satisfied with their years to completion average, then what is the problem?

Yes. Data and policy considerations are always useful.

Yes. We can all do better and the project allows us to focus on the issue, learn from others and benchmark ourselves.

Willing to test the idea.

Yes, performance assessment is critical to success.

Yes. We have trouble with graduate students taking large amount of time in the dissertation phase and not having good working relationships with their major professor.

Yes. I agree that improving doctoral completion is an important goal, particularly if scarce resources can be directed in other ways to support graduate education.

Yes, an admirable effort to focus energy to ensure more efficient and effective training of researches; to avoid squandering human resources, talent, and scarce institutional resources.

Yes. It is important to address and to actively prevent “bad” graduate attrition.

Yes. The goal of recruiting and training top quality doctoral students is attainable and will improve the quality of graduate education at all three universities.

Absolutely! Our department has long been concerned with the time-to-completion issue and this project has already offered a number of strategies for reducing time-to-completion of the degree.

It is not clear that there is a problem in my area.

Yes. A defining statement of doctoral education is critical to measure all other data.

Yes, the merit is obvious. Attrition is a problem but beyond that, it is essential to see what our practices are within and across disciplines, institutions and maybe regions.

It is not clear to me that the premise of this conference “ there is a crisis in doctoral completion” is true. If there is a 60% completion rate, so what?

More than I expected. I was able to observe different models and I am thinking of adopting ideas and practices that might benefit my department.

Yes. We are all interested in what happens to our students and to find what we can do better.

Absolutely, yes! It is always good to review and, where necessary, try to improve established practices – even better to do so in dialogue with representatives of other schools/programs. It was stimulating to hear views/practices from other disciplines, even when they do not seem directly applicable.

Yes – with several caveats:

- *Need better justification may a “magic” of Ph.D’s need to be graduated*
- *Need preventative ways to make sure this data isn’t used punitively*
- *Need better explanation/justification of study methodology.*

Yes. A scientific (versus political) analysis of the issues should be useful. That seems to be the theme in most of the analysis that is taking place so far.

Yes. Qualitative and quantitative studies of the process of doctoral education are scarce, especially studies that focus on middle-tier institutions.

Yes.

Yes. I believe that it can provide the framework for programs to analyze their systems and identify methods for improvement.

Yes. Understanding the processes of qualitative education will permit the definition of appropriate outcomes and evaluation processes. The net result will be an improvement in graduate education. The three institutions involved are [in the study] are in front of many of our peers and therefore our work will have broad implications across other institutions.

Yes...but probably in a rather discipline-dependent way. It draws attention to the problem and the need to tackle it.

Yes, to the extent identifying variations across disciplines are associated with completion.

Attrition is tied to many aspects of graduate education programs; therefore, it is useful to periodically review one's graduate program.

Absolutely. I really expect to find several ways to improve our program. Even if our completion rate is already good, this study is bound to identify lots of new and useful ideas.

Yes. Apparently there is less of a problem in biological sciences than in some other areas, but we could still improve. I got lots of ideas on things we could do.

Yes. I appreciated as much as anything else the opportunity to discover the variety of approaches to structuring graduate programs. Obviously, we all want our programs to be quality programs and have tried to find ways of achieving that goal. Sharing ideas and pooling data is a good way to achieve the next level of improvement toward that goal.

Yes. We can improve doctoral programs and we got ideas on how to do so. I learned a lot from the other programs.

Definitely yes! It got all of us to think about possible problems and shortcomings we have in our system and ways to improve it.

Absolutely. I think it will improve not only our completion rates but also the educational experiences of the students.

Yes and no. Hearing the best practices from other programs helped me to think of new ideas for improving my department. The statistical data are essentially meaningless because the metrics are ill defined and the programs are so dissimilar in their practices. A statistical study within a discipline might have some value (e.g. all computer science programs, nationwide) but otherwise we are comparing apples and oranges.

This program has high merit. Anyone who has experienced the personal and economic costs of failure of Ph.D students to complete their program understands the significance

of a critical examination of program practices, and I believe this project is on track to stimulate that examination.

Yes. It is good to be ahead of the curve in establishing benchmarks. Having research-based benchmarks are important and having this ready for our administrators, state, and national governments before they are demanded from us gives us more power over the process.

I am not certain. We are going to set goals for new levels of excellence for the nation. It is a noble goal, but I prefer to think nationally and act locally. So, what will the local actions be and how long will it take to be implemented?

Yes, but I think the most effective way to improve completion is at the department level. We do not need an across-the-board or even across-the-discipline model.

Yes. It is important to learn about other programs and policies. Completion is a more appropriate concern than time towards degree.

Yes, I'm convinced that limiting non-completion is worthwhile. Resources for training Ph.D students are becoming less abundant and should not be wasted. It is also important for departments to be aware of these numbers even if we believe that the non-completion percentage is not a problem.

Question: Do you have any concerns about how this project might affect you and your program? Please describe.

Concerns about how transparency regarding low completion rates might result in punitive measures against departments were voiced often. We need to emphasize that focusing on optimizing completion rates is about enhancing the quality of programs; not compromising that quality.

Not really. But, the funding structure and other common program practices specific to disciplines and departments should be kept in mind.

No.

There is the question of data publication and potential impact. Our program does not come out well in the data, even if major changes have been made during the past five years and those data no longer are representative of the attrition performance in our program.

I wonder what the emphasis on "doctoral completion" will bring. Will it become a new measure of accountability, and if so, how will affect other goals of graduate education such as inclusivity, creativity and originality?

No. The concerns I had about our program before I came are still the same. This project has raised a few others and provided ideas about the solutions.

Potential impact seems largely positive, i.e. enhancing our ability to recruit and retain student.

I am concerned about the increase in workload for my assistant and me. However, this may also help us to do a better job keeping databases once a mechanism is in place.

I hope it affects my program (in a good way of course.) Change is difficult but oftentimes necessary. Aware is the key and this is what this project is designed to accomplish.

The four conditions are missing one step. For example, I would add a condition 2A “ the right student continue as doctoral students”. We need to think clearly about how to identify students who are likely to perform well and “weed out” those who do not. This is an important tool for some of the social sciences and humanities. Essentially, this should be a two-stage process – the admission stage and then allowing people to continue stage.

Only all good concerns i.e. analyzing our situations and how we can make it better.

I have concerns outside of the fact that our faculty/department may not be overly welcome to change especially since our attrition /completion rates are in a comfortable range.

Definitely, I am afraid that there will be a number of years to completion goal for each department. Also another major concern is that communication with the graduate school regarding getting correct data from the database does not exist.

I am concerned that benchmarks may become weapons and that appropriate qualifications by program and discipline will be lost; rather than used in a helpful way at the departmental level, they will be used institutionally against programs.

Generally no. My only caution is to recognize that some Ph.D students are, by choice, intentionally part-time and their longer time-to-degree should not be viewed negatively.

No negative concerns.

I got some useful ideas that I will use in our program.

No. We feel that we are already doing a good job in this already and we welcome additional insights or techniques that the study might provide.

Yes, the misuse of data for reward/punishment r to promote various agendas.

It is difficult to generalize Ph.D programs. Enforcing policies may not always be a good idea.

No.

No.

I do not want top-down control or characterization of my department.

I'm concerned about how the statistical information will be presented and used especially at the state and federal level. Transparency has its pros and cons.

Yes, assessment is necessary and often good. When it is done poorly it can feel like a big stick held over the department to what do what the Dean wants us to do.

No.

Potential misuse of data is a concern. Potential abuses and manipulations are obvious concerns. Data comparisons across academic cultures can be problematic.

I am concerned that the data might be used to persecute faculty with high attrition rates.

Yes. I expect resistance from the faculty in implementing changes to the graduate program.

My only concern is those specific parameters that are identified, may be taken by some, as absolute measures of quality.

No. I think it has been made clear that's the project is to identify best practices and not to identify programs/institutions identify that may not be at the norm.

The only concern is that generalized data may be read (e.g. by funding agencies) without sufficiently accounting for specialized disciplinary circumstances.

There is always the danger that descriptive statistics cannot capture the complexity/context of a particular program. Thus, it is unlikely that's the project will produce information that will be favorably received by "stranger" to the project.

It will be part of our overall review of our graduate program during the 2005-2006 year.

No.

No concerns.

Yes the usual paranoia. Will upper administrative people (or legislators) seize upon a few simplistic numeric values and use them as indices of program value, in terms of providing resource, deciding program size, or even program continuation. Otherwise, if changes are our choice, then knowing about more options is good.

No personal concerns. Some faculty might feel that this is more accountability and have concerns that they are being scrutinized. Also, many may be concerned about how information might be used.

We all recognize that every discipline is different. The way we operate is intimately dependent on the funding situation; therefore, any sensible administrator will try to implement changes in a sensible manner.

No

I have found a few new ideas that I will incorporate.

My principal concern is that a “one size fits all” approach will not work, and that general principles must be coupled with a template for developing specific recommendations that work for a given program.

My department will be reluctant, but this project will give us a good push towards correcting deficiencies.

I am not concerned. Our graduate program will experience a positive impact if the students obtain a faculty-equivalent health option and if the messy fellowship structure can be resolved/improved.

Yes. I’m worried that the numbers will portray Humanities negatively and cause program changes that will be deleterious especially to women and minorities.

Yes. The social sciences are under attack from right wing groups and if data show that completion rates are low, groups will seize upon this information to attack women, minorities, and programs. Also, data based on completion [rates] need to be checked for reliability and validity – need multi-category dependent variable.

Yes. I worry that legislators or university trustees may use these numbers without a proper interpretation or understanding.

Question: Has this conference been a worthwhile experience? Why or why not?

Again, I have some concrete suggestions, questions and observations that I look forward to sharing with you. Good luck on the project and keep up the hard, good work!!

Yes, I think that the right persons are talking but we are early in the process.

Yes. It is helpful to hear the programs practices in other departments and universities. Reflecting on the traditions and expectations of one’s graduate program is worthwhile.

I gained some insights but more data should have been submitted to the participants before the conference.

Yes but some part more than others. The data presentation session, especially sine little analysis had been completed were given too much time; much could have been done as handouts. The small group discussions were helpful and informative.

Yes, the sharing among the participants was the most valuable. The responses at the common session were generally redundant and of little value.

Yes. It has been useful to learn about the experiences of other disciplines.

Yes I'm concerned about graduate education and training as a researcher, person and administrator. The conference has helped to energize me.

Yes, as a graduate student this has been an enlightening experience and a real chance to contribute a different perspective. More current graduate students need to be included in this project. Overall, very well done.

I found it of little value. Much of this material is repetitive; it largely depends on discipline. This [conference] could have been easily condensed to one day.

Yes. Awareness of commonalities and differences widened my perspective about all that is valued in Ph.D completion. Equally as important is the contact with other faculty members who have the same goals as we have and are working together for a common goal. This was great!

The conference has been worthwhile. The sharing of ideas in the breakout sessions was particularly helpful. I have several ides bouncing around in my head for improving the functioning of our program even though I feel comfortable with our completion rates.

It was worthwhile to learn about other ways to provide information about the Ph.D program.

I learned about other department programs so that was good. But our faculty did not show up so they didn't care enough to be involved. If this is the case, how can changes be made?

Yes, I've particularly enjoyed and found it useful talking to others across institutions and disciplines about their practices.

Yes. It was a pleasure to interact on this subject with other from different fields. We always get additional ideas for improvement and also understanding of why others do things differently.

Yes, the opportunity to learn from other programs.

Yes, learning from other Graduate Schools and hearing the different program level perspectives.

I would have liked to hear more about the research in this area.

Yes, many creative ideas for recruiting, retention and for improving program environment.

Yes. It was useful to hear about the different challenges the different department and programs face.

Yes. I have learnt a lot about different programs and have met some interesting people.

Yes – good networking and many new ideas. It was also good to hear what has been successful and not successful in other programs.

Yes, especially the interaction with faculty from other institutions and departments. I can better put our own practices into perspective (and to start thinking about changes in our program) as a result of these discussions.

It gave me food for thought, some ideas.

Definitely – hearing from other disciplines has been eye opening.

Yes- the opportunity to interact with colleagues in different disciplines and different institutions has been useful, not so much in specific, practical ways but more in terms of self-discipline and analysis.

The experiences and practices of the natural sciences, humanities and social sciences dare so different that it is impossible to generalize across disciplines.

Yes, although a huge time commitment away from my research program.

Yes. I have learned a huge amount about others operate many ideas have been presented than we may be able to use.

Yes.

Break out groups have limited value. I would much prefer to hear from experts about the research done to date and the principles of effective practice.

Yes, I've come to realize that assumptions regarding what is an "optimal" completion rate are at the heart of the issues.

Yes. It's nice to hear the ideas suggested previously reached need audiences, especially at the "trench" level.

Yes. Good information about how other programs work.

Yes, because it has in fact allowed me to take the time to reflect on our program and think about potential improvements.

Yes. It has provided me an opportunity to focus on graduate education and the results will improve graduate education at our institution.

Yes. Hearing about the ways other departments (and even disciplines) run their programs was enlightening.

Yes, it provided an opportunity to hear about process across several disciplines.

It has been very useful to meet people from other disciplines.

It was a unique opportunity to discuss these issues with this select group.

Yes. As mentioned earlier, I got lots of ideas on how we can improve completion rates. Also, I got some recruiting ideas.

Yes. I expect to continue some communication with new acquaintances among colleagues within my own campus, as well as from other institutions.

Absolutely worthwhile! We can devise better measurements of completion/attrition and time to degree. We can also stimulate conversations on our own campus regarding best practices. We need to bring together faculty, graduate coordinators and department heads.

It has been a worthwhile experience. I learned about how other departments operate in terms of funding, graduate admission and doctoral programs. Thanks for the great effort organizing this conference.

It has been worthwhile in the coffee breaks and somewhat in the breakout sessions where specific practices emerged. If we have another meeting, I suggest that you eliminate about all of the large sessions and let the participants share their experiences in small groups.

Absolutely! I was impressed with the degree of concern for the problem and I definitely benefited from learning about the diversity of program practices and novel approaches to enhancing program success.

Yes. Learning about practices in my discipline and in that of other universities was beneficial. The information provides good resources and a variety of choices for correcting deficiencies.

The first day was interesting. The second half-day seemed flat.

Yes, very interesting to hear from different disciplines.

Yes. It helped to develop common language for assessing graduate programs.

Yes. I now have a better understanding of the challenges facing other programs and departments with regard to Ph.D non-completion, and most importantly, I now have some solutions for my own program.