Programming for Successful Retention of Graduate Students

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Graduate students represent nearly one out of every four students attending universities or comprehensive institutions. It is an extremely heterogeneous group and provides unique challenges to higher education. This article summarizes current programming efforts to enhance graduate student experiences. Included is a focus on programs for the entering student as well as programs that support student persistence. Ideas for programming that facilitate a successful entry into careers have also been included. These programming efforts can facilitate graduate student retention through degree completion.

Increasing attention is being devoted to the graduate student experience in higher education (Anderson, 1998; Baird, 1993; Pruitt-Logan & Isaac, 1995). Learners engaged in graduate study have grown increasingly diverse. Greater access to advanced degrees has resulted in an accelerated number of female graduate students, even in traditionally male-dominated fields. Between 1960 and 1991, master's degrees awarded to women increased by 53%. Today women represent three fifths of all graduate student enrollments (O'Brien, 1992).

Approximately one in five graduate students belongs to a racial or ethnic minority (Pruitt-Logan & Isaac, 1995). The numbers of international, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students, as well as students with disabilities have also increased (Pruitt-Logan & Isaac, 1995).

Today's graduate students are less likely than their predecessors to pursue graduate work on a full-time, residential basis (O'Brien, 1992). Many are older, employed while pursuing degree work, and confronted with the need to balance multiple commitments involving degree requirements, work demands, and family needs (Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Isaac, Pruitt-Logan, & Upcraft, 1995). LaPidus (1998) estimated that 85% of master's level students attend part-time and are increasingly reliant on completing course work through distance education or at off-campus sites.

While a growing number of graduate students pursue advanced study immediately upon completion of their undergraduate programs, a substantial contingency of delayed-entry students return for advanced degrees after an absence from higher education. The graduate student population is extremely heterogeneous, resulting in a wide diversity of needs (Fischer & Zigmond, 1998). While higher education has historically provided a variety of services in response to a diverse undergraduate population, limited attention has been devoted to extending such support to this diverse graduate student clientele. To respond to the needs of these learners, institutions need to examine the unique challenges confronting graduate students as they move into, through, and out of their graduate degree programs.

Although graduate students represent nearly one out of every four students attending universities or comprehensive institutions (Baird, 1993), little research has examined factors related to graduate student retention. Baird suggested that institutions of higher education pay attention to graduate student retention because of the large number of students impacted, the important ways those with graduate degrees contribute to society, and the intensive time and resource commitments institutions make to graduate education. Most student retention research has focused on undergraduates, although limited study has been made of the general patterns of completion rates for graduate students (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). The complexity of issues related to understanding graduate student retention has probably inhibited research in this area (Isaac, 1993).

Quality academic advising has frequently been cited as a major predictor of graduate student persistence (Baird, 1995; Baker, 1992; Council of Graduate Schools, 1991; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The critical roles advisors play at different stages of a graduate student's degree pursuit is frequently cited (Baird, 1995; Bargar & Mayo-Chamberlain, 1983; Winston & Polkosnik, 1988). Advisors who fulfill these various roles successfully will probably have a positive impact on degree completion.

However, not all graduate advisors have the skills, interests, and commitment to fulfill these various roles. Even if they did, they may not have the time to allocate to such activities. Pruitt-Logan and Isaac (1995) noted that recent changes in higher education have created an increased expectation for faculty contributions to research and scholarship. Such expectations provide stiff competition for the time faculty can devote to graduate student advising. Therefore, institutions may need to seek alternative ways to enhance graduate student experiences and increase retention.

The remainder of this article provides a brief overview of programs that can improve the graduate student experience. These programs may be implemented and sponsored by individual advisors, departments, colleges, or school graduate studies offices, university-wide graduate schools, or campus student service providers (i.e., counseling centers or career services). The intent is to encourage the development of programs that can supplement academic advising as a retention strategy.

Programming for the Entering Graduate Student

The literature supports offering a variety of programs designed specifically for graduate students (Baker, 1992; Council of Graduate Schools, 1995; Fischer & Zigmond, 1998; Hodgson & Simoni, 1995; Kelley, 1999; Rimmer, Lammert, & McClain, 1982). Services that assist students in making the decision to pursue graduate studies and orient them to their graduate programs have received considerable attention.

Wessel (1995) described a graduate studies awareness program created by Career Services at Ball State University. Drawing on a number of existing student services (e.g., financial aid, counseling center), workshops were developed to give prospective students an extensive overview of the graduate program selection process, preparing for entrance examinations, applying for graduate school, and seeking financial aid. The purpose was to assist prospective students in deciding if pursuing a graduate degree was appropriate for them.

Several authors have described the development of effective orientation programs (Barker, Felstehausen, Couch, & Henry, 1997; Rosenblatt & Christensen, 1993; Vickio & Tack, 1989; Vlisides & Eddy, 1993). To establish the importance of various orientation program topics, Barker, et al. (1997) surveyed graduate students 27 years and older who had delayed entry to graduate school. Orientation programs that offered a cafeteria-style workshop format best suited this diverse graduate student population. The most important topics were information about library services, library searches, technical writing, time management, assistantships, study skills, and medical services. Stress management, career counseling, test-taking skills, and financial counseling were viewed as desirable, but less critical, topics.

Others (Baker, 1992; Kelley, 1999) suggested that the focus of orientation programs be broadened to include child or elder care, disability support services, leadership and community service opportunities, security services, psychological and learning services, and marriage and family counseling. Kelley (1999) recommended that academic and student service units work jointly to sponsor workshops. Rather than providing a formal orientation program some institutions provide a "graduate fest" for newly admitted graduate students. Services and organizations available to assist graduate students are presented in a show-and-tell format. The informality of this format may increase its appeal.

While orientation programs may be central to the student's transition into graduate school, the literature also encourages targeted efforts to facilitate the acculturation process (Baird, 1999; Boyle & Boice, 1998; Council of Graduate Schools, 1995; Rimmer, Lammert, & McClain, 1982). Assuming new roles and entering a new subculture may cause graduate students to experience what Kneller (1965) called "cultural discontinuity." Boyle and Boice's research (1998) found that exemplary graduate programs provided opportunities to enhance the acculturation process at the departmental level. The process is designed to help students feel that they belong by acquainting them with departmental norms, specific rules, and academic requirements. Introducing new students to departmental faculty and established students can also be used to facilitate the acculturation process.

Departmental open houses and printed material represent additional ways to assist in the acculturation process. Faculty directories describing each faculty member's research interests and academic specialities can be very helpful to students. Question-and-answer guides, curriculum advising sheets, one-page course descriptions, self-advising handbooks, and handouts about choosing an area of emphasis are other ways printed materials can orient students.

Programming to Support Student Persistence

Peer Interactions

Once students understand the norms and regulations of their academic community, programming efforts may focus on helping the student feel connected and supported by the department and the institution. Opportunities for graduate students to interact with their peers are a very important part of this process.

Valuable socialization occurs as a result of peer interactions (Baird, 1990, 1993; Conrad, Duren, & Haworth, 1998; Tinto, 1991). Rimmer

et al. (1982) found that graduate students need opportunities for social interactions with peers. Programs that not only increase informal faculty-student interaction but also provide a noncompetitive arena for students to mingle with one another can enhance the socialization process. Graduate student brown bags, TGIF parties, and potlucks are examples.

Sponsoring similar activities in off-campus based programs is logistically more difficult but not impossible. Distribution of a semester newsletter can keep the off-campus students connected to the department while informing them of important requirements and deadlines. Some institutions have created graduate student listservs to facilitate communication between graduate students in geographically dispersed programs; others simply provide a graduate student directory that includes information about the students, their areas of interest, and current or previous employment focus. These and other activities can increase networking among peers, a valuable adjunct to the support they receive from significant others, co-workers, and friends.

Role Conflict and External Supports

For many graduate students, role conflict is inherent in graduate school attendance. Research suggests the source of conflict may differ for men and women (Mallinckrodt, Leong, & Kralj, 1989), but substantial percentages of graduate students have reported that they are always or usually bothered by role conflict created by work and family demands (Anderson & Swazey, 1998). Yet, these other roles can also be key sources of both emotional and financial support for graduate students. Many institutions offer traditional workshops (e.g., time, stress, and money management) to assist the student in balancing these demands.

Some institutions not only help graduate students cope with such conflicts but also promote support and understanding from significant others. Kelley (1999) describes a Life Partner Program that explicitly addresses questions like: "Why is my partner studying?" "What are the components of the academic program?" "Where are his/her classes?" "Who are his/her classmates?" "What are his/her career options?" "Are there other partners who share my feelings?" Another institution offers a similar workshop that features a panel discussion of significant others. The goal of the workshop is to acquaint significant others to the stresses created while a partner is in graduate school.

Other workshops provide insights into the special concerns of today's graduate students: "Staying Married in Graduate School," "Everything I Wish I Had Known When I Started Graduate School," "Child Care: Who's Going To Do It and How Much Will it Cost?" A key element of these workshops is educating the student and those who support them about the impact of the graduate student experience on their lives. A unifying goal is to build support and understanding for those undertaking the demanding role of graduate student.

Promoting Health

Effectively dealing with role conflicts requires maintaining mental and physical health. Numerous factors threaten the health of graduate students. The expense of health and dental care may result in costly delays in seeking services, and eating habits may become irregular. Concurrently, time pressures may require that exercise be excluded from schedules (Caple, 1995). Workshops devoted to student health care, health insurance issues, and health-promoting habits address important concerns related to graduate student persistence.

Mattering

Some have suggested that adult persistence in school is related to the need for students to feel that they matter. Schlossberg and Warren (1985) found that this feeling of mattering kept adult learners engaged in learning. The literature suggests that graduate programs can employ a variety of mechanisms to increase the likelihood that learners will feel valued.

Kelley (1999) described a Graduate Student Appreciation Week, which includes both academic and social activities. Free massages, lectures, receptions, and luncheons are a few of the ways in which appreciation is communicated. Her institution has also created a Student Recognition Board where student awards, grant recipients, published articles, and other contributions made by graduate students are recognized.

Providing graduate student mailboxes and a graduate student lounge are structural ways that mattering may be communicated. It can also be communicated in less direct ways, such as a departmental photo album, monthly coffee hours, and graduate student forums.

Seeking student feedback about their graduate experience is yet another way institutions can communicate that students matter. A number of

institutions have initiated ongoing mechanisms by which this feedback is gathered (Council of Graduate Schools, 1995). Graduate school administrators often initiate the evaluation process. While the overall institutional concern is with graduate student retention, the process of gathering information can contribute to graduate students' feelings about their importance to the institution.

Facilitating Student Success

Other program offerings contribute, directly or indirectly, to student success. For example, many institutions sponsor workshops designed to help the student complete various stages of graduate programs, such as preparing for the qualifying exam, grant-writing, conducting quantitative/qualitative research, preparing the dissertation proposal, publishing research findings, presenting workshops, and completing internships.

The University of Pittsburgh sponsors a series of eight, 7-hour workshops, one per month in the fall and spring semesters (Fischer & Zigmond, 1998). Many of the traditional graduate-student, survival-skill seminars previously described are offered. In addition, this in-depth program provides instruction on research ethics, including topics on authorship, plagiarism, and confidentiality.

Programming for the Transition from Graduate Studies to Work

While programs focused on enhancing the success of graduate students, especially in their early years, is critically important, institutions should also be proactive in preparing the student for the transition from school to work. Because many graduate students will seek careers in the academy, workshops on publishing and paper presentations are frequently offered. These are conducted by teams of professors and graduate students with experience in presenting papers and publishing. Topics include dealing with audience questions as well as the steps to getting manuscripts accepted (Blackburn, 1993).

As students bring closure to their graduate experience, many institutions offer conventional workshops on creating resumes or curricula vitae, writing letters of application, and preparing for interviews. Emory University sponsors a workshop on resume and curriculum vitae writing that is held in conjunction with a workshop on the academic and nonacademic job search. A panel of graduate school alumni and faculty discussing their experiences in both the academic and nonacademic markets is a feature of this workshop. (Blackburn, 1993)

The University of Michigan's Graduate School sponsors forums in which faculty members are invited to instruct graduate students on a variety of topics they are likely to confront when they interview for positions. Topics include how to give a job talk, what can be expected in a job interview, how to negotiate teaching load, and other topics, including space, lab equipment, research support, and research leave (Council of Graduate Schools, 1995). Workshops on networking and how to make the most of a national convention are other ways to introduce students to potent job seeking strategies.

The changing market provides numerous opportunities that may not have been previously available and, therefore, not considered by the graduate student. While delayed-entrance graduate students may need less assistance with career counseling and job placement than traditional age graduate students (Baker, 1992), they may need to be encouraged to confront the future actively and do so with a broadened vision of career opportunities. Fischer and Zigmond (1998) suggested that students should be encouraged to seek role models and mentors outside academia to ensure they carefully examine all options. Programming efforts designed to encourage future graduates to explore the full range of options available to them has been recommended by LaPidus (1998).

Conclusion

The challenges confronting institutions in meeting the needs of today's heterogeneous graduate population can be daunting. Graduate student demographics vary widely, as do their lifestyles, values, and attitudes. This diversity is not likely to be addressed by expanded services from the graduate advisor. Instead, if higher education is to respond effectively to these students, program offerings will need to be expanded. Focusing attention on graduate students needs, whether they are moving into, through, or out of graduate programs, provides a critical link to persistence and graduation.

Programming efforts addressing the special needs of this diverse group of students must be a shared campus responsibility. Advisors can help identify the needs, but they will not be able to provide the various workshops or other types of assistance identified in this paper. This will likely require an expansion of the roles and responsibilities of student service providers. Higher educa-

tion must be willing to address these issues aggressively and creatively if it is to be successful in promoting graduate student retention.

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