Strategic Intervention for Doctoral Completion

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How do you get the right students to apply to your program?

A study of Faculty and Student Perceptions related to doctoral completion

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BACKGROUND

There are various reasons why attrition is a problem in doctoral education. Some argue better programs, departmental structure, social support, or funding will solve this problem. However, some believe the problem begins at the earliest possible point: the individual's decision about whether or not to apply to a given doctoral program.

When asked methods for getting the *right* people to apply faculty members suggest recruitment strategies for streamlining the admissions process. However, another key factor resides not in the program but in the prospective students who are making the selection decision.

As these applicants approach this process there are several decisions that occur simultaneously. The first is whether or not they should pursue a doctoral degree. Secondly, they must decide whether or not they can afford to pursue a doctorate. Lastly, prospective students must examine which program is the best "fit" for their needs.

The information that programs can provide to prospective students during this process can serve as a solid foundation for these decisions. It is essential that sources of information provided during the admissions process allow prospective students to form realistic expectations regarding the demands of a doctoral program. Programs can address this step in the admissions process by providing quality information through media that prospective students are likely to use. When information is not provided applicants do not have adequate data about the programs to make a sound decision.

Although the views previously discussed seem common sensical and consistent with the literature, our project represents an attempt to understand how this process is viewed by those most closely involved: faculty and applicants.

This study is part of a larger effort to study and improve doctoral completion at three universities: North Carolina State University (NCSU), the University of Florida (UF), and the University of Georgia (UGA). This project is sponsored by the Council of Graduate Schools and funded by Pfizer and the Ford Foundation.

All project activities including this research study were built around a conceptual model (Table 1) which we believe influence doctoral completion. In this particular study, we focused on one aspect of Condition 1: The *right* people apply for doctoral study. More specifically, we investigated the information provided by programs for prospective applicants and how those applicants utilized that information.

Table 1: Necessary Conditions for Optimal Doctoral Completion

Condition #1: The right people apply for doctoral study
Condition #2: The right applicants are admitted as doctoral students
Condition #3: Students and faculty form productive working relationships
Condition #4: Students experience social support from fellow students

Purpose

The purpose of this research study was to investigate faculty and student perceptions of what constitutes high quality advanced information for prospective

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students.   Additionally, we explored ways of getting the right people to apply.

METHODS
Sample

Sixty participants--thirty faculty members and thirty doctoral students from fifteen programs in seven areas participated in this study. Each program nominated two faculty members and two students to serve as respondents in this study. In nominating respondents, program administrators were asked to make their choice based on the participants' familiarity with, and knowledge of, the individual programs. Participating programs consisted mainly of the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) fields. However, other programs representing the humanities and social sciences were also included. The 15 programs are identified in the matrix represented in Table 2.

Table 2: Participating Programs

Programs	The University of Georgia	The University of Florida	North Carolina State University
Economics	X	X	X
History	X	X	
Sociology	X	X	X
Chemistry	X	X	X
Civil Engineering		X	X
Genetics	X		X

Two researchers from the University of Georgia conducted the interviews. We made several attempts by telephone and email to contact the participants. Of the 30 students nominated for the study, 27 students (90%) participated. Participation rate for the 30 faculty members was 28 or 93 %.

Instrumentation

We collected the data using a semi-structured interview guide as the primary data collection tool. The questions focused on the four conditions in our conceptual model. The questionnaires were parallel, though slightly altered to fit each group. Faculty questionnaire consisted of six questions while the student's version had seven questions. Our intent was to obtain the participants' perspectives on:

- Why some students complete doctoral studies and others do not;

- The type of program information given to students and its usefulness in helping students select the most appropriate program;

- Graduate admissions protocol and whether they (the participants) believe the process is an effective selection process;

- The relationship between doctoral students and their advisors;

- The different ways students support each other or do not support each other;

- Program practices that support doctoral completion, or practices which, if implemented, may improve conditions for doctoral completion.

We asked the interview questions in the same sequence except in those situations that warranted deviations. Each participant was interviewed by telephone. Individual interviews took an average of 30 to 35 minutes to complete. We audiotaped and later transcribed all interviews.

Data Analysis

We collected the data over a period of two months (May 2005 through June 2005) and used qualitative content analysis to analyze the data. Comments from both faculty members and students relating to Condition 1 (see again Table 1) were extracted and compiled into a single data set. We studied the data and coded the primary themes that emerged. Emergent

themes in each data set were then compared for similarities, relationships and patterns.

FINDINGS

Three underlying questions guided our data analysis:

- *Who are the right students?*

- *What information do programs provide to ensure only the right people to apply?*

- *Do the currently provided sources of information help prospective students assess their readiness for doctoral study?*

Findings related to each of the questions are presented below.

Who are the right students?

Both faculty and student agreed students who complete their doctorate can be differentiated from those who do not on four dimensions. First, the right applicants "*fit" the research of their advisor and atmosphere of the program.* Secondly, these students have *clear expectations* regarding the demands of doctoral study. Additionally, the right students have *financial resources* to last throughout doctoral studies. These students must also be able to perform independent research and studies. Lastly, the right students possessed *motivation, commitment and other personal attributes.*

However, faculty and students were not always parallel in their definition of what constituted the right students. For instance, only students mentioned the right students are able to *adjust* to doctoral study and are *valued* within the program. Additionally, these students have *positive relationships with their dissertation committee, are able to deal with the pressures of graduate school, and are goal-oriented.*

On the other hand faculty believed the right students have excitement for their research and are able to *put forth the effort* necessary for doctoral study. Ad-

ditionally, these students are able to complete preliminary and qualifying examinations as well as their dissertation efficiently.

In addition to looking for the right students, students and faculty believed students who did not complete their doctorate also possessed certain characteristics. First, these students were more likely to accept full-time employment during the time of doctoral study. Additionally, students who did not have social support were more likely to attrite. Lastly, students who had difficulty balancing the pressures of a family and doctoral study were believed to have trouble completing their degree.

What information do programs provide to ensure only the right people to apply?

Faculty members believed communicating "certain practices and certain kind of expectations" of doctoral study would be helpful. More specifically, faculty believed doctoral applicants should be aware of how programs work as well as the core requirements of the program. However, some faculty recognized it is "always difficult to let people know exactly what a doctoral program is going to be like—it's one of those things that you find out when you're in it."

In order to communicate these demands, programs provided information in a variety of mediums, such as *websites, personal contact, career days, and summer research programs*. Furthermore, *graduate recruiting weekends, tables with time-to-completion, and job placement information* were sometimes used. When asked what materials they used to make their decision of which doctoral programs to which to apply, applicants also used an array of types of information. Of the 27 people interviewed, virtually all mentioned websites as being important to applicants. Additionally, their advisor's work, location, and possibility of funding were considered during the admissions process.

Do the currently provided sources of information help prospective students assess their readiness for doctoral study?

Based on past research, advanced information

should facilitate prospective students to determine if they "fit" a program. Additionally, this information should effectively communicate the demands of graduate school. Although this is the intended purpose of the information, faculty members acknowledged it was difficult to "communicate what graduate school, life is really about."

Accordingly, most students believed this process was simply a bureaucratic step to get into graduate school. Most students never assessed their readiness for a doctoral program because they did not think to do so, trusted the admissions committee to make that decision, or were not given adequate information to make that decision. However, 21% of the participating students believed the admissions process helped them assess their readiness for doctoral study. These students who did assess their readiness for a doctoral program relied on advanced information from their program. More specifically, their advisors and/or graduate students communicated the demands of the program through personal contact and recruiting weekends.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

1. Faculty members can improve available program information. Applicants need to know during the application process about the inner workings of a program.

2. Programs can provide realistic information about time to completion. Applicants must have an accurate estimate about how long doctoral study may take.

3. Encourage applicants to make realistic assessments of their available finances and resources. Students need personal resources so they can attend a doctoral program. Additionally, applicants should be aware of the type of funding they will receive. Applicants must have services to deal with the pressures of doctoral study, especially for those with other obligations.

4. Communicate expected skills and knowledge to

applicants. Students need to prepare for the rigorous academic work of doctoral degrees.

USEFUL RESOURCES

Books & Articles

Bair, C. & Haworth, J. (1999). Doctoral student attrition and persistence: A meta-synthesis of research. Association for the Study of Higher Education. San Antonio, TX, University of Northern Iowa.

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Useful Resources (con't)

Tinto, V. (1998). Colleges as communities: Taking research on student persistence seriously. *The Review of Higher Education*, 21, 167-177.

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