

The Struggle to Succeed: Factors Associated with the Persistence of Part-time Adult Students Seeking a Master's Degree

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INTRODUCTION

Studies of student persistence at the undergraduate level are numerous and well known to those in the field, but at the graduate level, they are far more limited (Ott and Markewich 1985; Stolzenberg 1994; Cooke, Sims, Peyrefitte 1995; Most 2008). The latter generally focus on doctoral candidates or those enrolled in professional programs (Faghihi and Ethington 1996; Dorn and Papalewis 1997; Golde 1998; Mastekaasa 2006; Most 2008). Master's-degree candidates, especially those who pursue a degree on a part-time basis at a public institution—the focus of the present study—have not received particular attention. Just as understanding persistence among undergraduates is important for both students and their institutions, so, too, is such understanding for adults in part-time graduate programs. The high attrition rates for graduate students—with a national average at about 50 percent (Green 1997; Nelson and Lovitts 2001)—make it imperative that we gain a greater understanding of the factors associated with their persistence.

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Today's graduate students are likely to be adults who work full-time; have family responsibilities; enroll on a part-time basis, often after a gap of several years after completing their bachelor's degree; commute distances to and from classes; take online or distance education courses; and often find themselves without peers with whom they can easily relate (Jeffreys 1998; Polson 2003; Hyun, Quinn, Madon, Lustig 2006).

Studies that have focused on factors that differentiate between graduate student persistence and attrition cite internal and external influences. Factors internal to the educational institution include mentoring programs (Dorn and Paplewis 1997; Polson 2003), orientation practices (Polson 2003), institutional services and support (Faghihi and Ethington 1996; Polson 2003), institutional constraints on enrollment (Mastekaasa 2006); advising (Polson 2003), and graduate student role socialization (Golde 1998; Polson 2003). Vincent Tinto (1993), in proposing his theory of doctoral persistence, recognized that the primary reference groups for doctoral students are the student and faculty communities that reside in specific fields of study.

Other factors have been identified as more personal to the student and external to the institution, including: race and foreign status (Ott and Markewich 1985; Perna 2004; Wells 2008; Most 2008), full-time vs. part-time status (Ott and Markewich 1985), possession of social and cultural capital (Astone, Nathanson, Schoen, and Kim 1999; Perna 2004; Wells 2008), sex (Perna 2004; Most 2008), psychosocial variables (Green 1997), student mental health status (Hyun, Quinn, Madon and Lustig 2006), student attitudes and intentions (Cooke et al. 1995), costs and financial considerations (Perna 2004), balancing multiple responsibilities and role conflict (Polson 2003), family support and approval (Mare 1980; Cabrera, Castañeda, Nora and Hengstler 1992; Stolzenberg 1994), parents' education and background (Mullen, Goyette, Soares 2003; Mastekaasa 2006), and impact of job values (Stolzenberg 1994).

The current study looked at specific institutional and external factors that might contribute to persistence among part-time master's-level students at a public institution. Independent variables included educational experiences; academic preparedness and support; family and social support and responsibilities; economic and career considerations; physical and mental health; and social and cultural capital. While we found that some institutional factors played a role in student persistence, it was primarily factors external to the institution that determined persistence-attrition outcomes within our population.

METHODS

This study was conducted at a comprehensive, small state university with approximately 3,000 undergraduate and 1,000 graduate students. The institution offers 25 master's-degree programs, of which the Master of Education is the largest. All but one of the programs was offered on a part-time basis in the evenings and online.

The authors developed the questionnaire in fall 2010 with input from graduate faculty, staff, and students. It consisted of 46 questions in six major areas:

- demographic information (including age, highest level of education of mother, father, spouse/significant other);
- educational experiences (including number of courses enrolled per semester, GPA, course delivery format, and the importance of institutional and external factors in the decision to persist);
- academic preparedness (including undergraduate GPA, prior graduate level coursework, self-perception of academic skills);
- academic support and student services (use of and satisfaction with the university's services);
- family and social support and responsibilities (including family members, friends, co-workers, employer); and
- career, economic, and personal considerations (reasons for attending graduate school, financial concerns, physical or mental disability).

The questionnaire was posted on Survey Monkey at the end of January 2011. An email with the link to the questionnaire was sent to 1,499 individuals, including 584 alumni who had graduated from a master's program at the university within the past two years and 915 students currently matriculated in a master's program. Thirty emails were returned as non-deliverable and four respondents replied that they were not active in the program. This left 1,469 eligible respondents. We received 465 completed questionnaires (response rate = 32 percent), and of these, 420 were from part-time students.

As a follow-up, respondents were invited to participate in a focus group. Thirteen alumni and current students attended one of three focus group meetings at which they shared their experiences at the university and discussed factors that affected their persistence.

FINDINGS

Demographic characteristics of the sample

The majority of respondents were female (78.6 percent), employed (93.7 percent), married (60.5 percent) or in a committed relationship (23.2 percent), and had children (53.8 percent). Almost 90 percent of those with children had at least some of their children living with them. Of those who were married, 77.3 percent had a spouse with at least a bachelor's degree. Parents of respondents, however, were less likely to have earned higher education degrees. Sixty-one percent of mothers and 48.9 percent of fathers earned less than a bachelor's degree. The age at which respondents in the sample began graduate school was split between those entering soon after graduation from college (45.7 percent) and those entering when in their mid-thirties or later (44.4 percent).

Institutional factors related to persistence

When asked about the importance of several university services in their decision to persist in graduate school, the most important were deemed to be academic advising and the library. However, these were relatively less important in student persistence than were aspects of instruction. Most significant for students was being treated with respect, followed by faculty enthusiasm for teaching, faculty understanding of adult learners, feedback on assignments, expertise of faculty, fairness in grading, teaching methods used, and concern for students. Other important factors associated with the learning environment were interactions with faculty both in and outside the classroom, interactions with fellow students in the classroom, and interactions with the academic program advisor. Participants in the focus groups also stressed the importance of treatment by faculty. (Table 1)

	Mean Score*
Being treated with respect	3.44
Faculty enthusiasm for teaching	3.38
Faculty understanding of adult learners	3.34
Faculty feedback on assignments	3.34
Expertise of faculty	3.32
Fairness in grading	3.32
Teaching methods used	3.29
Interactions with faculty in the classroom	3.25
Faculty concern for students	3.23
Interactions with students in the classroom	3.06
Interactions with faculty outside classroom	2.80
Interactions with program advisor	2.74
Library	2.62
Academic advising	2.60

Table 1. Importance of institutional factors for persistence

* Items were scored on a scale from 1=detrimental for persistence to 4=very important for persistence.

Overall, respondents were positive about their experiences with the university and the graduate programs. They were satisfied with instruction in their programs and with their intellectual development, they enjoyed being students and found the learning environment supportive, and they were pleased with their decision to attend the university. (Table 2)

	Mean Score*
Satisfaction with instruction	4.07
Enjoyed being a student in the program	4.04
Satisfaction with intellectual development	4.00
Pleased with decision to attend FSU	4.01
Supportive learning environment	3.93
Convenient scheduling of classes	3.85
Provided services led to student success	3.73
University cared about the individual	3.36

Table 2. Satisfaction with experiences

*Items were scored on a scale from 1=not at all satisfied to 5=very much satisfied.

The more the respondents felt the university cared about them as individuals and the more they found the learning environment supportive, the more the respondents enjoyed being students in the program and the more they were pleased with the decision to attend the university. These variables were strongly correlated with one another and the findings were statistically significant at $p = .000$.

Personal factors related to persistence

While institutional factors were relevant to persistence, respondents in the study were more likely to be motivated by personal factors external to the institution in their pursuit of a master's degree.

Among family members, the respondent's spouse/partner and children and, to a slightly lesser degree, the respondent's parents were the most important individuals to the student's persistence. Outside the family, employers, and co-workers were motivators for persistence. (Table 3) Spouses/partners provided the most support, followed by parents, and then children. Interestingly, co-workers provided almost as much support as did parents. The nature of the support ranged from emotional to financial to help with household responsibilities and childcare, and varied by source. Spouses/partners provided the most emotional support (67.8 percent), followed by friends (64.4 percent), co-workers (57.9 percent), and parents (55.5 percent). Employers provided the most financial support (32.9 percent), followed by spouses/partners (28.8 percent), and parents (15.1 percent). Other forms of support came primarily from spouses/partners, mostly in regard to household responsibilities and childcare. Employers provided flex-time at work, excused the respondent from meetings, and readjusted the respondent's work schedule to accommodate classes. Co-workers provided help by taking over the respondent's shift so the respondent could focus on coursework. Assistance on assignments and/or coursework came from spouses/partners, family, co-workers and employers. Among married respondents, the spouse was the most important individual for persistence in graduate school; among unmarried respondents, parents, siblings, friends, classmates, and staff were most important.

	Mean Score*
Spouse/Partner	3.27
Employer	3.21
Children	3.05
Parents	2.81
Instructors	2.78
Co-workers	2.74
Classmates	2.60
Academic advisor	2.55
Friends outside of school	2.49
Siblings	2.44
University staff	2.33

Table 3. Importance of individuals for persistence

*Items were scored on a scale from 1=detrimental to 4=very important

Respondents noted several reasons for going to graduate school, many of which pertained to factors associated with jobs and careers. Respondents wanted to advance in a current career, obtain an increase in salary, and satisfy an employer. Other reasons were more personal in nature and included the desire to gain knowledge or skills, fulfill personal goals, and become a role model for the family. (Table 4)

	Mean Score*
Gain new knowledge and skills	4.44
Advance in career	4.26
Fulfill personal growth and enrichment	4.18
Increase salary	3.88
Serve as role model for family	3.48
Satisfy employer	3.35
Make a career change	2.94
Enter the job market	2.59
Satisfy members of family	2.55
Satisfy friends	2.25

Table 4. Reasons for attending graduate school

*Items were scored on a scale from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree

These goals were largely satisfied through the graduate programs. Respondents said they were able to enrich and enhance their professional skills by obtaining greater knowledge and new skill sets. These, plus a resultant greater sense of competence, helped students gain more marketability and career advancement, increases in salary, and more respect in the workplace. Respondents also experienced greater personal satisfaction as a result of their studies. They identified personal growth, increased self-confidence, self-fulfillment, increased self-awareness, and a new way of viewing the world as outcomes of their educational experience. Many cited having achieved a personal goal of setting an example for their families, especially their children.

Perhaps the most interesting findings in the study concerned the relevance of parents' education for student persistence. While parents' education level did not have a significant effect on motivation to complete a degree, it had a significant effect on several key variables related to persistence. In several earlier studies (Mullen et al. 2003; Mastekaasa 2006; Cabrera et al. 1992; Mare 1980; Stolzenberg 1994), researchers questioned the role of parents' education on students' educational persistence at the graduate level. However, we found parents' educational background was an important factor in several respects.

Parents' education played a role in motivation to attend graduate school. The higher the level of education of the father, the more likely the respondent was to attend graduate school in order to satisfy family members ($p=.04$). Mother's education level had a significant relationship with several motivating factors. The higher the level of education of the mother, the more likely the respondent was to attend graduate school to advance in his/her career ($p=.008$), to satisfy his/her employer ($p=.03$), to attend graduate school to increase his/her salary ($p=.006$), and to attend graduate school to fulfill his/her personal growth and enrichment ($p=.022$). Strikingly, the lower the level of education of either mother or father, the more likely the respondent was to attend graduate school in order to serve as a role model for his/her family (mother, $p = .008$; father, $p = .000$).

Father's level of education had an effect on importance of faculty concern for students ($p = .003$); feedback on assignments ($p = .007$), faculty enthusiasm for teaching ($p = .03$), fairness in grading ($p = .05$), and being treated with respect ($p = .05$). The lower the father's level of education, the more important these instructional elements. The lower the level of mother's education, the greater the importance of academic support services ($p = .02$).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Respondents in this study juggled many responsibilities (home, work, school), each of which could be considered full-time in its own right. At some point during their graduate program, 16 percent of the respondents said they either withdrew or seriously considered withdrawing from the university. For many, the stress of handling so many responsibilities was overwhelming. This suggests the need for graduate program staff, faculty and advisors to be cognizant of the multiple pressures on students and sensitive to students' need for support in balancing these responsibilities.

Many of our students do not come to graduate school with the cultural and social capital needed for a relatively easy transition or accommodation to the rigors of academia. As indicated by the findings of this study, they often do not have parents who can serve as role models to provide the support that would prepare them for the experience of a graduate level education. Several authors (Astone et al. 1999; Mullen et al. 2003; Perna 2004; Mastekaasa 2006; Wells 2008; Wegmann and Bowen 2010) have noted the importance of cultural and social capital for educational achievement; they point to the connection between cultural and social capital and the ability to adapt to graduate school. Wells (2008) found that "...social and cultural capital are positively significant for persistence in higher education" (p. 103). Without the requisite forms of capital, our students rely on the University for their socialization into the role of graduate student. Golde (1998) found a similar need for socialization by academic departments in his study of persistence in doctoral programs, as did Faghihi and Ethington (1996) in their study of doctoral programs. In this regard, several of our respondents cited faculty support, respect, and understanding as more important than faculty expertise. In lieu of background competencies and preparedness, socialization is critical for what Jeffreys (1998) called self-efficacy, the belief that one can accomplish a task regardless of obstacles or hardships. As she notes, "...there is empirical evidence that self-efficacy is a significant variable influencing...persistence" (p. 43).

Many of our students cited other impediments to persistence, of which the most important was health concerns. In addition to family health problems (e.g., parent with cancer, child with Asperger's), respondents had to contend with personal health issues that included both physical problems (e.g., broken leg, visual limitations) and mental health problems (e.g., eating

disorder, depression, anxiety, ADD). Having a physical or mental disability posed a challenge to persistence. Those respondents who acknowledged a disability were significantly more likely to withdraw or seriously consider withdrawing than were those without an acknowledged disability ($p=.000$). Mental disorders are particularly threatening to persistence. As Hyun et al. (2006) notes, this is a widespread concern:

Almost half of graduate student respondents reported having had an emotional or stress-related problem over the past year, and over half reported knowing a colleague who had had an emotional or stress-related problem over the past year (p. 247).

Other problems encountered by students centered on their ability to pay for a graduate education (expressed in terms of either fears of not having money or actual difficulty with finances), problems with the program (advisor issues and course scheduling), and parking.

IMPLICATIONS

The barriers to graduate-student persistence cited in this study suggest the university must better respond to the now-identified needs of its graduate students. This includes making greater efforts in socializing students for the graduate student role, providing help in finding a balance for competing academic and personal needs, focusing attention on health issues and their effect on ability to attend classes and study, and offering assistance with practical and intellectual challenges.

Perhaps the most significant implication is that although graduate students may be older, they are not unlike undergraduate students in terms of their need for support. This is especially true for those students who come to our programs lacking cultural and social capital and, therefore, adequate preparation for their role as graduate students. Further investigation into this central issue would be a next step in improving graduate student persistence. A more complete understanding of the student's background would better inform both faculty and advisors so that they could tailor their work to the student's needs regarding teaching and advising. Such a consideration argues for a more holistic approach to educating our graduate students. We

should also build on expressed student desires to become role models for their own family. Providing detailed feedback on assignments and engaging them through adult learning methods offers students not only the skills to succeed but promotes a sense of self-efficacy and self-validation. Treating students as adults and demonstrating concern for their success strengthens their confidence and improves their motivation to persist. Strong mentoring relationships with faculty may be especially meaningful to students with weak social and cultural capital.

It is also important that we help students balance contending needs. As adults, they play multiple roles and the cost of trying to reconcile those roles without sufficient support may be withdrawal. Advisors can help students navigate the system and explore ways to accommodate competing demands (including academic, family and personal, financial, and work related). In addition to providing more face-to-face meetings with advisors, several suggestions for assistance with acclimating to graduate school and supporting students emerged both in responses on the questionnaire and in our focus groups. These included expanding graduate orientation programs, offering adult refresher courses in study habits, expanding career services, having alumni return to serve as mentors, creating a network of graduate alumni, increasing support within departments or programs, and providing social opportunities for graduate students to meet informally.

Finally, since health concerns were found to be a significant consideration in withdrawal, we need to identify health problems—especially mental health problems—so that we can better support students as they struggle with these situations. This will likely entail education of faculty and staff about physical and mental health conditions and their possible consequences for learning.

The effect of increased efforts such as those identified above would help socialize students, provide support for balancing demands, and assist with challenges. More contact with students would allow the university to identify at-risk students and step in before withdrawal becomes a serious alternative to persistence. We need to create a more supportive and responsive environment that better communicates our commitment to student success. 🤝

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