



# Strategic Intervention For Doctoral Completion

Action Research  
Series

Number 8  
Spring 2007

Strategies for Improving Faculty-Student Working Relationship

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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 in partnership with the University of Florida, and North Carolina State University. 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 improve working relationships between faculty and students (Condition 3).

## 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 3. Programs' strategies ranged from a blend of professional development strategies such as faculty-student research to personal and human resource development strategies like celebrating students' achievements. Italicized quotes are excerpts from the programs' report

## STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING FACULTY-STUDENT WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

**1. Promote opportunities for faculty-student research and presentations.** A requirement for the completion of the doctoral degree is the ability to engage in scholarly research. Studies found students who are introduced to research early in graduate studies are more likely to have less difficulties completing the dissertation (Fagen & Wells, 2000; Golde, 1998). Additional research suggests joint faculty-student research and publications are beneficial to the students' career and professional development (Nettles & Millett, 2006). Across disciplines, many programs in this study recognized the importance of students' early immersion in research and have established procedures to facilitate this process. For example, programs have established symposiums or brown bag sessions for faculty and students to share research. Other programs offer special colloquia to introduce beginning students to research, early in their coursework. One program has restructured its graduate curriculum and courses sections to reduce graduate assistants teaching load and increase time for faculty-student research. Another program invites students to critique its faculty members' publications; an act of trust and student empowerment that goes a long way towards students' early introduction to research and to cementing collegial relationships between faculty members and students.

**2. Institutionalize mentoring into the program's culture.** Recognized as one of the most influential factors in doctoral completion, mentoring is touted by researchers and proponents of doctoral education as having significant benefits for both the faculty-mentor and student-mentee (Golde, 2006; Nettles & Millett, 2006). Two concrete examples of how programs are mentoring students for faculty-student working relationships are: (1) through assignments of temporary advisors to all incoming students and, (2) by delegating faculty members to act as role models for students in the "Preparing the Professoriate" program. The temporary faculty advisors also help guide students through course selection and the very important task of choosing a major advisor.

**3. Actively solicit students' feedback.** Feedback is another critical factor in faculty-student relationship. It is an excellent way to initiate conversations that could lead to better working relationship. Additionally, the need for feedback was a consistent theme in the interviews, which were conducted with 55 participants (28 faculty and 30 students) from the 37 participating programs in this study. Some programs have responded to the faculty and students' need for feedback by making it part of their strategies for improving faculty and student relationships. For example, one program has begun to solicit students' feedback on how to better engage research advisory committees on students' progress, via post-candidacy and post-degree questionnaires. Another program's strategy was to institute annual review meetings between each student and the graduate coordinator to address the student's professional development, progress in the program and, concerns and ideas on program development. While the latter strategy undoubtedly involved a substantial investment of time, the program reported several gains. The meeting *"provided important information on the program, gave students an opportunity to express their opinions in a private and confidential setting, and imparted to the student that their well-being and success are important to the program."*

**4. Involve students in program decision-making.** Traditionally hierarchical by nature, some doctoral programs are breaking the mold and borrowing concepts from human resource and organization development by including students in decision issues that are generally considered outside the scope of the students' education. Programs are inviting students to review curriculum requirements, students' support levels, and program recruitment activities. One program is now involving students in faculty recruitment and selection decisions. While it may be a paradigm shift for some programs, previous research findings also suggest that doctoral student retention is related to student involvement (Ferrer de Valero, 1996; Nerad & Cerny, 1991). Furthermore, it stands to reason that students should be involved in program decisions because students are one of the primary beneficiaries of their programs' success.

**5. Encourage faculty to advocate for student funding.** To the many reasons given for students'

non-completion of the degree, some programs, doctoral students, and researchers (Benkin, 1984; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Sauer 1986) have added scarce financial resources. Other studies have also shown there is a strong likelihood, students who are research and teaching assistants are more likely to complete their degree than students who are neither (Benkin, 1984). The increased chance for degree completion is because the opportunities for interaction with, and to receive support from, faculty and peers are greater (Lovitts, 2001). Therefore, faculty members who *"include requests for research support in grant proposals"* are creating opportunities for more faculty-student interactions, longer periods and greater frequencies of time to build better working relationship, and *"early research experiences for entry-level graduate students"*. One program, among the thirty seven, has made faculty advocating for student funding in their grant requests, an official strategy for improving faculty-student relationship.

**6. Provide opportunities for information sharing.**

Information sharing is vital in all aspects of doctoral education. Realizing the potential for doctoral completion, programs have included information sharing in their strategies for building working relationships and, are providing students with both formal and informal forums for information exchange. For example, one program implemented town hall meetings for students. Another program provided more informal opportunities for new students to clarify their understandings about program expectations, assistantships, etc. Other programs promote networking opportunities for faculty and students to *"market funding opportunities and individual interests."*

**7. Create opportunities for faculty-student social interactions.** "Social events provide a respite from the demands of graduate school; a stress free gathering where students and faculty members can build collegiality outside of their disciplines; a way for busy students and faculty to network with other professionals; and a means for the institution to generate goodwill for itself" (Guadeloupe-Williams, 2005, p. 5). Creating opportunities for faculty-student social interactions is a frequently implemented strategy by many of the 37 participating programs. Examples of some program's social events are: picnics, barbecues, dinners, luncheons, coffee and donuts, pizza parties, softball and basketball games. Family members are invited to some events.

**8. Celebrate achievements.** For many people, faculty and students included, celebrating achievements can be an excellent motivational tool. These events also present opportunities to show others that their efforts did not go unnoticed and, for expressing gratitude. Doctoral education requires many resources: time, money, and energy. Therefore, although exhilarating, at times it can be rather arduous. Additionally, because time to degree completion can be quite lengthy for some students, it is important to celebrate small “wins” along the way. For these reasons and others, many programs are opting to celebrate and spotlight students’ achievements. They are publicly recognizing their students’ publications, presentations, and entry into candidacy, etc. through various forums. One program aptly referred to the celebrations as “rites of passage”. In the process, programs help students to rejuvenate their efforts to complete their degree and to simultaneously build stronger bonds with their faculties and programs.

**9. Expedite time to degree (TTD).** The length of time for doctoral students to complete the degree is affected by multiple factors. These factors include: “individual preferences, economic constraints, labor market for new doctorate recipients, cultures of the academic discipline, and institution-specific program characteristics” (National Opinion Research Center [NORC], 2006, p. 22). Depending on the standards used, TTD can vary significantly. Despite its contextual nature, programs are also aware that TTD is a concern for students, faculties, university administration, and public and private agencies and organizations. Moreover, studies have identified TTD as contributing to attrition in doctoral education (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992).

In their efforts to advance doctoral completion through improved faculty-student working relationships, programs are looking for ways to expedite a critical aspect of the doctoral process—the exam phases of the dissertation. To accomplish this, one program, for example, restructured the programs’ written and oral exams. This is an important strategic move for building working relationships, for two good reasons. First, both the oral and written exams stages of degree completion are viewed with trepidation by most doctoral students. Second, many students believe faculty make the final decision whether, or not, a student advances to the next stage of the exam. Therefore, any attempt by program faculty to help students reduce the time it takes to complete their program is a plus for faculty-student relationship. Although this strategy is not a widely reported strategy by many programs, it is nonetheless, a worth-

while strategy.

## RESOURCES

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Strategic Intervention for Doctoral Completion is published under a grant from the Council of Graduate Schools, Pfizer, and the Ford Foundation. The University of Florida, the University of Georgia, and North Carolina State University collaborated on this research project. The research briefs were prepared and distributed by the Graduate School at the University of Georgia. Dr. Maureen Grasso is the director, and Dr. Tom Valentine is the co-director of the project. Please direct questions regarding this project to:

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