Faculty Perspectives on Graduate Student Success

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Abstract

This study sought to understand the variables surrounding faculty perspectives of graduate student success at a Hispanic-serving and doctoral granting research institution in Texas. This study focused only on the graduate faculty’s insight, beliefs, experiences, and perspectives relative to graduate student success. Faculty perceptions indicated variables of academics and self-advocacy to be most important to the success of graduate students. Social emotional connectedness variables were considered less important.

Understanding and identifying the variables involved in graduate student success is a difficult challenge at best. In addition, defining graduate student success may depend on the type of institution and will likely vary by faculty, college, and discipline. Demographic make-up, geographic location, and other underlying factors, such as cultural nuances, may influence graduate faculty perceptions of graduate student success. Furthermore, multiple success factors may be dependent upon the preparedness and perspectives of graduate students themselves. This study sought to understand the variables surrounding faculty perspectives of graduate student success at a Hispanic-serving and doctoral granting research institution in Texas. This study focused only on the graduate faculty’s insight, beliefs, experiences, and perspectives relative to graduate student success. A review of the findings, along with potential implications for this study, will be presented.

Literature Review

The very notion of completing a graduate degree can be a traumatic undertaking for any serious student. Many institutions are preparing material and information designed to help
undergraduate student contemplate the momentousness of graduate school. Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis’ (n.d.) website has uploaded Tips for Preparing for Graduate School: Characteristics of Graduate Students. A research study, by Descutner and Thelen in 1989 (as cited in IUPUI, n.d.), was briefly discussed on the website that asked “seventy-nine faculty members from nine APA-approved clinical psychology graduate programs to describe a successful clinical psychology graduate students” (para. 1). Surprisingly, being intelligent was number 9 of the top 10 characteristics listed by the professors participating in the study. The most important aspects of successful graduate students consisted of hard work, the ability to get along with others and being able to write in an academic format. The graduate professors seemed to prefer students that were congenial, stable human beings, and who could maintain a level of above average or higher grade point average.

Concordia University (2016) listed successful graduate student characteristics similarly to IUPUI. These characteristics are primarily taken from the perspectives of graduate students. They include the factors of persistence, flexibility, optimism with motivation, and the willingness to work hard in order to be successful. However, Concordia also added to their success factors their finding that graduate students need to have the backing and understanding of their family and friends.

A study conducted by Cornell University (2009) found faculty members believed graduate student success factors consisted of not only needing to be driven to attain scholarship, but also given to independence, self-motivation, curiousness, being a self-starter, able to see the big picture, and intelligence. Faculty members identified passion as the top factor for graduate student success. The study also mentioned students need to be focused on a professional goal upon starting graduate school.

Gardner (2009) conducted a study of thirty-eight faculty members from 7 different disciplines within the same university and found contact between the faculty member and the student to be one major success factor. This contact was described by faculty as a relationship of not merely professor and student, but consisting of “family and camaraderie in the department” (p. 400). Although professors “serve as teachers, advisors, committee members, mentors, role models, and future colleagues” the student was being not only trained in their chosen field, but nurtured through the process of degree completion as though the students were an extended family in a manner of speaking (p. 386).

Lechuga (2011) examined the mentoring relationship between graduate faculty and graduate students. The research confirmed the importance of mentoring in the overall success of graduate students. Discussions with faculty identified four domains of significant relationships: faculty as advisor, faculty as instructor, faculty as employer, and faculty as an agent of socialization. The delineation of these domains suggested an evolving and growing aspect of the faculty-graduate student relationship over the period of graduate studies. A finding of this study also indicated this relationship provided graduate students with a clearer appreciation of the culture of academe and career choices. A recent study by Duranczyk, Franko, Osifuye, Barton, and Higbee (2015) supported this relationship and concluded that intentional faculty focus on inclusion and student success was particularly effective on a diverse student population. The findings indicated the efficacy of developing a culture of inclusion and emphasis on student professional development.

A research study was undertaken by Wapole, Burton, Kanyi, and Jackenthal (2002) that analyzed the Graduate Record Examination utilized by one hundred graduate school faculty and staff in twenty-six disciplines at twenty institutions to discover what graduate student success
factors they deemed to be important (p. i). The outcome of the study found four of the top five most desirable success factors to be “...research or scholarly experience, communication ability, interpersonal skills, and persistence” (p. 13). Other qualities found to be important to graduate student success were “indefinable qualities of motivation, curiosity ...goal orientation, and “heart” often make a big difference in a student’s success” (p. 4).

Persistence was again identified as a success factor in Swaminathan’s (2012) article, *What Predicts Grad School Success*. In the article, Dr. Peter Giordano, a professor of psychology at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee was quoted as saying, “By the time you get to graduate school, everybody is smart, so it’s more the independent thinking, creative thinking and the persistence that really help folks succeed,” (as cited in Swaminathan, 2012, para. 4). On the other side of the world at Griffith University in Australia, Arthur E. Poropat, PhD, a psychology professor hypothesized:

Also critical to student success is conscientiousness, which includes self-discipline, future planning, and willingness to work hard. Among personality characteristics, conscientiousness correlates most highly with academic achievement, according to a 2009 meta-analysis in *Psychological Bulletin*. Agreeableness was also correlated with academic success, though not as highly, found. (as cited in Swaminathan, 2012, para. 9)

Another vital success factor mentioned was developing a self-regulated learning style (Swaminathan, 2012). The article quoted Barry Zimmerman, PhD, eminent professor of educational psychology at the City University of New York as saying:

Self-regulated learning involves setting challenging goals and figuring out strategies to reach them, implementing your plan and keeping track of its effectiveness, and then tweaking those strategies based on how successful they are at getting you closer to your aims. (as cited in Swaminathan, 2012, para. 19)

Zimmerman also added, “Above all... be sure to cultivate your curiosity” (as cited in Swaminathan, 2012, para. 21).

The success factors that dominated the literature suggest three themes: motivation, persistence, and hard work. Motivation was seen as the basis of all of the themes that followed, as it was found within many of the research studies. If one does not have the will to do what is needed to be done, then the rest is all a moot point. Persistence being the next factor considered vital by professors was an evident action from the motivation that the student possessed. With hard work being the last of the three replicated themes within the literature, it is only inevitable that this theme fall into third place. This was not necessarily due to the fact that it was not as important as the other two, but logic dictates that once an individual is motivated and maintains (or persists in this case), hard work is a natural by-product of the whole process of the other two themes. These three recurring factors, important as they are, only explain but a small piece of the bigger picture of what was considered vital success factors by professors, as there are many other themes that are also derivatives of these previously discussed themes.
Method

The aim of this study was to understand and identify the variables associated with graduate faculty perceptions of graduate student success. This study was conducted in a college of education at a Hispanic-serving, doctoral granting research university in Texas. The researchers utilized purposeful sampling to select study participants. A URL containing a link to instrument was delivered via email to 52 faculty members who have taught at least one graduate level course within the year. The survey questionnaire included 28 items. Some items were derived from measurements of self-efficacy utilized by Zajacova, Lynch, and Espenshade, (2005). A 5-point Likert scale was employed (1 = Not Important, 2 = Somewhat Important, 3 = Important, 4 = Very Important, 5 = Extremely Important). Study participants were anonymous and included 21 graduate faculty. Results were derived from analytical methods involving descriptive strategies of frequency distribution, percentages, and correlation.

Results

A bivariate correlation (Pearson) was calculated to determine associations between variables. The faculty perception inventory was found to be highly reliable (28 items, $\alpha = .917$). Table 1 illustrates the overall descriptive statistics for the entire survey instrument.

Table 1

| Descriptive Statistics Graduate Faculty Perspectives of Student Success |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| M                           | $s^2$                       | SD                         | N                          |
| 116.7143                    | 149.814                     | 12.23986                    | 28                         |

There were significant correlations between variables in three categories of questions within the study instrument: academic, self-advocacy and social-emotional (connectedness). Correlations are reported significant at the 0.01 level on 2-tailed tests with $r \geq .70$. Graduate faculty responses indicated significant associations between the need for graduate students to improve their reading skill and their writing skills, $r = .926$, $n = 21$, $p = .000$. On a related item, there was a positive correlation between conducting research for term papers and the need for graduate students to improve their writing skills $r = .788$, $n = 21$, $p = .000$. Similarly, a positive correlation existed between the need for graduate students to improve their writing skills and their need to understand textbooks, $r = .701$, $n = 21$, $p = .000$. The variable related to graduate faculty perceptions of student participation in class indicate a positive correlation with the need to understand textbooks, $r = .754$, $n = 21$, $p = .000$.

Within the area of self-advocacy, there was a correlation between the importance of communicating with professors and seeking help and information from school, $r = .743$, $n = 21$, $p = .000$. There was also a positive correlation between the importance of communicating with professors and talking with college staff, $r = .786$, $n = 21$, $p = .000$. The relationship between understanding college and university policy appeared highly important. A correlation existed between the importance of understanding college and university policy and communication with professors, $r = .733$, $n = 21$, $p = .000$. A strong association also occurred between the importance of understanding college and university policy, $r = .861$, $n = 21$, $p = .000$. 
There were no correlations in the area of social emotional connections higher than \( r \geq .70 \). It is important to note a relatively high association between faculty perceptions of the importance of making social connections and family influence \( r = .669, n = 21, p = .001 \). Results are reported from responses aimed to gauge the importance level of various perceptions by faculty. The results clearly illustrate high correlations connected within the categorical variables associated with academics and self-advocacy. This may or may not be related to the nature of the academic relationships between graduate faculty and graduate students.

**Implications**

The findings of this study indicated significant correlations between variables in the three categories of questions administered in the study: academic, self-advocacy and social-emotional (connectedness). The results found within each of these categories gave the researchers a snapshot of the faculty insights relative to success factors of their graduate students.

The first of the three categories of questions in the study pertained to the variable of academics. In this area, graduate faculty responses indicated a significant association between the necessity of graduate students improving their reading, research and writing skills. This finding coincided with the Descutner and Thelen (1989) study cited on the Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis (n.d.) website which discussed valuable preparation tips for students planning to enter graduate school. There, the authors cited proficient academic research and writing skills as being one of the top ten characteristics needed to succeed in graduate school. Similarly, a positive correlation was found between the variables of conducting research for term papers and the requirement of improved reading skills ultimately tied into the need to understand textbooks.

Communication, a variable of the self-advocacy element located within the second of the three categories of the questions in the study, was found to have a sizeable correlation to communication with professors, conversing with the university staff along with seeking assistance and information. The findings of this present study supported Gardner’s study (2009), which discovered communication to be highly important as a success factor for graduate students. Contact (communication) in Gardner’s study was viewed as a nurturing aspect of the education process for the graduate student, which ultimately aided the self-advocacy part of the relationship between the professor and student. The Lechuga (2011) and Wapole et al. (2002) studies also examined communication as a success factor. In Lechuga’s study, communication in the format of mentoring was a driving factor behind graduate student success, whereas Wapole, et al. found having the ability to be a good communicator was vitally important.

The last category, connectedness, had a higher association between faculty perceptions of the importance of social connections along with family influence on the graduate student’s success. These findings are specifically consistent with the idea that family encouragement contributed to the student’s ability to succeed academically, yet connectedness rated lower than the factors of academics and communication for professors (Concordia University, 2016).

Although this study provided some unique insights from the graduate faculty on their perceptions of graduate student success, it does possess some limitations. For example, the findings from this study were limited to one purposeful sample: a college of education at a Hispanic-serving and doctoral granting research institution in Texas with twenty-one participants out of fifty-two responded. Since the study was limited to a small population of participants and
one college, future studies are certainly warranted. Further studies could include a purposeful sample population of all Hispanic-serving and doctoral granting research institutions of graduate faculties in the colleges of education throughout the state of Texas. On a larger scale, after the state study has been completed, the population sample could be extended to college of education faculty in the Hispanic-serving and doctoral granting research institutions. The larger populations could provide the researchers with a more diverse set of insights ultimately confirming or disproving the findings of the original study and provide other perceptions that weren’t uncovered originally.

Conclusion

Overall, faculty perceptions at this college of education in a Hispanic-serving, doctoral granting research university in Texas indicated the variables in the two of three categories of questions pertaining to academics and self-advocacy to be important to the success of graduate students. The variables in the third category of social-emotional, such as connectedness, were considered less important.

The variables in the highest ranked category of academics, such as improved reading and writing skills were deemed extremely important by faculty. An increase in enhanced reading skills would naturally increase students’ ability to understand textbooks which could lead to increased participation in the classroom. By helping students increase their critical thinking and academic writing skills, the more likely they are to master the knowledge of the course concepts being taught (Elder & Paul, 2006).

In the category of self-efficacy, faculty deemed the variable of communication essential to graduate student success. Faculty emphasized the importance of active student pursuit of information. Most professors would see student questioning as a positive thing particularly for new graduate students. Course and institutional policies can be highly complex and are often confusing to students. The understanding of those policies was deemed highly important for student success. One can posit that student communications with a professor and staff members about these policies could lead to a beneficial understanding of expectations and possibly better academic performance by the student.

The variables related to those of the social connections and family influence (connectedness) was not as highly regarded by graduate faculty. From the results of this section of the study, one can hypothesize connectedness could be important for the graduate student, but from the faculty’s perspectives of what it takes to be successful, academics was ranked highest as the necessary success factors. This faculty perspective about connectedness may stem from the design of the question as it was asked in the survey. In fact, previous studies at this university and others have supported the significance of connectedness for the graduate student both with their faculty mentors and fellow students (Fedynich & Bain, 2011; Young & Brooks, 2008; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2010). Research confirms the need for faculty mentorship and positive peer relationships across the variety of student types and ethnic backgrounds (Young & Brooks, 2008; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2010).

The results of this study have brought thoughtful insights from the graduate faculty of the College of Education and Human Performance at this Hispanic-serving and doctoral granting research institution in Texas. It is the hope of these the researchers that other institutions will find this information useful when seeking assistance with graduate student success factors.
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