



Strategic Intervention For Doctoral Completion

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Strategies For Encouraging the Right Students To Apply For Doctoral Study

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BACKGROUND

This publication is a product of a larger study to improve doctoral completion. The study was funded by Pfizer and the Ford Foundation, sponsored by the Council of Graduate Schools, and piloted by The University of Georgia (UGA) in partnership with the University of Florida (UFL) and North Carolina State University (NCSU). Thirty seven programs from the three universities participated in the study. All intervention activities, supporting the study, were framed within four conditions which are necessary for doctoral completion. The conditions, which were drawn from the existing literature on doctoral completion are:

- the right people apply for doctoral study;
- the right applicants are admitted as doctoral students;
- students and faculty form productive working relationships;
- students experience social support from other students.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this publication is to provide valuable strategies, to doctoral programs, on ways to encourage the right students to apply to doctoral programs (Condition 1).

By using the phrase “right students” we do not mean to make distinctions based on race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, or socio-economic standing; it is intended to describe students who are “realistic about the demands and expectations of doctoral study” (Strategic Intervention for Doctoral Completion Grant Proposal, 2004, Figure 1).

METHOD

These strategies were developed from the activities implemented by the 37 programs participating in the study. Analyses of the activities revealed programs implemented an eclectic mix of strategies to meet or improve the four previously stated conditions. The central

theme that emerged from the analyses was: *creating opportunities for improvement*. This publication addresses only the strategies for improving Condition 1. Conditions 2, 3, and 4 are addressed in separate publications. Italicized quotes are excerpts from the programs’ reports.

STRATEGIES FOR ADMITTING THE RIGHT STUDENTS

1. Involve program faculty in recruitment efforts. Many programs in the study are involving faculty in doctoral student recruitment efforts. This strategy by itself, is not a novelty. What is new and exciting about this strategy is the increased efforts to provide more opportunities for information sharing, so that applicants are informed about the realities of graduate school before they apply to the programs. Programs are creating these opportunities by giving applicants access to more sources of information. They are: increasing the visibility of the department and its faculty through proactive recruitment activities at conferences, participating in student recruitment fairs, sponsoring faculty visits to local and international universities; adding communication links to departments web pages; expanding or sponsoring summer undergraduate programs; and building relationships with faculty and students from “Partner Schools”. In the process, prospective students have greater opportunities to interact with the individuals who are primarily responsible for guiding them through the program. Students also obtain information to make a better assessment of the program’s teaching strengths, research opportunities, and their compatibility with the program. Programs are reporting that these changes are garnering positive results. For example, one program reported its faculty recruitment efforts resulted in “*qualified minority students seeking admission for 2007.*” Other programs report receiving positive feedback from students and faculty about the changes in the program’s recruitment procedures, and the efforts to build new recruitment alliances with other programs and universities.

2. Use technology to better disseminate information. The use of technology to help the right students

to apply to doctoral programs was, by far, the most popular strategy implemented by the 37 participating programs. More than half have restructured or planned to restructure their web sites, to include information that they felt was critical for prospective students to make the best application decisions. A good example of how programs are using technology to better disseminate information to prospective students is the changes the History department at UFL made to their program's website. Through these changes the department plans to: improve the efficiency of the admissions process; improve the visibility of its faculty research and teaching; promote its graduates students' work and accomplishments; develop better networks of professional contacts and connect applicants directly to faculty whose interests are similar to theirs. By "*marketing the programs strengths*" the department is already reaping huge benefits. According to Joseph Spillane, Chair of UFL History department "the many steps we undertook this year to improve graduate recruiting certainly paid off. We had 130 applicants this year compared to an average of 100 the previous five years, and we successfully recruited a far greater number of our highest-ranked applicants than ever before." Other programs like UFL Civil and Coastal Engineering department is creating a departmental database of former program graduates. They are also exploring ways on how to maximize its use as a shared resource, among the different areas within the department.

3. Share program information with colleagues from other universities. Information-sharing is critical at all phases of doctoral study. In fact, the Woodrow Wilson Foundation recommends that "information about doctoral education, program expectations, and career prospects must be more transparent to students from the moment they begin to consider a Ph.D." (Woodrow Wilson Foundation, [WWF], 2005b, Executive Summary). Programs are subscribing to this notion and "*communicating the scope and capabilities of the Program to key advisors, mentors, and colleagues at local and regional academic institutions.*" By their actions, programs are setting the conditions for generating a more informed applicant pool. The benefits of this strategy manifest throughout doctoral study in many forms; but it begins with students who have made better and more satisfying program choice.

4. Provide more attractive assistantship benefits.

Due in part to scarce funding brought about by escalating operating costs, increasing enrollments and disappearing funding streams, graduate students' debt load have increased significantly (Gravois, 2007). In some programs, students find it difficult to meet the financial costs associated with completing their degree and meeting other financial responsibilities (Hoffer et al., 2006). Given these realities, there is a real possibility that otherwise excellent doctoral candidates may miss out on the opportunity of a doctoral education. To encourage these students to pursue doctoral study, programs are taking steps to make graduate assistantship benefits more attractive. Some departments are restructuring their undergraduate programs or hiring additional faculty to reduce the graduate teaching assistants workload. Several other programs "*encourage and facilitate faculty attempts to obtain funding that includes research assistantship for graduate students, by directing faculty to grant-writing programs that require applicants include funds for graduate students research assistantships, and informing them [the students] of grant opportunities.*"

5. Advocate for reduced Time To Degree (TTD).

A much researched institutional barrier to doctoral completion, TTD is a concern for some programs. TTD can discourage good candidates from applying to the programs and current students from completing their degree. Programs are taking a proactive approach that may produce multiple dividends for students, faculty, individual programs, and the university. In one case, a program have changed the timing of the qualifying examinations. At least one other program will ask students to participate on the task force responsible for reviewing student curriculum requirements and for making recommendations for changes. Several programs are introducing students to research experiences much earlier in their studies; a move that is intended to provide students with early exposure, and greater familiarity and understanding of how to conduct research. Based on the programs' report, these changes "*will attract higher quality students, help them proceed through the program more quickly, give them greater research opportunities, and better prepare them for the job market.*"

6. Build alliances with undergraduate programs.

Undergraduate programs provide a ready source of graduate students recruitment. Doctoral programs

in this study are opting to maximize this source, by building early alliances with undergraduate students through student to student mentoring. These programs are hosting undergraduate research programs in the summer, and reviewing the files of current and past students to identify institutions that may be a source of budding Ph.D's.

7. Actively recruit faculty and students from underrepresented groups. Much has been said about the need to include more members of underrepresented groups in doctoral education. In their evaluation of what is being done to expand diversity in doctoral education the Woodrow Wilson Foundation [WW], (2005a) concluded “doctoral programs have made less progress in diversifying than business, government, and other levels of education” (p. 7). Some doctoral programs in this study have implemented strategies to address this issue. To this end, programs like NCSU Mathematics and UFL Psychology, Microbiology, and Computer Science and Engineering, among others, are including strategies that will expand their minority recruitment efforts. These programs are: forming alliances with institutions with large groups of traditionally underrepresented groups of students, encouraging them to apply to their programs, offering them financial assistance, and putting support systems in place to help them succeed.

RESOURCES

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