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Surviving a Doctoral Program:

Student Perspectives of Support Services

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. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate student perspectives on factors that impede and assist in the completion of an Ed.D. program. Students at a small university in the northeast currently enrolled in their courses, as well as those enrolled in their dissertation phase, were included in this study.

Background of the Study

Considerable research has been conducted on graduate and professional students, largely focusing on reasons for attrition and departure (Ladik, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 1987; Tinto, 2004), reasons to pursue a doctoral degree (Antony, 2002; Golde, 1998), and the ways graduate students assimilate into the university, i.e. student experiences in and out of the classroom (Forney & Davis, 2002; Tinto, 2004; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). Fewer studies, however, have been conducted to assess the support services offered to graduate and professional students designed to enhance their educational experience and assist with their work-life balance. While these support services may seem incidental to the graduate student experience, a thoughtful and intentional program may affect student satisfaction, persistence, and a greater sense of connectedness with the institution (Elliott, 2003; Poock, 2004). Additionally, graduate students exhibit significantly different characteristics and needs compared with their undergraduate counterparts, yet much of the research fails to distinguish their unique profile (Ladki, 2005; Polson, 2003).

Graduate student attrition/persistence: Graduate students, and doctoral students in particular, tend to withdraw at three distinct enrollment points; 1) within the first month, 2) within the first year, and 3) after the completion of course work, prior to beginning the

dissertation phase (Bowen & Rudenstein, 1992). While some institutions attempt to mitigate this trend by enrolling students with a better "fit" (Lovitts, 2001), other institutions attribute poor programming or mediocre classroom experiences as the impetus for student departures (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). Tinto (1987) suggests, however, that a lack of integration into the organizational culture and the co-curricular opportunities is the underlying reason for student dissatisfaction and isolation.

Reasons for pursuing a doctoral degree: Golde (1998) conducted a study to investigate student reasons for pursuing doctoral degrees. The study found that many doctoral students held unrealistic expectations about the scope, purpose, and time demands of their degree program. These frustrations were compounded by the lack of personal and academic support services that might have offset student withdrawals. While this particular study did not delve into the possible benefits of a stronger support structure, other researchers have hinted at the importance of graduate student programming to strengthen persistence towards degree completion (Brandes, 2006; Lehker & Furlong, 2006; Polson, 2003; Poock, 2004).

Assimilation into the university culture: Several researchers offer perspectives on how doctoral and professional students assimilate to a new campus culture, especially if they are enrolled as part-time students (Brandes, 2006; Golde, 1998; Lawson & Fuehrer, 2001). Students must navigate the university bureaucracy, the processes for registration and financial arrangements, the departmental norms, program requirements, and scheduling logistics. Adults who have returned to graduate school after a hiatus find this landscape particularly daunting and crave a corresponding support structure (Polson, 2003).

A few researchers have found that carefully designed graduate support programs may reduce first-year stress and isolation (Antony, 2002; Lawson & Fuehrer, 2001). Examples of these support programs typically include orientation programs, peer-to-peer counseling, specialized academic advising, financial assistance, student support groups, and increased faculty-student interaction, formal as well as informal. Streeter (1985) was one of the first researchers to explore the relationship between first-year graduate student anxiety levels and the extent of faculty-student interactions. The importance of the faculty-student interaction is highlighted by other researchers, as well (Kim, Rhoades, & Woodard, 2003).

Graduate student profile: Today's graduate student population comprises adult students who are generally enrolled full-time, who enroll in graduate programs on a part-time basis, and who struggle to maintain a work-life balance with their careers, their civic and community obligations, and most importantly, their families. Many of these students have returned to education after a period of years; they are focused on pursuing advancement in their current career or in changing professions altogether (Zigmond, 1998). Additionally, their personal time and their finances are strained as a result of trying to obtain a degree and prepare for new roles in their professions. These students demand a different mix of student services, requiring the collaboration and creativity of graduate school faculty and administrators. More extensive research is needed to better understand the needs and interests of graduate and professional students in order to ensure their satisfaction and academic success.

Conceptual Framework

Tinto's (1987) interaction theory forms the basis for this study, focusing on the relationship between student satisfaction and institutional commitment. Tinto measured student satisfaction across six transformative dimensions, from growth and development to self-actualization. The dimensions include:

Educational experience: The extent to which student expectations are met relative to course content, rigor, quality, and challenge;

Development of skills & knowledge: The extent to which students are able to learn, to think critically, develop problem-solving skills, synthesize material and analyze information;

Faculty contact: The extent to which students are satisfied with academic advising, accessibility of faculty, and the extent of the interaction with faculty acting as advisors/mentors;

Personal and social growth: The extent to which personal and/or social growth is experienced and developed by the student (personal growth defined as private, individually-directed development, while social growth is defined as involvement in planned group activities and interactions, usually sponsored by the institution);

Sense of community: The extent to which students feel a sense of belonging and being welcomed by the institution, both broadly and within their individual departments. In addition to personal relationships, students may form a relationship with the institution's organizational identity and culture (Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995);

Overall commitment to and satisfaction with college: The extent to which students feel they have selected the right institution for their aspirations, the sense that they would select the institution again, given the chance, and the confirmation that they would recommend the institution to a classmate or friend.

Methodology

Design

This sequential exploratory mixed method design sought to first determine the factors in phase that enhance or impede success, as well as recommended interventions to guarantee future student success. The sequential exploratory design of this study consisted of qualitative data collection and analysis, followed by the development of a questionnaire (Creswell, 2003). The qualitative portion of this study will be presented here.

The first phase of the study included N=2 focus groups and N=4 in-depth interviews. Morgan (1997) described the value of focus groups as “data collection that pursues “exploratory” aspects of the analysis” (p. 27).

Sample

The sample was drawn from students in a small Ed.D. doctoral program in a northeast city. The program comprises a cohort structure where all students travel together through two years of coursework and then complete the dissertation (within four years, six years total). The courses are offered on alternating weekends, so the greater majority of the students continue to work full-time while in the program. The population of students range from late 20's to late 50's with an average age of m=42. Enrollment in the program requires work experience in a leadership capacity, which speaks to the level of stress on their professional life prior to admission and during the program.

A total of N=18 students participated in focus group discussions and N=4 students participated in the personal interviews. Purposeful sampling of focus group participants consisted of intact groups of students. One class (n=14) was chosen at the conclusion of the first course and one class (n=4) was chosen at midterm of their final course. This homogeneity in the composition of the sample allowed for "more free-flowing conversations among participants within the groups but also facilitates the examination of differences in perspectives between groups" (Morgan, 1997, p. 35). Purposeful sampling was also employed for individual depth interviews based on the special knowledge and insights the respondents possessed about the program.

Instrumentation

Focus Groups

A focus group moderator's guide was developed and used to facilitate the group interviews. Krueger and Casey (2009) highlight the importance of introducing factual questions in the opening phase of the interview in order to put participants at ease. The interview protocol proceeds from an opening question ('icebreaker") to introductory questions (introducing the topic) to body questions (transition and key questions). The focus group session concludes with ending questions, giving participants a chance to debrief and offer final comments.

Participants were questioned about their perceptions of support services available to doctoral students, spanning three broad categories: academic support, student services support, and personal (work/life balance) support. Initial questions provided participants with a chance to ease into the discussion by citing the services and support structures that worked best for them; subsequent discussion focused on student assessments of services in all areas, supplemented by personal examples of their experiences. Concluding questions focused on specific suggestions the participants offered regarding improvements that could be made to the program.

Interviews

Depth interviewing is useful in developing first-hand descriptions of the "lived" experience (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). Employing a semi-structured interview technique, current students were queried regarding their assessment of doctoral program support services. Probes were integrated into the exchange to extract more detailed information about student comments. These interviews (n=4) yielded rich descriptive

details that reflected the depth of student perceptions and feelings about the ways in which the program supported their education.

Following each focus group and interview, peer debriefing was employed to check the accuracy and consistency of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, the initial findings were sent to the participants for member checking in order to correct errors, assess the intention of participant words, and add meaning to the findings that may have been stimulated from reading the transcripts (Lincoln & Guba).

Data Analysis

A thorough examination of the notes allowed for the development of themes and identification of codes. The focus group data were developed into themes that emerged from the specific conversations and an interpretation of the deeper meanings behind the personal stories (Kruger, 1998). Themes were subsequently translated into broad categories, which were then further segregated into sub-categories based on clustered responses. Themes reflected Tinto's six dimensions, supported by participant descriptions of shared and personal experiences.

Because this study included $N=2$ focus groups, group-to-group validation was utilized to determine how much emphasis a theme should receive (Morgan, 1997). Additionally, the process of member checking was utilized to ensure trustworthiness and clarity of the themes by circulating initial drafts of the focus group transcripts to select participants.

Results

The theoretical underpinnings of this study was rooted in Tinto's (1987) interaction theory. The findings, reported according to the six transformative dimensions of growth and development, are organized and presented as the first phase of the questionnaire

development. The final instrument will be distributed to a sample of current doctoral students and alumni of a small, Ed.D. program located in the Northeast.

Educational experience: This dimension reports the findings relative to meeting student expectations on course content, rigor, quality, and challenge. Survey items to further investigate include:

- Pre-enrollment preparation, to include readings, outline of the first term assignments, and overview of the program would ease the transition during the first year of study.
- Additional APA assistance is needed throughout the program.
- Distribution of syllabi and course assignments in the semester prior to enrollment would be beneficial.
- Scaffolding of the dissertation throughout the program would help students feel more in control of the process.

Development of skills & knowledge: This dimension reports the findings relative to students' ability to learn, think critically, develop problem-solving skills, synthesize material and analyze information:

- Facilitating student work continually throughout the program on segments of their dissertations.
- Provide students with in-class application activities to work and learn.
- Provide peer-to-peer learning.
- Provide self-reflection where students can reassess their knowledge and skills

Faculty contact: This dimension reports findings relative to student satisfaction with academic advising, accessibility of faculty, and the extent of the interaction with faculty acting as advisors/mentors:

Satisfaction with:

- Accessibility of faculty
- Approachability of faculty
- Faculty provide timely feedback
- Faculty provide respectful, detailed feedback
- Commitment of dissertation advisor to the student
- Process for choosing a major advisor

Personal and social growth: This dimension reports findings relative to personal and/or social growth experienced and developed by the student :

Personal

- Interaction between first, second, and third year students to discuss progress, obstacles, and growth.
- Work on dissertation early to allow them to see progress through the program
- Create student support group (i.e. student association or leadership group).
- Forum or seminar, during the fall term of the second year, to discuss the process and preparation of the comprehensive assessment and dissertation.
- Assistance with off-campus resources support (i.e. email, programs, library, etc.)
- Assistance with logistics (i.e. hotel accommodations, meals, parking, events, etc.)

Social

- Alumni events to encourage relationships.
- Guest speaker series to bring all students together in a collegial atmosphere.
- List available of all alumni willing to meet with current students for concerns or advice.
- Provide a lounge space for students work and gather, socialize and share.

Sense of community: The extent to which students feel a sense of belonging and being welcomed by the institution, both broadly and within their individual departments. In addition to personal relationships, students may form a relationship with the institution's organizational identity and culture (Bhattacharya, Rio, & Glynn, 1995):

- Include students in the continuous improvement, assessment, and development of the program.
- Host periodic social events (holiday and/or year end) for all students.
- Solicit student opinions regarding assignments and course content.
- Introduce students to the campus prior to enrollment (Orientation)
    - Registration, parking stickers, id, library, campus tour
    - Intro to administration and resources
    - Provide detailed overview of program from beginning to end

Overall commitment to and satisfaction with college: The extent to which students feel they have selected the right institution for their aspirations, the sense that they would select the institution again, given the chance, and the confirmation that they would recommend the institution to a classmate or friend.

These items will seek to determine how to better develop current students as potential alumni:

- Connect students from all cohorts through an advisory process
- Include and invite students to University events
- Provide students with information regarding campus services available to doctoral students.

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