Effectively Managing Time to Degree: Best Practices for Doctoral Advising

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Best Practices for Doctoral Advising  
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Project Description

The intent of this project is to identify best practices in doctoral advising at WMU and in the professional literature. This project aims to support the goal of reducing the time to degree for graduate programs at WMU, which is identified as an indicator in the Academic Affairs Strategic Plan 2010. This project will focus on time to degree (TTD) for doctoral students at WMU.

Phase I: Data Gathering & Review of Key Literature  
- Gather WMU data on doctoral programs  
- Collect & review literature  
- Academic Leadership Academy Poster Presentation

Phase II: Research Project  
- Refine project and gain HSIRB approval  
- Identify 2 WMU doctoral programs each in the: a) sciences, b) humanities, and c) social sciences  
- Conduct focus groups and utilize electronic surveys with faculty doctoral advisors, advanced students and recent graduates  
- Identify factors that facilitate and inhibit timely degree completion

Phase III: Distribution of Findings  
- Develop & distribute a doctoral advising best practice info sheet  
- Conduct a workshop at WMU for doctoral advisors on TTD  
- Refine project and gain HSIRB approval  
- Phase III: Distribution of Findings

Desired Outcomes

Short-term:  
1. Increase awareness of faculty of current data for time in degree for their doctoral program.  
2. Identification of best practices for excellent programs at WMU.  
3. Identification of best practices in the professional literature for effectively managing time to degree for doctoral studies.  
4. Identification of barriers or obstacles that lead to longer time in degree.  
5. Develop and distribute to doctoral program faculty and chairs an informational sheet on strategies for effectively managing time to degree and best practices for doctoral advising.

Long-term:  
1. Reduce average time to degree for doctoral studies at WMU  
2. Reduce time to degree for those programs that have especially long averages for time to degree.

Measuring Time to Degree

Elapsed TTD: Time from entry into doctoral degree to the awarding of the degree (can be difficult to measure when master’s is attained along way and lack of clear beginning of degree).

Total TTD: # of years between awarding of the baccalaureate and the attainment of the doctoral degree.

Registered TTD: Includes only when student is registered in graduate school, excluding time taken off.

WMU Time to Degree Data 2000-2006

Total Number of Doctoral Degrees: 535

Elapsed Time to Degree:  
 WMU overall: 5.76 yrs.  
 College of Arts & Sciences: 5.71 yrs.  
 College of Education: 6.23 yrs.  
 College of Engineering: 4.62 yrs.  
 College of HHS (PHD): 4.75 yrs.  
 College of HHS (Doctorate): 3.67 yrs.  
 STEM Fields: 5.25 yrs.

Median Time to Degree:  
 WMU overall: 5.26 yrs.  
 College of Arts & Sciences: 5.00 yrs.  
 College of Education: 5.92 yrs.  
 College of Engineering: 4.80 yrs.  
 College of HHS (PHD): -- yrs.  
 College of HHS (Doctorate): 3.83 yrs.  
 STEM Fields: 4.93 yrs.

Sample Narrative: Electrical & Computer Engineering

CGS identified 6 institutional and program characteristics as key factors influencing student outcomes that can ultimately affect the likelihood that a particular student will complete a Ph.D. program.

1. Selection/Matching
2. Mentoring & Advising
3. Financial Support & Structure
4. Program Environment
5. Research Experiences
6. Curricular & Administrative Processes & Procedures

Gender: Males complete at higher rates in Engineering, Math & Physical Sciences & Life Sciences; Females at higher rates for Social Sciences & Humanities.

Race/Ethnicity: Whites overall completed at higher rates than African-American, Asian & Hispanic Students. Whites & African-Americans had similarly higher completion rates for Life Sciences & Humanities.

Program Size: Smaller programs completed students at higher rates.

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