Navigating Doctoral Studies Successfully: Diverse Students’ Voices

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Universities are interested in:

- Recruiting and retaining graduate students from diverse backgrounds.
- Increasing degree completion for doctoral students.
- Creating additional support services to assist graduate students.
- African Americans and Hispanics are still significantly underrepresented among recipients of Ph.D. degrees. These groups comprised 32% of all U.S. citizens, but only 7% of those earned doctorates (Cherwitz, 2005, p. 72, Reddick & Young, 2012).
What We Know

- Low enrollment and success rates of diverse groups of students in graduate studies (Allen, 2005).
- Strategies used by African American students to succeed (Jones, 2004).
- Specific experiences of African American Ph.D. students, prior to degree completion (Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies & Smith, 2004).
- Institutions should aim at “getting to the what, how and why of diversity on campus” (Gurin & Nagda, 2006, p. 20), particularly at the doctoral level.

Previous studies focus on students during their doctoral studies. The experiences and reflections of those who have actually completed the doctoral journey have not been addressed.
To determine the factors that affect diverse students’ doctoral studies, with a focus on those who have successfully completed a doctoral degree.

Diverse students included:

- African American
- Mexican American
- Asian American
- Women and men, to assure representation of minority populations.
1. What factors facilitate diverse doctoral students’ success (degree completion)?

2. What factors block diverse doctoral students’ studies (degree completion)?

3. How do diverse students overcome the identified blocks in order to complete their degrees?
A qualitative approach was used in order “to examine questions that can be best answered by verbally describing how participants in a study perceive and interpret various aspects of their environment” (Crowl, Kaminisky & Podell, 1997, p. 499).

Participants were selected using purposeful and snowball sampling (Gay & Ariasian, 2000).

- Successful completion of a doctoral program.
- Self-identification as African American, Mexican American and Asian American.
- Representation of four doctoral programs in a major university.
Participants’ Profile

- Seven men and ten women
- Five African American
- Nine Mexican American
- One Asian American
- Two international students
- Graduates from the same university (educational administration).
- The average age was 42, ranging from 34 to 58.
- Most were married, only two were single and two were divorced.
- The average timeframe to complete the degree was three years, ranging from two to six.
- Most changed jobs since graduation, with a majority being promoted to a higher-level position.
Data was collected through participants’ written responses to open-ended questions (Patton, 1990) using a questionnaire mailed by electronic media.

Completed questionnaires were returned as attachments and printed without names in order to assure confidentiality.

Data were analyzed using grounded theory guidelines in order “to build middle-range theoretical frameworks that explain the collected data” (Charmaz, 2003, p. 250).

Topics were identified, compared and synthesized across participants’ experiences, specific programs and ethnic background.
Factors that contribute to doctoral students’ success include:

- Mentoring, both formal and informal
- Faculty support
- Cohort membership
- Personal motivation
- Family support
- Additional course work
- Graduate school personnel
Factors that may have a detrimental effect on degree completion:

- Lack of resources: financial and time
- Family separation (both nuclear and extended)
- Negative stereotypes
- Work demands
- Fear of scholarly writing expectations
Strategies to Overcome Blocking Factors

- Secure family support (financial and moral)
- Apply for funding, fellowships, TA positions, etc.
- Balance family, job and doctoral studies’ demands
- Establish a positive relationship with faculty
- Take additional courses/workshops

Successful doctoral students...
Factors that facilitate diverse doctoral students’ success (degree completion) reflect the components of the Tri-dimensional Foundation of Hispanic Student Persistence Model (Pino & Ovando, 2005).

- Student Self-Concept
- Familial Support
- Institutional Climate & Support
Aspiring doctoral students need to:

- Engage in deep personal analysis of the possibilities and demands of doctoral work prior to entering university programs.

- Seek accurate information about doctoral programs’ expectations and requirements.

- Search for alternative ways to finance their studies, and secure family understanding and support.

- Use the resources provided by the institutions of higher education.
Institutions of higher education must continue to:

- Develop innovative mechanisms to enhance diverse doctoral study experiences and completion rates.
- Offer additional support systems to enhance students’ ability to write in scholarly fashion.
- Generate financial support (fellowships, assistantships and other strategies).
- Recruit and hire diverse faculty.

Institutions of higher education, which increase recruitment and support to encourage degree completion, will indeed be in a position to make solid contributions to the better preparation of citizens who will, in turn, contribute to a better democratic society.
The End

Thank You!