

Transforming the Opaque into the Transparent: Gender Issues in Doctoral Student Mentoring

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Abstract

This paper investigates issues of personal and institutional accountability in doctoral programs in education at three research universities from student, faculty and administrative perspectives. Through student surveys, taped and transcribed in-depth interviews with students, faculty and key administrative personnel, data sources are triangulated to analyze multiple perspectives on the intricacies of communication that muddy the transparency of successful doctoral program completion. This analysis illustrates institutional accountability issues that inhibit adequate mentoring practices as well as gender differences in communication styles that influence time to degree completion at the doctoral level. The findings from this study warrant improved administrative oversight, of, and systemic faculty rewards for doctoral degree completion.

Objectives

The objective of this study is to investigate primary stakeholder perspectives of doctoral education at three research-intensive institutions. By exploring the perspectives of doctoral students, faculty and administrators through the use of surveys, taped and transcribed interviews and content analysis of documents, this study includes evocative perspectives of doctoral programs at three locations. Motivated by the desire to profoundly analyze the complexity of the issue of doctoral degree completion, this study's purpose is to convey the varied perspectives of students, faculty and administrators on their experiences of, satisfaction with, and importance of, mentor-protégé relationships with regard to student degree completion. Some of the issues explored in this study include:

- How does faculty workload influence mentor/protégé relationships?
- Does faculty turnover contribute to doctoral student attrition?
- How does gender influence mentor/protégé relationships?
- What role does timing play in mentor-protégé interventions?
- What factors and conditions promote quality learning and scholarship?
- What student factors promote and hinder degree completion?

A major premise of this study is that student success in doctoral programs is most frequently the outcome of extended, deliberate involvement between faculty members and doctoral students during critical periods of development. These student development efforts revolve around developmental tasks that socialize doctoral students into the profession. Our study analyzes multiple perspectives on mentorprotégé relationships to clarify practices and experiences that both hinder and promote degree completion.

Theoretical Framework

At it's core, this study embraces the philosophies of the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (CID) in that every person who has earned a doctorate should "Generate new knowledge...Critically conserve history and foundational ideas of a discipline...and effectively transform existing knowledge

and its benefits to others” (Walker, 2004). Graduates of doctoral programs possessing these capacities are described by the CID as “stewards of the discipline.” For the purposes of limiting this study, we primarily analyze our data from a process model perspective. Baird (1993) and Berkenkotter, Huckin and Ackerman (1991) describe the process model as tasks that students are involved in that center around 1) an embedded ‘model of knowing’ that is specific to the discipline and is learned through involvement with the research products of the discipline. 2) Involvement in the larger research community beyond the institution by participation in professional societies. 3) Refereed journals that serve as active forums for the discussion and debate of ideas. 4) Faculty interaction centered around research. We also explore our data from a cultural perspective by considering academic departments and disciplines as products of tensions and struggles that are specifically inherent to a specific discipline at a specific location.

Methods

Survey Data

A convenience sample of 250 graduate students in the first two years of coursework at three research-intensive universities were administered a survey pertaining to four categorical measures of their disagreement and agreement to questions posed in the following domains:

- 1) Similarity of faculty interests to their own
- 2) Student perceptions of faculty interest in them
- 3) Opportunities for mentoring
- 4) Equality of communication regarding opportunities for growth
- 5) Relationship of assistantship to student career goals
- 6) Relationships with peers
- 7) Research opportunities with faculty
- 8) Teaching opportunities
- 9) Task related behaviors with faculty
- 10) Psychological support
- 11) Socialization experiences resulting in opportunities to “network”

The “Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney rank sum test”—a non parametric statistical test (Becker, 1995; Fraenkel and Wallen, 1993) was employed to analyze the survey data for the following reasons: 1) the data is categorical and ranked, 2) the assumptions of normality could not be made, and 3) the groups compared were essentially similar in that they were doctoral students in their first two years of coursework.

Qualitative Data

In-depth interviews were conducted with thirty doctoral students, twenty-one faculty members and fifteen administrators at three research-intensive universities schools of education. Fifteen female and fifteen male students at different stages of degree progress were interviewed to elicit their experiences and insights as graduate students. Ten female and eleven male faculty members were interviewed and five female and ten male upper level administrators participated in these interviews. The interviews were semi-structured and utilized an interview protocol that identified general topical domains. Likewise, documents from, and notes taken at public meetings regarding doctoral student mentoring were analyzed and coded for the purposes of this study. All qualitative data analysis followed Carspecken’s (1996) meaning reconstruction, validity reconstruction and horizon analysis protocols. For the purposes of this presentation, we will discuss three primary themes that resounded in different levels and capacities with all of the interview participants.

Results

Survey Data

Of those students who indicated an opinion either way, each survey item pertaining to the eleven domains described above were analyzed by gender. Our findings elucidated differences between the male and female experience of mentoring in nine of the eleven domains. Male doctoral students reported having more in common with their professors, more access to communication about opportunities, greater congruence between their assistantship and their career goals, more opportunities to be involved with faculty in research related activities, more social support from faculty, more detailed feedback on performance, more career directed task oriented and socializing opportunities with faculty than do their female peers.

Interview Data

The three elemental perspectives of stakeholders in the doctoral degree process at these research intensive institutions revealed cumbersome considerations that pertain to ongoing institutional capacity. Faculty retirement, recruitment of faculty away from their university and administrative promotions have created a situation where some departments have experienced an alarming rate of faculty turnover. For students who attended an institution to study with certain key faculty members, by the time they had been promoted to candidacy and ready to embark on the dissertation, the possible mentors these students cultivated had left the institution. Faculty turnover places added stresses on the workload requirements of the remaining full faculty members at the institution. Some professors reported chairing more than twenty dissertations at a given time. It is no surprise that several professors reported feeling “abused” by the system. While funding issues seemed to be the justification for these “manpower” issues, at the heart of the dilemma is the integrity of the doctoral education process itself. Other issues impacting the doctoral education programs were related to unit economic productivity and related governance issues of various competing doctoral programs enrolling anywhere from 5 to 150 students; faculty indicators of quality such as publications, faculty-student ratios, externally funded research; gender and race issues; as well as financial support for doctoral students through research opportunities and scholarships. All of these considerations impact the system that seems to have squeezed out the possibility of practicing good mentorship as a conventional practice in most cases.

Educational Importance of This Study

Over the last twenty years, there has been a growing consensus that relationship factors between faculty and students are significant predictors of doctoral degree completion as well as the length of time to degree attainment. Previous studies have focused on the importance of research opportunities and supportive systemic structures that promote faculty-student interaction and are deemed critical for graduate student success (see Baird, 1990; Baird, 1992; Barger & Duncan, 1982; Barger & Mayo-Chamberlain, 1983; Clark, 1986; Cusanovich and Gilliland, 1991; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Laden, 2002; Noe, 1988;). Some studies have also concluded that there is a difference between the way that males and females experience doctoral programs (see Anderson, 1996; Clark & Corcoran, 1986; Laird, 1996; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Heinrich, 1991; Schneider, 1987; Schroeder & Mynatt, 1993). While most of the existing knowledge about doctoral education concedes that relational and informal systems of support are crucial factors for degree attainment, most studies agree that the notion of mentoring remains a fairly nebulous concept because of the necessarily individualized nature of the mentor-protégé relationship and the number of arenas in which it occurs (Kartje, 1996).

Motivated, in part, by a mismatch between student needs and an increasingly irrelevant system of doctoral education, several national endeavors have been established to determine how the doctorate should evolve in the 21st century. They have all indicated the importance of mentoring to the doctoral

experience. The Carnegie Foundation's "Initiative on the Doctorate" identifies the purpose of doctoral education to be the creation of "stewards of the discipline". Chris Golde's review of initiatives and reports on doctoral education from 1990-2001 asserts that: "The underlying model of doctoral education is apprenticeship, it presumes that the faculty advisor is the mentor and the student is the protégé. Today's research faculty are pulled in many directions and mentoring often is a low priority" (Golde, p. 4). The Pew Foundation's study on "Re-envisioning the Ph.D." is another ambitious project that seeks to identify and involve five stakeholder groups in a global discussion on transforming doctoral education to meet the changing realities and intellectual demands of the world we live in. Despite the conflicting views revealed by Jody Nyquist's team of researchers seeking to re-envision the Ph.D., one of the eight recommendations made by her teams was that adequate and multiple types of mentoring are important for a relevant Ph.D. Likewise, the Woodrow Wilson's initiative on "The Responsive Ph.D." attempts to invigorate scholarship by making the doctorate more inclusive of diverse points of view. Finally, the multi-sponsored initiative on "Preparing Future Faculty" has created a program that promotes hands-on experience to students aspiring to be faculty members by creating an organized systemic apprenticeship program in teaching, research and service experiences in eleven fields.

This study elaborates on the mentoring issues identified in these national initiatives by focusing specifically on mentor-protégé relationships. Mentoring is the nucleus of all traditional activities and values (research, teaching and service) that culminate in the doctoral degree. The doctorate in education differs from doctorates in other disciplines in that the student population varies in some key characteristics: the median age at degree conferral is 10.8 years older than in other disciplines (NORC, 2000). Likewise, the divorce/separation rate among doctoral recipients is twice that of other disciplines at the same time that the marriage rate is slightly higher too (NORC, 2000). Finally, doctoral degree recipients in education are characterized by a much higher representation of females (64.9%) compared to men (35.1%), when the average for all fields shows that male Ph.D. holders outnumber female Ph.D. holders by 12.8% (NORC, 2000). Considering the unique characteristics of doctoral students in education, this study employs a mixed method analysis of three research-intensive institutions' doctoral program in education to harvest insights from students, faculty and administrators on their experiences of, satisfaction with, and importance of, mentor-protégé relationships with regard to degree completion.

By eliciting students' professional experience at degree entry, their expectations from their disciplinary program, their experiences of graduate school, as well as their reflections on significant milestones in their intellectual progress toward degree completion, this study contributes a holistic student view on the mentor-protégé experience. Integrating this view with in-depth faculty perspectives gained from interviews and focus-group discussions on workload, service requirements, personal family life considerations and factors that promote and inhibit the mentor protégé relationship exposes fissures between student views and faculty views of this process.

Finally, this study warrants that there be systemic rewards for tenure and promotion based on faculty involvement in *quality* mentoring of *diverse* students. This study also warrants that schools of education take an active role in navigating the mentor selection process in cases of faculty turnover or other disruptive events that stop the natural flow of normal mentor-protégé relationships.

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