

The Faculty

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In Humanities, 10 Years May Not Be Enough to Get a Ph.D.

But overall rates for finishing doctorates may be better than thought, new data show

By JOHN GRAVOIS

By the time the 10th anniversary of their enrollment in a Ph.D. program has rolled around, about 57 percent of doctoral students have their terminal degrees in hand, according to new data from the Council of Graduate Schools.

That figure represents the latest and most comprehensive effort to measure American Ph.D.-completion rates, which conventional wisdom has placed at about 50 percent since the 1970s — a statistic that some observers in higher education have called scandalous because of the waste of time and resources that it signifies. The new data, which come from preliminary findings of the council's Ph.D. Completion Project, suggest a slightly more positive picture.

Perhaps the most interesting of the council's findings is the suggestion that the 10-year mark may be too early to write off some students as "noncompleters."

In some fields — mainly engineering and the sciences — most people complete their Ph.D.'s after six or seven years of doctoral study. After that, the percentage of students who have completed their degrees begins to level off. However, in the social sciences and in the humanities, even into the eighth, ninth, and 10th years of study, the percentage of students who have completed their degrees slowly but doggedly continues to rise.

Trends in the data suggest that still more humanists and social scientists may complete their degrees after 11 or even 12 years in Ph.D. programs, according to Daniel Denecke, a program director for the project. Those findings may call into question the wisdom of setting time limits on doctoral study, as some universities do, said Mr. Denecke. And it may inspire a new round of soul-searching about the question "Why do some graduate students take so long to finish what they have started?"

"Are they underfunded?" asks Chris M. Golde, an associate vice provost for graduate education at Stanford University and a longtime researcher on doctoral completion rates. "Are they doing it part time? Are they engaged in some pact of mutual delusion, where I say I'm going to finish my dissertation and you say that you'll check on me?"

"Probably all those are correct," she says.

This stage of the Ph.D. Completion Project is a study of doctoral completion and attrition rates at about 30 public and private universities across the country. To provide a first glimpse of data from the project, the council has released a set of statistics on Ph.D. completion and attrition rates broken down by field of study, along with a report on exit surveys of doctoral students who have completed their degrees. Later stages of the project will study the effects that different approaches have on completion rates.

The council drew its data from doctoral students who began studying for Ph.D.'s from 1992 to 1995.

Low Completion, High Attrition

The humanities have the lowest completion rates of any field, the study found, and one of the highest attrition rates. But even more troubling is the timing of those attrition rates.

In other broad fields of study, most students who abandon their doctoral programs do so early on. Take mathematics and the physical sciences, which actually have the highest attrition rates of any field. In those programs, almost all of the students who jump ship do so by the third year of study. (Why so much attrition in math and physical sciences? Mr. Denecke and Ms. Golde suggest that it may have something to do with the career opportunities that often lure, say, computer scientists away from academe.)

In the humanities, on the other hand, only half of the students who will eventually drop out are gone by year three. The remaining departures are staggered out over the next seven years — with almost 3 percent finally throwing in the towel after investing nine or 10 years in the doctoral slog.

Some findings in the council's study buck the conventional wisdom about Ph.D. completion.

Earlier studies have suggested that graduate programs with small numbers of doctoral students yield better completion rates than those with large numbers. Not so, say the council's data. Over all, the difference between completion rates for departments with large and small numbers of students is insignificant. (In some individual fields, however, size does make a difference. In engineering, smaller is slightly better; in the life sciences, smaller is slightly worse.)

The same goes for the difference between completion rates at public universities versus private ones. Higher-education researchers have long thought that private universities yielded better Ph.D.-completion rates than public universities did, presumably because the private institutions tended to have deeper pockets for grants, stipends, and other aid. But the council's study found little difference between the completion rates at the two types of universities. Public institutions, in fact, fared slightly better.

To Ms. Golde, that last finding is surprising because it suggests that attrition is not all about money.

Money was, however, high on the minds of the people who completed the council's exit survey after earning their Ph.D.'s. Eighty percent of those respondents said that financial support was the main factor that had enabled them to complete their doctoral programs. In Ms. Golde's mind, those two statistics are not irreconcilable.

Money, she said, "may help people complete, but that doesn't mean that [lack of money] is the reason people leave."

The newly minted Ph.D.'s who responded to the exit survey said that their advisers were most available at the beginning of their programs and least available during the thorny dissertation-writing phase. That runs counter to many experts' assumption that the relationship between graduate students and their advisers becomes more intense in the later stages of doctoral work.

Young scholars who completed the survey also said they thought that teaching assistantships tended to increase the time it took to earn a degree. That concern ran especially high in math and physical sciences and in the humanities, the two broad fields where teaching assistantships outnumber research assistantships.

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