

As Many Dropouts as Degrees

Poor PhD Completion Rate Prods Group to Evaluate What's Lacking

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U.S. high schools and doctoral programs share a problem: How do they keep their students enrolled long enough to get a degree?

According to the Council of Graduate Schools, doctoral students drop out at an average rate of 50 to 60 percent -- the same rate reported in some urban K-12 systems. (There are about 400,000 students enrolled in doctoral programs.) In some of the humanities, the completion rate is even lower.

Just as K-12 systems across the country wrestle with how to keep kids in school, numerous colleges and universities are trying to alter their own dropout dynamic and turn out more PhDs.

At stake, some educators say, is America's tradition of world dominance in doctoral education, which has fueled research and innovation since the first PhDs were awarded in the United States in the 1880s.

Similar warnings have been made before, and some educators shrug off the latest ones. But Debra W. Stewart, council president and former university dean, said the need for a solution has never been so pressing.

With China, India and the European Union investing heavily in graduate education programs -- modeled after the U.S. system -- and with international applications down during this decade, Stewart said it is vital to keep U.S. students in the doctoral pipeline.

"We will ultimately look at this [decline in international applications] as an early warning signal that focused our attention on a problem we had for some time been ignoring," she said. "We must aggressively attract talent from around the world but take seriously the need to develop our domestic talent pool."

That's why the council has assembled more than two dozen universities from across the country to get definitive data on attrition and completion in doctoral programs, do in-depth analyses of why more students don't get their doctorates and create interventions.

Educators said they used to believe that so many dropped out because they weren't tough or smart enough to complete the rigorous research and dissertation course required to get a PhD, which, on average, takes six years.

The truth is more complicated, they say.

"If we knew which 50 percent wouldn't complete their program, we'd be better off, but we don't," said Adam F. Falk, dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at Johns Hopkins University.

Some students, for example, have family, financial or health issues that make it impossible to stay in a full-time program; some students have doctoral advisers with whom it is difficult -- or impossible -- to work. Some aren't a good fit for their program; others decide a master's degree is enough to get a great job.

There's also the issue of how data on doctoral education are compiled: Minorities and women, on average, take longer than white men to receive their degrees but are frequently counted as dropouts.

"We have to figure out where we are on this so we know where we can go," Stewart said.

-- Valerie Strauss