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Anemone, Robert L., "Time to Completion of Degree and Retention Rate in Graduate Student Cohorts from 1998-2008" (2012). Academic Leadership Academy. 31.
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Time to Completion of Degree and Retention Rate in Graduate Student Cohorts from 1998-2008

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The Problem

The Anthropology Department at WMU suggests that incoming graduate students should be able to complete the Masters Degree within two years or 4 semesters. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it is the rare student who actually completes his or her degree within 2 years. In fact, many students require 4-6 years to complete what is ostensibly a 2 year degree program. A surprising result was that many students indicated that they were not particularly unsatisfied with completing their degree in 3-4 years. Several suggested that they were financially more comfortable with taking 6 credits per Fall and Spring terms, and thus fully expected to be in residence for 3 or more years.

The Survey

A Survey was written and, with the help of the Anthropology Grad Collective (AGC) and its President, graduate student Jamie Gomez, was distributed via email to all current graduate students and all recent graduates whose email addresses were on file in the Department office. This included many students who had not completed their degree in spite of having been enrolled for more than 2 years. Students were asked to return their completed surveys to Ms. Gomez, who printed them after stripping them of any personal identifiers, and returned the results to me.

The Survey was designed to provide quantitative data that would elucidate the time to completion of degree and the student's own progress to date, and finally

The most valuable part of the responses to the questionnaire were the open-ended responses concerning experiences of individual students, including expectations of how long it would take to complete their degrees, their levels of satisfaction with their progress towards completion of their degree, and problems and difficulties they experienced with finishing their program.

The average time to completion for the 46 students who had been awarded their degree was 10.02 semesters, with a standard deviation of 4.12 and a range of 16 (maximum was 22 and minimum was 6). Note that we counted 3 semesters as equivalent to a single academic year (i.e., Fall, Spring and Summer semesters), so that our mean time to completion of 10 semesters indicates slightly more than 3 years for the average student to complete his or her degree.

In Archaeology, the average time to completion for the 17 students who had completed their degree was 9.75 semesters, with a standard deviation of 3.92. In Cultural Anthropology, the average time to completion was 9.00 semesters, with a standard deviation of 3.55 semesters.

The Anthropology Department at WMU suggests that incoming graduate students should be able to complete the Masters Degree within two years or 4 semesters. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it is the rare student who actually completes his or her degree within 2 years. In fact, many students require 4-6 years to complete what is ostensibly a 2 year degree program, while many other students eventually drop out of the program and never complete their degree.

This situation has been discussed among faculty and graduate students in the department for a number of years, but no actual data have been collected on the time to completion or the retention rate of graduate students within our department.

My Academic Leadership Academy research project was designed to address this situation by:

- Collecting quantitative and qualitative data on recent cohorts of students in order to document whether a problem exists,
- Eliciting the opinions of current students and recent graduates as to their progress in our program and their (dis)satisfaction with their own progress through the program,
- Exploring the institutional and personal obstacles that may adversely affect time to completion of degree and retention.

The Analysis by Subdiscipline - Retention

Differences in retention between the subdisciplines are minor. In Biological Anthropology 17 of 25 students (68%) were awarded their degree while 6 (24%) had dropped out, and 3 were still enrolled. In Cultural Anthropology, 13 of 25 students (52%) completed their degree, 8 (32%) had dropped out, and 4 were still enrolled. In Archaeology, 17 of 29 students (59%) had completed their degrees, 6 (21%) had dropped out, and 6 were still enrolled.

The author acknowledges the inspiration and mentoring provided by Linwood Eisenbach in the 2011-2012 Academic Leadership Academy, as well as the contributions of all of the Academy participants. LouAnn Wurst and Lauretta Eisenbach in the Department of Anthropology at WMU provided significant help and support in pulling together the data that went into the cohort analysis, and Jamie Gomez helped with the administering of the survey.

A big and heartfelt thank you to all the graduate students in the Anthropology Department to studying the success or failure of our graduate students, and implementing rational changes and improvements to our program.