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## Attributes of Successful Graduate Students: Facilitating Self-Efficacy and Persistence

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## Attributes of Successful Graduate Students: Facilitating Self-Efficacy and Persistence

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Attributes of Successful Graduate Students: Facilitating Self-Efficacy and Persistence

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### **Abstract**

Colleges and universities struggle with declining program completion rates among graduate students. While the attrition rate of graduate students declined over the last five years in the United States, the issue of graduate student persistence continues to be challenging. This study identifies and explores reported characteristics: expectations, motivation, self-discipline, emotional intelligence, and passion for learning. Graduate students studying educational leadership conducted a qualitative inquiry to approach theoretical comprehension of the intrinsic motivations, expectations, and major attributes of successful graduate students. Examining these areas provides a deeper understanding of success achieved by graduate students.

*Keywords:*

Graduate Students, Attributes, Characteristics, Self-efficacy, Self-efficacy Theory, Persistence, Self-discipline, Graduate Student Success

## **Introduction**

Graduate student completion rates are declining, while enrollment is increasing (Baum & Steele, 2017). This poses an immediate problem for colleges and universities. Lew et al. (2020) notes, “persistence is a process in which individuals take the initiative to diagnose their learning needs and evaluate learning outcomes.” In graduate education, persistence plays a significant role in the framework of a student’s success and the attrition rates for colleges.

Successful graduate students demonstrate excellent time management skills and work extraordinarily well with others, (Cullen & Vose, 2014) and exhibit high motivation and drive to complete programs (Grehan et al., 2011). In exploring the persistence pathways of successful graduate students, several articles emerge about the attributes students bring to the learning environment. Tinto (2016) posits that persistence is a form of motivation that propels students to stay connected to programs of interest. Graduation enrollment has increased in recent years, and graduation rates have plummeted.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Graduate student attrition rate approximates 50 percent in the United States (U.S.) (Baum & Steele, 2017). Individuals planning to attend graduate school face significant challenges and stressors. Similarly, graduate student program completion is a significant productivity outcome of higher education institutions’ effectiveness (Lew et al., 2020). Consequently, it may provide valuable insights to identify personal factors that may increase program persistence among graduate students.

Graduate students are expected to develop, adapt, and excel in advanced reading, writing, and communication skills with demanding workloads and schedules causing significant stress

(Domingo et al., 2022). Graduate student enrollment and completion continues to rise with 13.1 percent of Americans holding a graduate level degree (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Although, little information is available about why graduation rates hover around 50 percent (Graduate, 2022). This study seeks to ascertain successful graduate student attributes to improve graduate student retention and persistence.

## **Literature Review**

The brief literature review explored graduate student expectations and attributes associated with successful graduate students. Lew et al. (2020) document that higher education institutions remain concerned about productivity outcomes and graduate student persistence. Studying graduate student attributes may inform institutional changes and practices in addressing graduate student attrition (Cullen & Vose, 2014; Ebejer, 2022; Tinto, 2016). The self-efficacy theory emerged as a guiding framework for identifying five key characteristics: 1) expectations, 2) motivation, 3) self-discipline, 4) emotional intelligence, and 5) passion for learning.

## **Self-Efficacy Theory**

The term was coined by Albert Bandura in the 1970s as a term to describe the developmental attributes of a person who can operate autonomously and gauge their own cognitive strength (Bandura, 1971). The self-efficacy theory derives from the notion that graduate students develop skills that strengthen “...an individual’s judgments of his or her capabilities to perform given actions” (Schunk, 1991, p. 207). This definition depicts several characteristics of successful graduate students as part of the theory, including motivation, emotional intelligence, and practical communication skills. Comparing the presence of these characteristics in graduate study programs against graduate student retention and program

success revealed an observable trend of graduate student success (Swaminathan, 2012). Graduate students also reviewed a list of applicable program characteristics, highlighting the relationship between those specific characteristics and how successful graduate students empathized with those characteristics (Battle & Wigfield, 2003; Tinto, 2016). The literature revealed several expectations associated with graduate student success.

## **Expectations**

Deggs et al. (2010) detail expectations regarding learning outcomes, teaching, and support systems as critical to the success of a graduate student. Concerning learning outcomes, students engage in relevant material beyond what books provide applying practical skills in their field of study (Deggs et al., 2010). Having access to faculty who are willing to provide instructional feedback allows graduate students to meet educational standards, notes Deggs et al. (2010). Finally, universities play an instrumental role in the educational experience graduate students receive by providing students with dedicated support systems to earn a graduate degree (Deggs et al., 2010).

Graduate programs require motivation and diligence (Ebejer, 2022). Hands-on experience in the field of study is one of the most important byproducts of being a graduate student (Mowen, 2007). In many graduate programs, students are immersed in a career field to gain experience and knowledge. Ultimately, as Powers and Swick (2012) argue, graduate students become competent researchers, writers, and time managers through diligent work. Students succeed through persistence and growth. Motivation emerges as a key attribute to persist in graduate school (Chang et al., 2022).

## **Motivation**

Staying ambitious and driven during challenging times is both a beneficial and difficult characteristic for graduate students. Motivation consists of three attributes: achievement, connection, and power (Chang et al., 2022). An intelligent graduate student shows support, drive, and responsibility for timely work. Graduate students share optimistic viewpoints and hope for success (Snyder et al., 1991) An increase in motivation creates more opportunities for problem-solving and a drive to succeed (Kolko, 1980).

Growth, a type of motivation, also plays a major role in success. Growth derives from an individual's intellectual curiosity and external, career-driven motivational goals (Battle & Wigfield, 2003; Hegarty, 2011; O'Connor & Cordova, 2010). Women statistically receive more advanced degrees than men (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Battle and Wigfield's (2003, p. 68) survey of women finds intellectual enrichment takes precedence over wealth, providing for a family, prestige, and profession. Thus, growth not only fosters success, but it also contributes to motivation. Another attribute for success is self-discipline.

### **Self-Discipline**

Hindi (2015) suggested self-discipline is an important attribute, as found in the 39 reviewed studies of successful graduate students. Additionally, greater than 50% of universities describe self-discipline as a significant predictor of graduate student success (Chlup et al., 2016). Successful graduate students manifest autonomy and control over oneself (Cullen & Vose, 2014). Attributes are classified as qualities or skills an individual possesses (Chiu et al., 2021). Self-discipline functions as a characteristic of self-management and is defined as one's willpower to accomplish political or economic tasks an educational culture deems desirable (Kohn, 2008). Graduate students possessing self-discipline direct mental processes toward the goal of successfully completing graduate school and blocking out internal or external distractions



(Montalvo & Torres, 2004). Mental processes can be significant contributors to graduate student well-being and overall success.

### **Emotional Intelligence**

The mental process of emotional intelligence is a significant attribute of successful graduate students. Emotional intelligence is "...an individual's ability to perceive, understand, as well as manage emotions and facilitate thought" (Mayer & Salovey, 1997, as cited in Grehan et al., 2011, p. 320). Qualter et al. (2009) suggest that emotionally intelligent students are more likely to seek advanced degrees and stay the course. Emotionally intelligent students channel and control both positive and negative emotions to meet established goals. Emotional intelligence promotes better communication and outstanding academic success (Grehan et al., 2011).

### **Passion for Learning**

Finally, passion for learning is an important attribute. Students who exhibit a genuine passion for learning exhibit significant advantages over students who do not possess such an attribute. Students in advanced degree classes achieve more autonomy than undergraduate students. Graduate professors expect students to complete all assignments on time and be able to discuss assigned reading materials as a group. Students who actively participate in class could potentially be offered assistantships, invitation to coauthor articles, or request to join research projects. Students actively engaged within the program are provided more opportunities to interact with different research projects, teach a course, or publish works before graduation (Cullen & Vose, 2014).

Intrinsically motivated individuals exhibit a true passion for learning as these individuals recognize the importance of intellectual growth. Intrinsically motivated individuals find learning

personally and professionally fulfilling. Students with this attribute tend to discover value in education and growing knowledge within professional careers (Briggs, 2017). Individuals that possess a genuine passion for learning invest in personal and professional development.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Self-efficacy theory suggests graduate students with the attribute of internal motivation have greater success in completion of a program. (Schunk 1991) postulates that components of the self-efficacy theory are critical to graduate student success. Graduate students' work provides opportunities for feedback and rewards leading to motivation (Schunk, 1991). A graduate program structured with institutional feedback and reward yields higher levels of displayed efficacy (Chang, 2022). Individual industry success, competency, and motivation are tied to self-efficacy and enhance graduate student success.

### **Method**

In a recent writing project, graduate students (N=7) enrolled in a leadership graduate class and explored the attributes associated with successful graduate students. Students researched successful graduate students' attributes and reported findings to the entire class. Students used data from an international collection of efficacy-related data pools (Chong, 2012). Graduate students considered other imperatives noted in the research in graduate decision-making, such as eventual salary impact and long-term cost-reward relationships in graduate studies (Battle & Wigfield, 2003; Hegarty, 2011; O'Connor & Cordova, 2010).

The method of evaluation is defined as a qualitative comparison between successful graduate student characteristics and the quantitative result of degree completion. Each individual characteristic was observed through research, evaluated for applicability and compared to a

definitive metric of student retention. Applicability of characteristics is compared, and graduate students postulate a conclusion to summarize a hypothetical relationship between these characteristics and graduate student success.

## **Results and Discussion**

Graduate students' methodological approach to determining efficacy's effect on graduate student program completion was summarized into four specific areas of understanding. The first area compiles simplistic motivations and rewards, such as the monetary reward for gaining employment in a desired career field (Battle & Wigfield, 2003; Hegarty, 2011; O'Connor & Cordova, 2010). This motivation was intrinsically linked to measurable post-program success and measured statistically over years of self-reported students' responses.

The second area of understanding focuses on appropriate expectations setting of graduate students. Successful graduate students manifest autonomy and control over themselves (Cullen & Vose, 2014). This attribute of self-discipline functions as a characteristic of self-management and is defined as one's willpower to accomplish tasks that political, economic, or educational culture deems desirable (Khon, 2008). Successful graduate students plan, control, and direct mental processes toward the goal of successfully completing graduate school (Montalvo & Torres, 2004).

Emotional intelligence is identified as the third significant trait for graduate students. Emotional intelligence is the ability to perceive, understand, as well as manage emotions and facilitate thought (Mayer & Salovey, 1997, as cited in Grehan et al., 2011, p. 320). Qualter et al., (2009) suggests emotionally intelligent students are more likely to seek advanced degrees and stay the course. Emotionally intelligent students are better communicators and will succeed academically (Grehan et al., 2011).

The last area of understanding for successful graduate students requires individuals to have a genuine passion for learning. Students who actively participate in the class will potentially be offered assistantships, participate in research projects, or be invited to coauthor articles before graduation (Cullen & Vose, 2014). In addition, students who enjoy learning will seek out opportunities within the individual's own personal and professional development (Briggs, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

Many factors influence graduate students' success or stagnancy. Expectations, motivation, self-discipline, emotional intelligence, and passion for learning are key attributes to being a successful graduate student. The attributes studied combined with persistence in graduate programs propel students to succeed.

All in all, there are multiple attributes that contribute to success in graduate school, but the attributes acknowledge qualities that are typically inherent, not learned. To provide graduates with greater opportunity to succeed, there should be an exploration of steps and processes needed to develop or improve attributes for successful program matriculations.

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