

Professional Development: In Quest of a Doctoral Degree

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An assessment

U.S. universities graduate approximately 40,000 doctoral students each year across multiple disciplines. Although doctoral students constitute a relatively small percentage of the total students in U.S. colleges and universities, the influence of doctoral education is quite powerful. As such, a doctoral education programs (especially in the field of social work) play a critically important role in developing future generations of faculty, research scientists, and expert practitioners for business, industry, government, health care, educational, and cultural organizations.

Regrettably, the current system of graduate professional development is not working at best as it can be. The attrition rates are reported to be as high as 50 percent, and even higher in some disciplines such as in social work. Studies have suggested that doctoral student preparation is failing to meet the changing demands of society and higher education in general. And while no precise figures exist, it is reasonable to imagine that the costs of recruiting and training doctoral students and losing them prior to completion are correspondingly associated to the costs of losing new faculty, innovators and researchers in the field. The costs of attrition devastates the departing student emotionally, professionally, and financially, and result in institutions and society losing talent, and resources that can further advance our profession.

As social workers, why should we care?

Researchers in general, assign responsibility for attrition vicariously to students or to doctoral programs. Doctoral students leave prior to completion for personal reasons such as pursuing the wrong path or lack of individual motivation. Program characteristics such as inadequate information, poor advising, and limited opportunity for professional and personal development also influence a student's decision to forego completing a doctoral degree program. Researchers have suggested that graduate school is in essence a survival-of-the-fittest game with only the best and brightest being able to succeed.

Understanding the professional developmental implications and challenges of doctoral education, necessitates a sort of a continued vitality of U.S. higher education. While many disciplines, such as the field of social work face an immediate challenge in recruiting faculty, research has suggested that the future of doctoral education in social work indicate a resounding anticipatory shortage that puts at risk the continual professional development of further research in the field of social work, unless social work programs invest themselves in further understanding the factors that contribute to the success of entering doctoral students in the field of social work.

Who's affected?

A doctoral student's decision to leave prior to completing one's degree is one that is quite costly for all individuals involved. From a professional developmental program perspective, costs such as recruiting, tuition remission, monthly stipends, and health benefits are essentially unrecoverable. Other costs include those associated with processing applications and students' campus visits which are lost when a student leaves before completing a degree. Faculty time spent advising and mentoring students who choose to leave prior to degree completion is also costly and may result in faculty only wanting to work with potentially brightest of candidates who will complete the program. In some instances, however, academic programs may benefit by intentionally over-admitting students in order to reduce teaching loads and providing them with graduate assistants to help their research agendas. In this instance, students are viewed by the academic program as temporary staff rather than future scholars. Programs may provide no individual development or guidance to their students.

Overall, society as a whole stands to lose prospective future faculty members because of the high attrition rates. Efforts such as The Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate explored the question: What is the purpose of doctoral education? This important initiative is the direct result of the loss that society has likely faced over the years and the failure of doctoral education, in general, to acknowledge that Ph.D., Ed.D. and DSW recipients alike make contributions to society beyond peer reviewed journal publications. While most, if not all, doctoral degrees are awarded at research universities, not all doctoral degree recipients earn faculty appointments at comparable institutions or enter the academy. Therefore, research institutions in general that ignore these trends during the doctoral student experience are doing society a disservice by not preparing their graduates for the variety of opportunities available to doctoral trained individuals.

The student who leaves prior to completion is also greatly affected emotionally and financially. At the heart of the matter, the most important reason to be concerned about graduate student attrition is that it can ruin an individual's lives; the financial, personal, and professional costs of attrition to the student are huge. Students who remain in an all-but-dissertation (ABD) status are adversely affected in terms of individual well being, and their time spent in the program becomes a waste of public as well as private resources. Faculty and administrators involved with doctoral programs need to begin tracking attrition consistently and make more of a concerted effort to understand why a student chooses to leave.

Implications for professional development as social workers

Identifying the factors that influence doctoral student in general, is critical to the continued vitality of a doctoral education specifically. Since doctoral education as a rule are program specific, policy initiatives as such, must begin at the college levels. Doctoral programs need to have a policy in place that oversee a student progress and recognizes a student's needs during each year and throughout all phases of the doctoral student experience. By examining *all the* influential relationships that have a direct bearing on a student success or failures, an institution of higher learning may be able to uncover what a student needs with respect support, and how that support may influence their overall development and commitment to persevere. In turn, this information can be used at the program, college, and institutional levels to ensure that support systems within the academic environment are encouraging rather than subdued.

Unlike the traditional undergraduate student, most doctoral students have outside responsibilities such as family that extend beyond their academic pursuits and may conflict with doctoral studies. However, most doctoral programs fail to acknowledge this reality. As social workers, it's important to recognize that family support is the most important factor in encouraging a sense of determination for the student. This suggests that doctoral programs would likely benefit by instituting policies that allow for a work and personal balance at the doctoral level or that, at the very minimum, encourage family involvement in the doctoral student's academic as well as socially. Assumed detractors such as marital, parental or work may not be as detrimental as once thought and could instead be used more effectively in socialization efforts (a reframing of sorts).

An additional policy implication for consideration would be for the need for doctoral programs to create formal developmental networks for each student. As social workers, this consideration would come natural for us, given the need for creating formal developmental networks for students and its potential benefit to students and academic programs in general. For instance, a student can be assigned mentors, both faculty and advanced students, in addition to the academic advisor. In instances in which the faculty advising relationship is less than adequate, students can seek guidance and support from the assigned mentors, which may encourage persistence and not result in students feeling isolated or having nowhere to turn. Programs can benefit by creating formal developmental networks for students by assigning network partners based on common research, teaching, or personal interests. Having and establishing formal relationships with individuals beyond the academic advisor but within the academic program may create more opportunities for research collaborations which can result in knowledge development and dissemination which is of particular importance in research institutions.

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