Reporting of Doctoral Student Attrition: A Policy Brief

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Introduction

Roughly half of all doctoral students in the United States will never complete their degree requirements (Council of Graduate Schools, 2020). That staggering number is larger for ethnic minority and female students, particularly for Black students who have the lowest completion rate (47 percent) and who make up only 13 percent of doctoral degrees (Lovitts, 2001). Additionally, retention rates for online students are an additional 10 to 20 percent lower than students who attend in-person (Rovai & Wighting, 2005). Thus, ethnic minority students in online doctoral programs are at a higher risk of not finishing their degrees compared to other genders and races (American Psychological Association, 2020).

While research has focused on understanding undergraduate student persistence (Astin, 1999; Bean, 1982; Tinto, 1988) graduate student persistence, particularly doctoral student persistence has been largely underresearched. Given the staggeringly low percentage rate of doctoral student completion, particularly in online doctoral programs, more research is needed to explore this phenomenon. These attrition rates have maintained at steady unacceptable levels for decades and research is starting to identify corrective measures. Accountability for reporting retention rates largely does not exist in the U.S. unless reported to a specific academic governing body or by the university itself. There is no mandatory reporting policy for this student data and data for these retention statistics often goes unreported or underreported by means of a self-report to the NCSES each year (NCSES, 2021).

Research Overview

A review of the literature provided support for examining the problem of doctoral student attrition. In the most recent Doctoral Recipient Summary Report from 2020, data shows that 55,283 individuals earned their doctorate in 2020 with 4,700 of those individuals in the field of

education (NCSES, 2021). Knowing that number might be two to three times higher, it is essential to identify and alleviate the barriers to doctoral student attrition (Council of Graduate Schools, 2020). Golde describes doctoral student attrition noting "Paradoxically, the most academically capable, most academically successful, most stringently evaluated, and most carefully selected students in the entire higher education system—doctoral students—are the least likely to complete their chosen academic goals" (Golde, 2000, p. 199). This ongoing research on doctoral student attrition has real and tangible implications for better understanding the experiences and needs of ethnic minority doctoral students in online doctoral programs.

Introduction of the Policy

The Student Right-To-Know Act of 1990 amended the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965 to require all institutions of higher education participating in receiving Title IV funds to disclose the completion or graduation rate of undergraduate certificate or degree-seeking, full-time students entering those institutions. In contrast, the largest report on doctoral student completion is The Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED) which is a voluntary self-report. The SED is an annual census of all individuals receiving a research doctorate from an accredited U.S. institution and has been conducted since 1957. The SED is sponsored by the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NSCES) within the National Science Foundation (NSF) and by three other federal agencies: the National Institutes of Health, Department of Education, and National Endowment for the Humanities. This survey collects information on the doctoral recipient's educational history, demographic characteristics, and postgraduation plans. Results are used to assess the characteristics of the doctoral population and trends in doctoral education and degrees. While reporting to the SED survey is high, there are many institutions that choose not to report.

There is not a national requirement that reports attrition or retention rates of doctoral students. To compound the lack of requirement in reporting, most colleges and universities simply do not track attrition data or information related to the attrition of those students, they only track retention data. This information is left to the university to track independently, if at all. Colleges and Universities typically do not track attrition data because it takes time to conduct exit interviews. In any professional field, the focus is on turnover rates or retention rates for employees. If 50 to 70 percent of the employees that started with a company six years ago were no longer with that company, the human resources department would probably spend a great deal of time looking into its hiring practices, regular employment practices, and compensation and benefits. Ultimately, all eyes would be directed toward solving this attrition problem. However, in the field of doctoral education, this high attrition rate has been commonplace for so long that it does not seem to spark the level of concern that it should.

Recent Trends

In 2017, a new congressional bill was introduced into the house called the Student Right to Know Before You Go Act of 2017. This bill is intended to establish new higher education data systems allowing for more accurate data on retention, attrition, graduation, and earning outcomes for all levels of postsecondary enrollment. This is a move in the right direction, but it still does not require any reporting specifically for doctoral program retention or attrition numbers.

Discussion and Analysis

A recent 2017 study of 80 doctoral students led to the emergence of four main factors contributing to doctoral student attrition: Faculty Advisor support of the student, socialization and support systems, emotional preparedness, and financial considerations (Rigler et al., 2017).

Based on these four factors alone, institutions could take a closer look at these current practices and provide support to doctoral students. Those support systems including faculty advisor support, socialization with other doctoral students, orientation courses that prepare for rigor, and financial aid training and consideration for students, combined with preparedness and information could mean the difference in retaining a student. If the institution knows better, the institution can do better.

Implications and Recommendations

A recommendation could be made for mandatory reporting of attrition and retention for all accredited, doctoral degree-granting institutions in the U.S. This proposed change could be an amendment to the current Student Right-To-Know Act of 1990. The reporting process should include tracking exit survey data of all doctoral students who leave the university or choose not to return to coursework. With steady tracking of this data, I believe researchers will find commonalities among the reasons for students not to continue their doctoral work. Once these trends are identified, work can begin to correct the concerns to create a better outcome for doctoral students and the institutions that serve them.

There are many current pressures leading to a heightened sense of accountability in higher education in the United States. Benchmarks are set for K-12 education and for undergraduate education. Appropriate benchmarks need to be set for doctoral education as well if there is a hope to break down barriers for doctoral students. If institutions are designed for learning and faculty are designed to seek iterative improvement processes, then we must be prepared for those internal and external pressures to hold us accountable for educating our students.

Future Research Direction

Further research needs to occur in the area of doctoral student retention and attrition. Student experiences should be highlighted from students who retain and also from students who choose to leave the university. Data from these studies could be used to highlight effective practices, provide reform in areas of need, and be used to thematize those experiences within the Ph.D. and the Ed.D.

Conclusion

The establishment of new higher education data systems that allow for more accurate data on retention, attrition, graduation, and earning outcomes for all levels of postsecondary enrollment is essential. Higher education should be accountable for how it supports or does not support its doctoral students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. For many years, doctoral education has been paired with phrases like, "only the strong survive" and "getting a doctorate is supposed to be hard work". While those two statements may still be true, we can no longer create and pour into systems that don't support students in the process. Colleges and universities should be tasked with creating student support structures that encourage student retention and build opportunities for success, not failure.

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