

National Implications: The Hidden Nature Of Doctoral Student Attrition

Janetta C. Gilliam, BS, MS, MA
PhD Student in Educational Leadership
Prairie View A&M University
College of Education

William Allan Kritsonis, PhD
Professor
PhD Program in Educational Leadership
Prairie View A&M University
Member of the Texas A&M University System
Visiting Lecturer (2005)
Oxford Round Table
University of Oxford, Oxford, England
Distinguished Alumnus (2004)
Central Washington University
College of Education and Professional Studies

ABSTRACT

This article examines the identification of the hidden problem of doctoral student attrition and paradigmatic retention initiatives that could influence the reversal of a growing trend. The authors analyze several theoretical approaches that take into account the process and the person. Tinto's model of (3) general stages after admission are presented. Recommendations for implementing systematic changes in the doctoral study programs are addressed. The authors recommend changing the manner in which doctoral students are regarded and better ways to help them navigate through the doctoral process.

The purpose of this article is to examine several innovative and visionary pathways in the search for effective and efficient methods to improve doctoral student retention. Increasingly, higher education is focusing its efforts upon the necessity to retain and graduate doctoral students. With a nationwide attrition rate estimated at

50%, a rate that may indeed be exceeded by students from underrepresented groups (Lovitts, 2001, p. 2). It is incumbent upon universities to dedicate themselves to the development and implementation of paradigmatic retention initiatives that reverse this unfortunate trend for all doctoral students.

Doctoral Student Attrition

Identification of the problem of doctoral student attrition is no longer the issue as has long been substantiated by research. We must be concerned with the manner in which we reverse it by applying effective and efficient retention methods. To date, the available research does not focus on approaches that have been tested and that lead to substantive changes that improve rates of attrition or that provide theoretical insight into the distinct phenomenon of doctoral attrition especially as it pertains to diverse students (Golde, 2005).

No Comprehensive National Studies Have Been Done

Even though no comprehensive national studies have been done on attrition from PhD programs, researchers still know a lot about the problem. Many institution-specific research in recent decades bears out the same trends: Women drop out at a higher rate than men do. Minority students leave at a higher rate than white students do. American students drop out more than international students do. And students leave humanities and social-science programs at a higher rate than those in the sciences (Smallwood , 2004).

Barbara Lovitts (2001) characterizes the steady flow of graduate students from their programs as higher education's "invisible problem". Doctoral students withdraw quietly. They are silent about their reasons for leaving, internalizing their exit as their personal failure. And no one asks them why they leave; thus the problem is invisible.

Eclectic Theoretical Approach

Eclectic theory and its central tenet of the primacy of the individual can be successfully incorporated into doctoral advising models, and thereby lend to one important pathway. This theoretical approach to advising, in conjunction with the distinct advantages for success offered by continuous doctoral orientation, lend to the establishment of a vibrant community of scholars lauded by many educational theorists as being of critical importance to the retention and persistence of aspiring future scholars.

Progress is measured by ongoing assessment, evaluation, and measurement, leads to continuous process improvements that coalesce in best practices, an overarching goal for institutions of higher education. To this extent, higher education must be committed to the success of its doctoral students, who collectively represent a stronghold on the nation's progress and superiority.

Doctoral Students Are Carefully Selected and Stringently Evaluated

The most academically capable, most academically successful, most stringently evaluated, and most carefully selected students in the entire higher education system -- doctoral student--are the least likely to complete their chosen academic goals. Excessively high rates of doctoral student attrition, which consistently range from 40 to 50 per cent, are one of academia's well -kept secret (Berelson, 1960; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Lovitts, 1996). Bowen and Rudenstine , authors of a landmark book on doctoral education, say "The practice has been (for understandable reasons) to concentrate on those students who actually earn doctorates, allowing those who drop out to disappear from sight" (1992, p. 107). Such systematic inattention means that students usually leave quietly, although the occasional student commits suicide or murder, perhaps in an effort to draw attention to problems. Seldom is any information gleaned from departing students; their reasons for leaving doctoral study and institutional factors that exacerbate attrition remains hidden.

Doctoral Attrition – A Dissertation Chair and Committee Member Responsibility

Doctoral attrition represents a grave concern among contemporary doctoral granting institutions. The loss of an institution's doctoral contingency represents untold economic losses and immeasurable voids in research. However, the variables are that positively and negatively influence attrition is numerous. It is a given that the doctoral degree is one that challenges students on both academic and human levels. Therefore, the approaches that take into account both the process and the person are necessary. Retention directly corresponds to those models of success upon which educators can rely to yield positive results. The degree to which educators-dissertation chairs and committee members-enter into conversations about these models of success and engage other members of the educational community remains debatable. To continue to view the student as the "independent scholar" who must move toward the completion of the degree in isolation is certainly to court an old world view no longer applicable to contemporary doctoral students. There are many scholars who have traveled such path and who have been successful. But for every student who has successfully secured the degree, there are scores who have not effectively managed a process at times guided more by randomness

and contingency than by effective advising, dedicated mentoring, human interaction, and technical support.

No Academic Differences between Completers and Non-completers

Students may abandon their programs of study for many reasons; however, the majority of all students do not leave due to lack of competence and failed admissions processes. As Barbara Lovitts' (2001) research reveals, there are virtually no academic differences between completers and non-completers among the participants in the study. In her comprehensive study, *Leaving the Ivory Tower: The Causes and Consequences of Departure from Doctoral Study*, Lovitts framed the attrition dilemma and its misdiagnosis:

Most graduate programs have responded to the problem, of graduate student attrition by placing greater emphasis on selection, assuming that if they could only make better admission decisions, attrition rates would decline. The emphasis on selection suggest that universities believes the Problem lies not with graduate schools but with the students themselves.
[p.20]

Given the huge emphasis on selection, the loss of doctoral students from the system of higher education is assumed to be the loss of precious human resources. Not only do the doctoral student and his or her family loses their investment and their dreams, but also society appears to lose the future value of the student. There are institutional and societal costs that include the huge investment by the institution in the form of student support, classroom and lab facilities, and faculty time and effort. However, the issue is not simple. There are different types of attrition that occurs at different stages of doctoral education, that are the consequences of different personal, professional, and institutional influences; and that result in different outcomes.

Tinto's Model – Three General Stages after Admission - A Specific Faculty Member or Members Can Determines Success or Failure

In Tinto's model, three general stages after admission are outlined: (1) transition to membership in the graduate community in the first year, (2) the attaining of candidacy through development of competence and (3) active research. Attrition and slow progress initially are connected with low rates of social and academic interactions in the department and low commitment to degree and career goals. Later, attrition is associated with inadequate interactions concerning the student's academic competence. In the last

stage, Tinto believes that the behavior of a specific faculty member or members is a determining factor (Tinto, 1993).

Engineering and Science: Environmental Factors

Howard G. Adams and Martha M. Conley correlated the low retention rates of underrepresented graduate students in the fields of engineering and science with factors in the environment, such as inadequate financing, mentorship, research advice and guidance, and departmental relationships, among others, the very same factors that underrepresented ABD (all but the dissertation) doctoral students cited as reasons why they departed their programs of study (Adams and Conley 1993).

Changing the Manner by Which We Regard Doctoral Students

Doctoral education represents training ground for future scholars. It is interesting, however, educators may tend to not think of doctoral students as undergoing a student development process, but rather may view students more as arriving at the doors of the institutions fully formed and less as the novices they are. The expectation is a somewhat misguided one that students should know or be aware of the intricacies of the doctoral educational process remains a feature of higher education. Changing the manner in which we regard doctoral students as they navigate through the process offers us new possibilities for retention, but certainly this awareness is not without its price.

National Studies on Doctoral Education – Systematic Changes

The National Studies on Doctoral Education (Nyquist and Woodford, 2000) recommended eight (8) ways to implement systematic changes to doctoral student programs, that may influence a decline in the student attrition rate. They are:

- (a) Provide explicit expectation for doctoral students.
- (b) Provide adequate mentoring from faculty to student.
- (c) Provide exposure to wide variety of career options.
- (d) Prepare students to teach in a variety of settings using a range of pedagogies based on research in teaching and learning.
- (e) Recruit women and students of color to diversify the American intellect.

- (f) Produce scholar-citizens connected more closely to the needs of society and global economy.
- (g) Balance the deep learning of the disciplinary doctorate with the variety of interdisciplinary challenges.
- (h) Create partnerships with all involved in doctoral education. This includes doctoral students and stakeholders, universities, government agencies, foundations, business and industry, professional and educational associations, governance boards and accrediting agencies.

In conclusion, it takes a community of scholars to build, retain, and graduate a community of scholars. If the paradigm works appropriately, the idea of mentoring beyond the self should occur. Scholars who have been mentored will in turn inspire others to success. The student remains the focal point for their work. The pragmatic application of this theoretical framework is an educational philosophy that cultivates and preserves individuality amid the global concerns of the university and its goals. It lends legitimacy to conscious efforts to implement purposeful change. Finally, one-to-one consistent engagement with doctoral students, dedication to the completion of their degrees, honest interaction through heightened communication, technical support, orientation, and the implementation of a doctoral student experience, all represent an eclectic approach that is refreshingly humane and that assuredly cultivates a climate of involvement. There must be continued research on doctoral student retention and attrition on national and institutional levels. This continued research must be linked to best practices with implementation measures and evaluation of policies and procedures that support both graduate advising faculty and their doctoral students. We urge decision makers to include doctoral students in the planning, coordination and implementation phases. By including them it could prove to be a valuable asset in assessing the appropriate direction for improving a doctoral program of studies for the ultimate benefit of students.

References

- Adams, H. G., & Conley, M. M. (1993). Focusing on the campus milieu: A guide for enhancing the graduate climate. South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University, National Consortium for Graduate Degrees for minorities in Engineering and Science.
- Berelson, B. (1960). Graduate education in the United States. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Bowen, W. G., & Rudenstine, N. L. (1992). In pursuit of the Ph.D. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Golde, C. M. (2005). Gaps in training of doctoral students: Doctoral students perceptions: Paper presented at the meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Albuquerque, NM.
- Lovitts, B. E. (1996). Leaving the ivory tower: A sociological analysis of the causes of

- departure from doctoral study. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland.
- Lovitts, B. E. (2001). *B. E. Lovitts Leaving the ivory tower: The causes and consequences of departure from doctoral study*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Nyquist, J. D. & Woodford, B. J. *Re-envisioning the Ph.D.: What are Our Concerns?* Center for Instructional Development and Research, University of Washington, 2000. [On-line].
- Smallwood, S. (2004). Doctor dropout. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 50(2) 120-129.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Formatted by Dr. Mary Alice Kritsonis, National Research and Manuscript Preparation Editor, NATIONAL FORUM JOURNALS, Houston, Texas. www.nationalforum.com