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Roles for Faculty in Reducing Barriers to Success for Part-Time Graduate Students

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Abstract: There is limited research on the barriers to successful degree completion for part-time graduate students. The purpose of this paper is to present the results of a survey on former part-time graduate students at Penn State Harrisburg and to discuss the influence that faculty and advisors can have on their success in completing graduate degrees.

Significance of the Study

Similar to past enrollments, in Fall 2007, a vast majority (88%) of the graduate student population is part-time (1472 total). The literature indicated that one of the greatest influences in a student's success is a positive relationship between faculty and student and, conversely, a negative relationship presents a barrier (Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 1998). The nature of the relationship between graduate students and advisors is an important determinant of a student's success or failure in any graduate program (Ferreira, 2000; Golde, 2005; Kluever, 1997; Nettles & Millett, 2006). Therefore, it is important to discuss the roles that faculty can have in reducing barriers and encouraging graduate completion, particularly for the unique part-time population.

Methodology and Demographics

A mail-based survey of former graduate students at PSH was conducted to determine the factors that affect the success of graduate students and the barriers to degree completion. Former graduate students who were enrolled between 1995 and 2005 at PSH were sent the survey (N=5407). The survey utilized Dillman's (2000) Tailored Design Method, which requires multiple contacts with possible respondents in order to increase the survey response rate. Thus, the PSH graduate student survey process included four mailings in addition to an introductory postcard to both those who completed and those who were enrolled but did not complete. There was a 25% survey response rate. The majority (70%) of the respondents were female; 93% self-identified as White, and 7% identified with other racial and ethnic categories; 84% completed the graduate degree program and 16% did not. The majority of students (90%) were enrolled in a master's program, 5% were former doctoral students, and 5% pursued a graduate certificate program .

Findings Related to Faculty/Advising

Although additional barriers were addressed in the survey (including finances, time to devote to studies, personal experiences and perceptions of program flexibility), this paper focuses on the importance of faculty and advising, where students indicated that the faculty relationships were statistically significant ($p=.002$) factors in their successful completion of the degree. Survey questions related to the faculty relationship included the timeliness and adequacy of feedback; the professor's teaching style; and the support, encouragement, time and validation received from the professor. Questions on advising included the usefulness of the guidance presented; the advisor's knowledge of the field; and the encouragement, validation and support received.

Most (80%) of the former graduate students who responded to the survey were also part-time. This statistic is not surprising, as the part-time graduate population is typically comprised of full-time working adults. However, because of their career responsibilities, access to faculty and advising is more difficult. Nearly half of the respondents (47%) indicated that they did not have an advisor and surprisingly, there were no statistically significant differences between completion status and the lack and/or presence of an advisor. This result suggests future questions of whether the lack of an advisor is better than poor advising, and how faculty can ensure that advising meets the needs of the part-time graduate student.

Roundtable Focus: Role of Faculty in Degree Completion

In a forum such as the Adult Education Research Conference, these barriers can be discussed openly to determine the roles that faculty can play in helping part-time students succeed in their educational pursuits. Questions to stimulate discussion will include: (a) How can faculty improve access to and/or efficiency of advising to part-time graduate students; (b) What can faculty do to maintain the motivation of part-time graduate students; and (c) Whether incentives are needed to assist faculty in these efforts.

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