

Breaking the Attrition Code: Evidence-based Strategies for Designing a Doctoral Program for Student Success

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Abstract

Nearly half of doctoral students do not ever complete their doctoral program. Many students who exhibit academic capability still struggle with completing the dissertation phase of a doctorate program. Field variations exist, but all disciplines face substantially high attrition rates. Completion becomes less likely as years progress, as 56.6% of doctoral candidates complete the doctorate in 10 years, and 43.4% do not ever complete the doctorate. The dissertation phase represents the most challenging aspect of the doctoral education, which requires targeted support and intervention strategies to reduce the high attrition rate. ABD status is often a symptom of systemic issues in doctoral education rather than individual student failure, which requires a comprehensive institutional response. Institutional barriers include a lack of leadership and professor retention, a lack of consistency across courses, a lack of guidance, a lack of relevant resources, and a lack of support. Institutions must devise an evidence-based strategy to solve this problem. Institutions must seek to provide ongoing faculty training, provide guidance specific to the dissertation, ensure a reasonable workload for professors and candidates, provide reasonable compensation, recognize accomplishments, provide a comprehensive orientation to setting clear expectations from the start, provide early advising including immediate chair assignment and engagement, encourage and provide multiple mentoring relationships beyond the chair, make expectations clear by providing a dissertation Handbook, ensure online progress monitoring that is timely, provide thorough and regular progress reviews, and provide encouraging and actionable feedback. A systematic approach to doctoral candidate success includes clear guidance through a dissertation handbook, structured course work to ensure consistent progress, and systematic program development to ensure consistency across programs and the institution.

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