

15 Years working with PhD Data A Few Lessons Learned

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Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's Graduate Education Initiative

- Launched in 1991
- Provided \$80 Million to 51 Humanities Departments
- 10 Major Research Universities
- Over a 10-Year Period
- Designed to improve PhD education

Motivation for program

- Research for In Pursuit of the PhD
 - Bowen and Rudenstine
- Shift assistance from individual student to department
 - Focus on department culture/expectations
 - Make funding conditional on timely progress
 - Monitor progress to reduce late attrition

Strategy – how was it done?

- Proposals
 - Identify “swamps”
 - Design “ramps”
 - Reality check -- baseline TTD, CR and targets
- Accountability
 - Narrative reports
 - Mellon staff visits
 - Conferences
- Focus on data
 - Annual submissions
 - Feedback from Mellon on outcome measures

Data Submitted by Institutions

- Individual (anonymous) Records

All Entrants to PhD Programs (1982 thru 2006)

- Demographic
- Annual financial
- Annual academic
- Placement
- 50 Control Departments
- 30,000 student records
- Over 150,000 student years
- Indebted to data gatherers at 13 institutions

What Happened?

- Completion rates: 38 of 50 increased CR
- Overall Financial Support in Humanities increased
- Student Survey undertaken
- Raised Awareness
 - National organizations – new initiatives begun
 - Departments – still refining/ more concerned
 - Graduate Schools – expanded role
 - Students -- expect TTD/CR to be reported
 - Data gathered more often
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Lessons Learned Along the Way

Social Science Experiments – not controlled

- Control departments improved
- Job market for Humanities PhDs
- Department intentions – not synonymous with actual changes
 - Leadership changes/budget constraints
 - Disconnect between faculty perceptions and student perceptions
 - Revisions in design

Lessons Learned Along the Way

- Unintended consequences
 - Financial support – not conditional
 - Early attrition reduced

The Data, Oh, the Data

- Time lags – 9 yrs to finish?
 - Last entering cohort we can look at today is 1995
 - By time you can evaluate impact, it has probably changed
- Definitions
 - Standardization
 - TAing
 - Tuition
 - Enrolled/Active/On Leave
 - Attrition
 - Is it 1 minus completion?
 - Languishing
 - What is an “innovation”

How good are the data?

- Institution-based vs. survey-based
 - Attrition – about 73% accurate
 - Transfers – cross-institutional data
 - 9 % of “attrition” is really transfer
 - 4% of entering cohorts complete at other institution
 - Data Errors
 - Survey says – I graduated!

Warnings

- Reducing early attrition may lead to increased languishing
- Attrition – registration definition may understate graduation
- Identifying Best Practices –
 - Standardization – for evaluation
 - Reality check – are department reports consistent with actual student experience

Outcomes

- Heightened awareness nationwide
- Broadened efforts to reduce attrition
- Proliferation of Innovations
- Expanded data collection
- Students expect TTD and CR info
- Over 100 departments are more self-aware
- TTD and CR were improved in 38 specific departments