Does Mattering Matter to Graduate Students?

Jodi Ost

VEXATION

Many doctoral students do not realize that 50% of them will fail to complete their degree (Wao, 2010). High school GPA, ACT/SAT scores, and demographic characteristics like gender, socio-economic status, and first-generation status have been identified as strong indicators in relation to college completion for undergraduates (Reason, 2003). However few studies address graduate program attrition. A notable exception is Wao’s (2010) study of archival data of 1,028 graduate students that attended a southeastern research university between 1990 and 2006, Wao (2010) noted that less than 50% of doctoral students completed their degree. Wao (2010) analyzed a variety of student variables such as gender, age at admission, master’s GPA, GRE verbal score and GRE quantitative score, and program variables such as size of program, size of the department, racial/ethnic diversity of the program, and proportion of females in the program. The data in Wao’s (2010) study did not demonstrate a correlation between attrition and the similar graduate student characteristics of undergraduate GPA, GRE score, and gender.

When considering why student characteristics like previous GPA, scores on academic tests, and gender are not stronger indicators for success as a graduate student, one needs to consider how graduate students are different from undergraduate students. While most undergraduate students are enrolled full-time and working limited hours, graduate students are working full-time and attending graduate school part-time (Offerman, 2011). Graduate students are older and often married. In an analysis of graduate student demographics from 2005, Offerman (2011) found the average age of graduate students across all disciplines was 33.3 years and two out of three graduate students were married or in a committed relationship. The average age of a graduate student in the field of education was 42.5. These differences in demographics have impacted graduate students in substantial ways (Offerman, 2011). Graduate students have limited availability to interact with faculty, their peers, and advisors as they need to balance work, home, and school commitments. They carry a heavier financial burden due to part-time status, and they often are directly applying their coursework to their professional position.

A starting point for identifying the factors related to graduate student attrition can be found in the research and theory development of studies focused on undergraduate attrition. While much of the research on undergraduate attrition focused on identifying student variables that correlate to retention and completion rates, there exists a large amount of research centered on how student engagement and mattering improves undergraduate student retention and completion. Since Wao’s study (2010) demonstrated that graduate student variables did not correlate with attrition rates, the underlying causes of graduate student attrition may be in closer alignment with the undergraduate theories of student engagement and mattering. Are graduate students that feel like they matter more likely to complete their doctorate than graduate students that feel like they do not matter to others in their learning community?

VENTURE

I venture that mattering really does matter to graduate students. Elliott, Kao, & Grant (2004) define mattering conceptually as having four facets: awareness, importance, ego-extension, and reliance. These facets relate to cognition and to feelings or affect and can be applied to students in the following ways. Awareness relates to a student being recognized or acknowledged. Importance occurs when a student feels that another person cares for them, shows concern, or has an interest in them. The ego-extension facet relates to a student feeling like others are proud of them, that they are empathetic or sympathetic toward them. Reliance is when a student feels that others depend or rely on
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Mattering has been applied to a wide variety of populations in varying contexts and one of the more recent contexts is that of higher education institutions. University mattering as characterized by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) is a form as societal mattering experienced by a student in a college or university setting. If a student feels they matter to someone at a university, they are more likely to feel connected and behave positively toward the university community by being more attentive to their academic studies, being more involved in campus activities, and being more willing to be an ambassador for their university/college.

While there are significant demographic differences between undergraduate and graduate students, the construct of mattering (or lack of mattering) could potentially illuminate some of the factors that push graduate students to withdraw from their programs. Research could demonstrate that graduate students respond to mattering in a manner that aligns with the undergraduate student response. Lovitts (2005, 2008) noted that the relationships graduate students develop with their advisors, program faculty members, their peers, and other scholars is pivotal in supporting the graduate student through the dissertation process. Without the support of these key relationships, graduate students may choose to withdraw when they begin to feel overwhelmed by the requirements of the doctoral process.

I am looking to administer the Unified Measure of University Mattering 15 (UMUM-15) (France, 2011) to graduate students as my research project for my dissertation. I am focusing on the UMUM-15 as earlier scales for measuring mattering were not aligned with the foundational Rosenberg and McCullough theory of mattering, were not specific to the higher education context, and/or were too focused on mattering to specific people on campus. In 2010, Franc and Finney published the 34-item University Mattering Scale (UMS) and later the Revised UMS which follows the original Rosenberg and McCullough theory of mattering and is based on the General Mattering Index (Elliot, 2004) with adjustments to items to be specifically related to higher education. In 2011, France wrote her doctoral dissertation around a newly created measure, which she named the Unified Measure of University Mattering 15 (UMUM-15). France postulated that it does not necessarily matter how or to whom a student feels they matter to/at a university, but simply that they do. This short 15-item scale therefore measures university mattering as a single construct, so there are no measurement issues with correlations among the four facets (awareness, importance, reliance, and ego-extension). Results of four independent samples support a unidimensional factor. Items from each of the four facets were retained in order to cover the full scope of university mattering. Thus far, unfortunately, the scale has only been published in a dissertation format. France acknowledges that further studies are needed in different populations and across time to better check reliability and validity. As graduate students are a separate and unique subpopulation at universities, I venture that the UMUM-15 could demonstrate that mattering really does matter to graduate students.

I would invite discussion of any of the ideas explored above, or some of the more concrete questions on my mind:

- Modifying the UMUM-15 designed for undergraduates for graduate students. Pitfalls? Limitations?
- Other methods for exploring the concept of mattering with graduate students?
- Who to sample: NDSU graduate students from EDP-alumni, current, withdrawn; all NDSU graduate students; graduate students at multiple institutions?
- Could mattering be more significant in certain disciplines: hard science vs social sciences?