



UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME  
THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

## Reducing the Cost of Graduate Attrition

A joint project by the Graduate Schools at the  
University of Notre Dame and Purdue University

Cecilia Lucero, Ph.D.  
Jarren Gonzales, Ph.D.

---

# Overview

- **Attrition and Completion Patterns**
  - **Peer Mentoring Program**
  - **Career for Masters Program**
-

---

# Attrition and Completion Patterns

- Data from 14 departments common to both ND and Purdue:  
CHEG, CE, EE, ME, BIOS, CHEM, MATH, PHYS, ENGL, HIST, PHIL, POLS, PSY, and SOC
  - Operationalization of attrition:
    - Overall attrition
    - Early attrition (first 2 years)
    - Late attrition (3 or more years)
    - ABD attrition
  - Attrition of sub-groups: male/female, majority/minority, U.S./international
-

---

# Attrition and Completion Patterns

- **Institutional Survey—Interviews with DGSs**
    - **Student selection**
    - **Coursework**
    - **Research, advising, professional development**
    - **Financial support and departmental service**
    - **Departmental assessment of student progress**
    - **Departmental/institutional environment**
    - **Career development and placement**
-

---

# Attrition and Completion Patterns

## ■ Student Survey

- Longitudinal
  - Two cohorts:
    - 2005-2006 and 2006-2007
    - n=1000 at Notre Dame and Purdue in year 1
  - Online surveys, 5 in first year, 3 in subsequent years
  - DGSs asked to promote survey
  - Students invited via e-mail to take survey, reminder e-mail sent one week later
  - \$1000 lottery prize incentive each semester
-

---

# Attrition and Completion Patterns

- **Problems with student survey**
    - **Low response rate at Notre Dame**
    - **Difficulty with on-line administration: constant error messages**
    - **No open-ended questions for qualitative response**
    - **Repetitive follow-up survey questions**
-

---

# Peer Mentoring Program

## ■ Program Overview

- Collaborative effort of Graduate School Administration, DGSs, and Graduate Students at Notre Dame
  - Aimed at reducing attrition rates in the graduate school population
  - Particularly important in the first year of graduate studies
-

---

# Peer Mentoring Program

- **Basic Processes of the Peer Mentoring Program**
    - **Identify at-risk departments or segments of the Graduate School population**
    - **Identify peer mentors from those at-risk segments**
    - **Match peer mentors with 2 - 3 incoming students**
-

---

# Peer Mentoring Program

- **The Mentor-Advisee Relationship**
    - **Based on the developmental concept of scaffolding**
    - **Mentors and advisees establish structured and supportive relationships**
    - **Peer mentors advise and coach new students through academic, social, and day-to-day issues**
    - **Peer mentors submit regular reports indicating progress of their advisees**
    - **Graduate administration contributes to overall development by supporting complementary events**
-

---

# Peer Mentoring Program

- **Goals of the Peer Mentoring Program**
    - **Build cultural competence**
    - **Foster the matriculation of graduate students**
    - **Provide opportunities for social connection**
    - **Recognize areas of opportunity within departments**
-

---

# Peer Mentoring Program

- **Progress towards goals (1 year after inception)**
    - **Advisees show strengthened connection to the department**
    - **Increased comfort with the academic requirements**
    - **Successful resolution of daily hassles**
    - **Retention data is ambiguous at this early stage**
-

---

# Career for Masters Program

- *Alternative Paths: Exploring Non-Academic Career Options*
    - Co-sponsored by The Career Center and The Graduate School
    - Seminar made up of seven sessions in spring semester
    - Participation in the seminar requires two to three hours of homework in between each of the sessions
-

---

# Career for Masters Program

## ■ Seminar Overview

- Re-thinking academic careers
  - Self-assessment Part A
  - Self-assessment Part B
  - Identifying and communicating transferable skills
  - Researching and identifying possible career options
  - Networking and interviewing
  - Job search strategies
-

---

# Career for Masters Program

- **Seminar Learning Objectives**
    - Understanding student motivation
    - Personal profile detailing individual skills, interests, values, and personality type (MBTI and Kerwin Values Inventory)
    - Focused resume, cover letter for specific career field
    - Knowledge of what networking is and how it is done
    - List of viable career options to continue researching
    - Extensive contact list
    - Opportunity to conduct a practice interview
    - A plan and set of goals to continue one's job search
-

---

## Next Steps

- **Meet with DGSs more frequently**
  - **Revise survey - content and delivery**
  - **Evaluate mentors' / advisees' experiences more directly**
  - **Provide more thorough orientation for peer mentors**
  - **Evaluate career-for-masters program**
  - **Conduct qualitative exit interviews**
-

---

**The Graduate School**  
**University of Notre Dame**

**Cecilia Lucero**  
**[clucero@nd.edu](mailto:clucero@nd.edu)**

**Jarren Gonzales**  
**[jgonzale@nd.edu](mailto:jgonzale@nd.edu)**

---