

An Exploratory Survey of Graduate Student Experiences and Satisfaction

Andrea I. Bakker (bakkerai@muohio.edu)

Denise Krallman (krallmda@muohio.edu)

Miami University

Background

This survey was initiated in part as a result of conversations with the Dean of the Graduate School after he had written a white paper entitled “Graduate Education at Miami University: The Role of Graduate Education at a Distinguished Doctoral Intensive University.” One of the six discussion points was:

How can we best utilize the talents and time of graduate and teaching associates to improve their career preparation and add value to Miami’s educational and scholarly missions?

This question was part of the framework that went into developing the Graduate Student Survey (GSS) at Miami University. Graduate school is a time for students to develop the skills that will allow them to succeed in their chosen field. Depending upon the desired degree and field, professional development may involve training in research, teaching, or other skills specific to the field (Golde & Dore, 2001, 2004; Lovitts, 2005). Previous research has found that factors such as a sense of belonging to a program and an open line of communication are related to graduate student retention (Hahs, 1998; Lovitts, 2005). The GSS examined the relationship between these two factors (i.e., sense of belonging and communication), students’ professional development, and student retention.

Because the factors influencing graduate student success are numerous and multi-faceted, Golde and Dore (2001) recommend that universities critically evaluate their graduate programs as well as collect and distribute information on student outcomes. A second reason for the GSS was that Miami University had never surveyed graduate students about their experiences, while spending considerable time and money surveying the undergraduate student population. The current study represents the first step in better assessing the experiences of graduate students at a predominately undergraduate institution.

Audience

Survey results were shared and discussed with the university community through a variety of means: a final report of the results were presented to the Provost, the Graduate Council, the Council of Academic Deans, the “First in 2009” subcommittee on graduate education at Miami University, and the Ohio Graduate Council; individualized reports for each department were submitted to the deans, so that they could share them with department chairs and/or faculty; and results pertaining to graduate students’ professional development were distributed to full-time faculty, professional staff, and select graduate students via a bi-monthly “Assessment Brief.” Selected results will also be distributed to the Graduate Student Association.

Method

Participants

In the spring of 2005 there were 1172 graduate students enrolled in graduate programs at Miami University (i.e., degree-seeking students). Of these students, 605 students (51.6%) participated in the online Graduate Student Survey (GSS). The racial and gender composition of the GSS sample is similar to the composition of the general graduate student population at Miami University. The GSS sample includes 471 “White/Caucasian” students (77.9%) and 130 students who reported an ethnicity other than White (21.5%).¹ The GSS sample also includes 369 women (61.8%) and 228 men (38.2%).

Survey Design

The 74-question GSS was developed in-house, with the questions based on graduate student surveys conducted by other colleges and universities, a local Campus Climate survey, and conversations with the Dean and Associate Dean of the Graduate School. The survey assessed graduate students’ experiences and satisfaction in the following areas: support from the graduate program, students’ professional development, coursework, student life, university resources and support, students’ experiences during enrollment and their first year of graduate school, and graduate program requirements (including questions about dissertations/theses and comprehensive exams). The survey was conducted on-line using SurveyZ.com. Students were able to complete the survey from any computer, on- or off-campus. Conducting the survey on-line allowed students to “skip” past questions that were not relevant to their experiences.

Additional data on graduation rates and time to degree completion were compiled by the Office of Institutional Research. These data, where relevant, are also included in this report.

Procedure

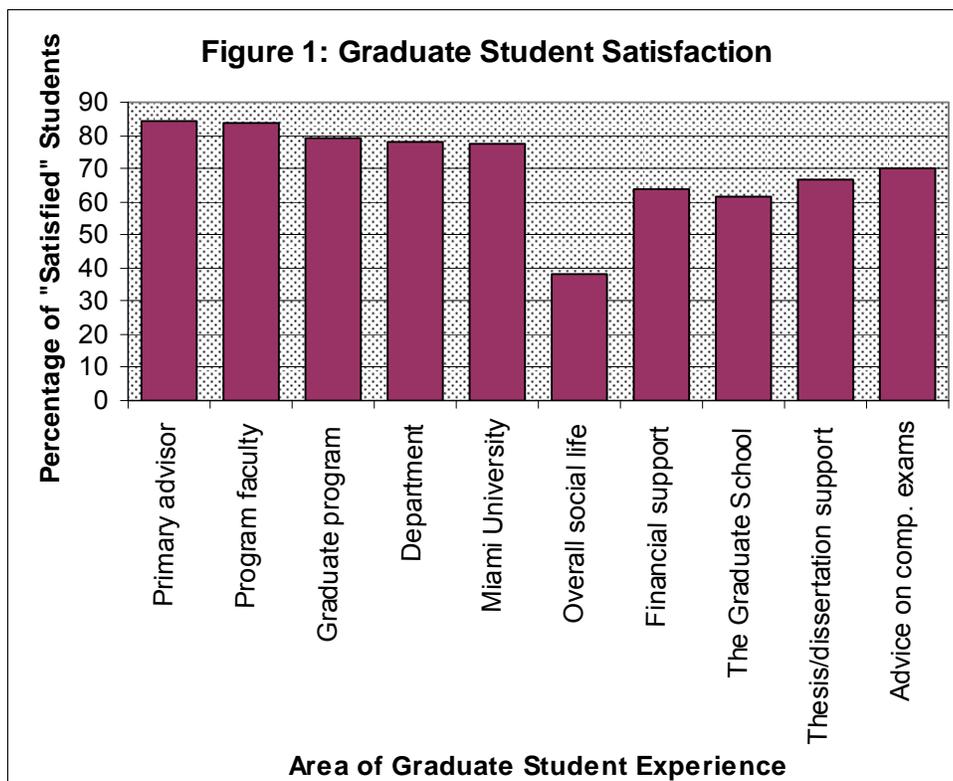
An e-mail was sent to all graduate students who were enrolled in a graduate program at Miami University. Students were invited to complete the on-line survey and were provided with a link to the website. A follow-up e-mail was also sent to students several weeks later. The survey was available on-line to students for approximately five weeks. In order to increase the response rate, participants were entered into a raffle for cash prizes ranging from \$25 to \$150. In addition, the first twenty participants to complete the survey received a small cash prize (\$5).

Results

General Results

Overall, graduate students were satisfied with many aspects of their experiences at Miami University, including their programs and the people within their programs. (See Figure 1.) Nearly 85% of students were satisfied with their primary advisor, over 80% were satisfied with the faculty in their program, and almost 80% were satisfied with their graduate program and department. Over 77% of the graduate students indicated that they were satisfied with Miami University, but among the different academic divisions this percentage ranged from 50.0% to 93.1%. When asked if faculty were accessible and helpful, over 86% of all graduate students agreed. Over 75% of the graduate students agreed that there was a supportive student community in their program.

¹ The remaining 4 students (0.7%) did not report their ethnicity.



On average, students were moderately satisfied with the resources and support provided by the university. At least 50% of students indicated that they were “somewhat” or “very” satisfied with the financial support received from Miami University (63.7%), library services (87.4%), access to office equipment and supplies (60.1%), on-campus computer facilities (62.4%), the Recreational Center and fitness opportunities (65.9%), and the Graduate School (57.7%). Students were least satisfied with student health insurance (11.2%). Students were less satisfied in areas that were not directly related to academics. Despite reporting satisfaction with many different areas of the university, only 61% of the graduate students indicated a sense of belonging to the Miami University community. Less than half (45.1%) of the students were satisfied with the overall social life on campus, and slightly over half (54.0%) were satisfied with the opportunities to interact with students with different ideas and perspectives.

Professional Development

Graduate students identified a wide array of career expectations for post-graduation. The top three career plans included professional services to individuals (17.4%), post-doctoral researcher, fellow, or associate (11.0%), and administrator or teacher at the K-12 level (10.3%). The most common categories of expected employers were higher education (40.6%) and elementary, secondary, or special focus schools (16.9%). Overall, 68.0% of students reported being satisfied with the career preparation and guidance that they received at Miami University.

A total of 23.8% of students reported being involved in research since entering graduate school at Miami University. Among those students, 37.7% have presented their research at a national or regional scholarly meeting, 21.6% have published an article or book chapter, and 49.9% have presented their research within their own department. 78.3% of these students were satisfied with how well their program is preparing them for scholarly research.

A total of 67.0% of students assisted with a faculty member’s course or were the primary instructor for an undergraduate course. Among these students, 51.2% agreed that teaching assistants in their program are appropriately prepared and trained before entering the classroom, while 69.4% were satisfied with how well, overall, their program prepares them for college teaching.

A total of 38.2% of the students were enrolled in a program designed to provide students with a professional internship or placement. Among these students, 71.3% were satisfied with the supervised practicum opportunities in their graduate program, and 77.9% were satisfied with how well their program is preparing them for professional work.

Correlations were computed between students’ professional development, questions related to their sense of belonging, and questions related to the level of communication within their program. The number of times that students presented their research in external or internal settings, as well as the number of times that they published their research, were not related to their sense of belonging or the level of communication within their program. However, student satisfaction with their professional development was moderately correlated to both the level of communication and a sense of belonging. Correlational results can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Correlations Between Satisfaction with Professional Development, Level of Communication, and Sense of Belonging

| | Level of Communication | | | | Sense of Belonging | |
|--|---|---|--|--|--|--|
| | Helpfulness of departmental orientation session (56a) | Belief that there is a person/ office to turn to for help with problems (17c) | Clarity of program requirements (59b) ² | Agreement that advisor provides constructive feedback in a timely manner (15c) | Sense of a supportive student community within program (17a) | Sense of belonging to the M.U. community (40a) |
| Satisfaction with overall career preparation (23) | .307** | .258** | .347** | .312** | .404** | .256** |
| Satisfaction with overall preparation for scholarly research (25c) | .244** | .208** | .160** | .306** | .248** | .128* |
| Satisfaction with overall preparation for college teaching (34) | .315** | .120* | .247** | .138* | .160** | .228** |
| Satisfaction with overall preparation for professional work (37b) | .323** | .201** | .537** | .298** | .437** | .224** |

*Correlation is significant at $p \leq .05$ level.

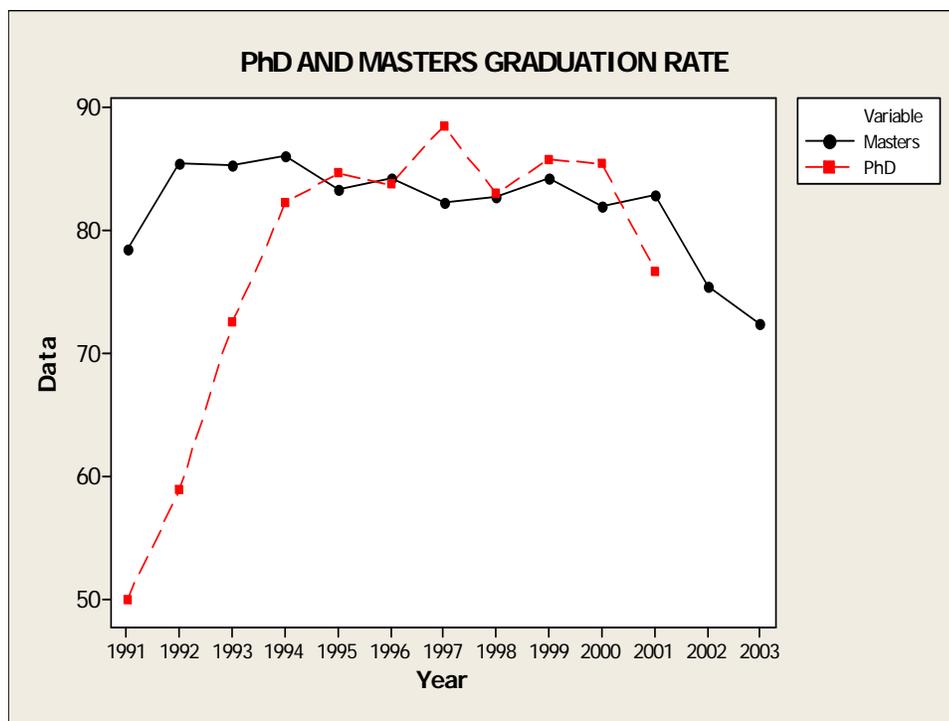
**Correlation is significant at $p \leq .01$ level.

² Question #59b (“My program requirements are unclear to me”) was reverse-scored for all analyses reported.

Retention of Graduate Students

Previous research estimates that approximately 50% of doctoral students fail to obtain the doctoral degree (Dorn & Papalewis, 1997; Hahs, 1998; Lovitts, 2005). Miami University graduation rate data (obtained from the IR Office) suggests a higher-than-usual graduation rate, with the graduation rate in most years ranging from 75% to nearly 90%. (See Figure 2.) However, graduate students, on average, underestimated the amount of time that it would take to complete their degree. According to the GSS, students working on a master's degree anticipated spending an average of 2.26 years for their degree, while students working on doctoral degrees anticipated spending an average of 4.66 years. However, graduation rate data from the IR office indicates that master's students take an average of 2.36 years to complete their degree, while doctoral students take an average of 5.5 years for degree completion.

FIGURE 2



Using the GSS, analyses were conducted to determine whether graduate students' sense of belonging and level of communication were related to graduation and/or retention. As with students' professional development, there were significant relations between sense of belonging, level of communication, students' perceptions of time to graduation, and thoughts about degree completion. The amount of time anticipated for degree completion (compared to original expectations) was significantly correlated with the clarity of program requirements ($r = -.12, p < .01$), a sense of a supportive student community within the graduate program ($r = -.11, p < .05$), and a sense of belonging to the Miami University community ($r = -.11, p < .01$). The less clear the program requirements and the less that students' indicated a sense of belonging, the more likely they were to indicate that degree completion was taking longer than anticipated.

Similarly, students who considered leaving the program prior to completing their ultimate degree reported significantly lower levels of communication and sense of belonging. (See Table 2.) Students who considered leaving without their final degree were significantly less likely to agree that there is a person/office to turn to for help with problems, that program requirements are clear, that their advisor provides constructive feedback in a timely manner, that they feel a sense of belonging with the student community in their program, and that they feel a sense of belonging to the Miami University community.

Table 2: Mean Level of Communication and Sense of Belonging, Divided by Retention

| Retention | | Communication | | | | Belonging | |
|--|---------|---|--|---------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| | | Helpfulness of departmental orientation session (56a) | Belief that there is a person/office to turn to for help with problems (17c) | Clarity of program requirements (59b) | Agreement that advisor provides constructive feedback in a timely manner (15c) | Sense of a supportive student community within program (17a) | Sense of belonging to the M.U. community (40a) |
| Have you ever considered leaving your program prior to degree completion or with a lesser degree than originally anticipated? (62) | Yes | 3.11 (.62) | 3.62 (1.25) | 3.48 (1.33) | 4.01 (1.21) | 3.76 (1.20) | 2.49 (.92) |
| | No | 3.2 (.61) | 3.99 (1.05) | 4.12 (1.09) | 4.42 (.89) | 4.24 (.89) | 2.75 (.86) |
| | t-score | -1.54 | -3.46*** | 5.85*** | -4.42*** | -5.06*** | -0.31** |

**Differences are significant at $p \leq .01$ level.

***Differences are significant at $p \leq .001$ level.

General Discussion

The results from the GSS suggest that graduate students are generally satisfied with many areas of their graduate student experience. The results also suggest that graduate students complete their degrees at higher-than-usual rates at Miami University. The GSS revealed that graduate students were least satisfied in areas that were not directly related to academics, such as the social life on campus and their sense of belonging to the Miami University community. Analyses confirmed other studies (e.g., Hahs, 1998) that reported that students' sense of belonging and the level of communication within a program are related to student retention. Analysis of the GSS also indicated that sense of belonging and level of communication were related to students' satisfaction with their professional development. Although only tentative conclusions can be drawn, due to the correlational nature of the data, additional research should be done to examine whether increasing student's sense of belonging and the level of communication within the graduate programs leads to higher retention rates and greater satisfaction with professional development.

Anticipated and Actual Changes as Result of GSS

Several positive actions have occurred as a result of the GSS. Survey results were shared and discussed by a variety of groups within the university community, as identified in the "Audience" section. The development of the GSS motivated two separate groups of graduate students to work with the IR Office to further explore the needs of graduate students at the

university. Students in a graduate-level Educational Leadership course addressed a particular area of concern for Miami University, the satisfaction of minority and international students, by conducting a series of focus groups with minority, international, and non-minority graduate students. Their project was designed to identify specific issues and elicit suggestions for change. In addition, graduate students in Statistics assisted in compiling graduate student retention and graduation rate data, some of which were reported above. Both projects support the need to further investigate campus climate/student life issues for minority students. The results of both of these projects were shared with the Provost, the Graduate Dean, Student Affairs, the Council of Academic Deans, and other interested individuals in the university community.

Due in part to the GSS results, some specific changes have been made to the graduate student experience. Funds have been made available to supplement the cost of health insurance for graduate assistants, an area where students reported the lowest levels of satisfaction. It is hoped that this supplement will increase over the next several years to make health insurance costs more manageable for graduate students.

The GSS also indicated that less than 10% of the students found the Graduate School orientation to be “very helpful.” Focus groups with the graduate students (conducted by the Educational Leadership students) confirmed this problem. The Graduate School Dean also acknowledges that there is need for a change in the orientation process. As discussed in the results section, the level of communication within a program and students’ sense of belonging are related to satisfaction with professional development and retention rates. Redesigning the graduate student orientation in order to increase communication between the university and graduate students and to increase graduate students’ sense of belonging may improve graduate student retention and satisfaction. Discussions regarding how to change the orientation session are currently in progress.

Finally, in order to monitor the effect of changes in the graduate student experience at Miami University, the GSS will be repeated within the next three years. At that time, we will revisit the questionnaire design as well as issues such as inclusion of graduate students who are only on the campus during the summer term.

References

- Dorn, S. M., & Papalewis, R. (1997, March). *Improving doctoral student retention*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL.
- Golde, C. M., & Dore, T. M. (2001). *At cross purposes: What the experiences of today’s doctoral students reveal about doctoral education*. Philadelphia, PA: Pew Charitable Trusts. (ERIC document Reproduction Service No. ED450628)
- Golde, C. M., & Dore, T. M. (2004). The survey of doctoral education and career preparation. In D. H. Wulff, A. E. Austin, et al. (Eds.), *Paths to the professoriate: Strategies for enriching the preparation of future faculty* (pp. 19-45). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Hahs, D. L. (1998, January). *Creating “good” graduate students: A model for success*. Paper presented at the MSERA annual meeting, New Orleans, LA.
- Lovitts, B. E. (2005). Being a good course-taker is not enough: A theoretical perspective on the transition to independent research. *Studies in Higher Education, 30*, 137-154.