Strategic Intervention For Doctoral Completion

Strategies for Improving Social Support Among Students

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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 social support among students (Condition 4).

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 overarching theme that emerged from the analyses was: *creating opportunities for improvement..*

This publication addresses only the strategies for improving Condition 4. Strategies for advancing the remaining three conditions are addressed in publication Action Research Series 6, 7, and 8. Although Condition 4 was intended to improve ways for students to experience social support *from* other students, the findings

revealed that programs also include in their strategies, ways in which faculty can help to support students. Therefore, the following strategies address ways to improve both student to student and faculty to student social support .

STRATEGIES FOR STUDENTS' SOCIAL SUPPORT

1. Encourage student socialization. Researchers on graduate education have reported on the importance of social support for program completion (Tinto, 1998) and for students' emotional wellbeing (Demaray & Malecki, 2002). Additionally, findings from interviews conducted with faculty and student participants from the participating programs, attest to not just its importance but also to students' positive responses when they experience social support (Guadeloupe-Williams, 2005). Based on the number of programs that have outlined strategies for encouraging students to support each other, it is reasonable to assume that student to student support is an important component of many participating programs' structure. Programs are encouraging students to: work together in groups to solve problems; act as role models and serve as mentors to their peers; and to organize and attend student social gatherings.

2. Establish joint social support ventures. Social support is a community undertaking. Regardless of whether it is formally or informally conceived, maximizing its potential requires collaborative efforts between and among students, faculty, and the university community. For example, student to student without faculty to student social support realizes only half the benefits. To ensure that students can gain the many benefits of social support, programs are establishing joint social support ventures. For instance, one program formed a faculty-student committee to oversee the organizing of its social gatherings. Another program established a Teaching Cooperative to provide instrumental, financial, and socio-emotional support for new teaching assistants. A third program encourages its community of graduate students to reach across levels of education and mentor

undergraduate students. In a similar spirit of support, another program seeks out opportunities for local community outreach activities and urges its students to participate. A fifth program encourages its faculty to attend student-sponsored seminars and other similar events, featuring student speakers.

3. Create opportunities for inclusion. Inclusion and social support are reciprocal; one influences the other. According to the 2005 report on diversity by the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, "doctoral education diversity record is poor.... [and] getting worse" (Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation [WW], 2005, p. 3). It is therefore critical that programs attend to inclusion issues in their efforts to promote social support for students. Cognizant of this need, one program has, for example, established a student-selected advisory board to provide input to program administrators on student-related issues. Other programs: provide common space for students to work and socialize, assign senior students to mentor new students, provide space on the program's website for graduate students to plan activities, mentor female students for personal and professional support and, provide professional help for Non-English speaking students

RESOURCES:

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Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college. Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. (2nd Ed.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation. (2005). *Diversity & the Ph.D.: A review of efforts to broaden race & ethnicity in U.S. Doctoral Education*. Princeton: NJ.

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