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Graduate Student Retention: An Examination of Factors Affecting Persistence Among Master's Program Students at Comprehensive Public Institutions

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GRADUATE STUDENT RETENTION: AN EXAMINATION OF FACTORS
AFFECTING PERSISTENCE AMONG MASTER'S PROGRAM STUDENTS AT
COMPREHENSIVE PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

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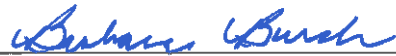Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

By
Scott Gordon
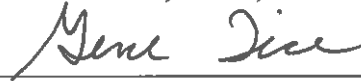
December 2016

GRADUATE STUDENT RETENTION: AN EXAMINATION OF FACTORS
AFFECTING PERSISTENCE AMONG MASTER'S PROGRAM STUDENTS AT
COMPREHENSIVE PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

Date Recommended __10/26/16__

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Dean, Graduate School   Date

I dedicate the time invested into this degree program to my family, as none of this would have been possible without their support. My parents instilled a love of learning that set me on this path years ago, and my mother, Joyce Gordon, has been a tireless advocate throughout the program. My wife, Angie Gordon, has been the steadying force that allowed me to pursue this opportunity, while my children, Aaron and Mason, have served as my inspiration to finish what I started. I could not have done any of this without all of you.

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Many individuals contributed to my earning this degree, and I am truly grateful for their influence and support throughout the process.

First, I am very grateful to have Dr. Barbara Burch as my dissertation chair. Her wisdom, experience, and guidance have been invaluable as she helped me navigate the process from coursework to dissertation. She is truly both a lady and a scholar.

My committee members also helped me immensely in terms of planning and executing this dissertation. Dr. Kristin Wilson is an expert in qualitative methods and is extraordinarily generous with her time and knowledge. Dr. Gene Tice graciously shared his experiences and expertise, as well as his support.

My doctoral classmates also have been incredible sources of information, inspiration, friendship, and support throughout my time in the doctoral program. I have had the opportunity to meet and to collaborate with amazing individuals in this program, and I value the relationships we've formed and deepened.

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AFFECTING PERSISTENCE AMONG MASTER'S PROGRAM STUDENTS AT
COMPREHENSIVE PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

Scott Gordon   December 2016   143 Pages

Directed by: Barbara Burch, Gene Tice, and Kristin Wilson

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program   Western Kentucky University

This study focuses on persistence efforts at the master's level at regional comprehensive public institutions, with student interviews and document research used as data sources. The interviews are conducted with students who are currently enrolled in or have graduated from master's programs at one of the two institutions studied, while the documents examined were texts for internal and external constituencies.

While Tinto's Longitudinal Model of Doctoral Persistence is used as a guide for the research, a variety of student retention models are examined that encompass both undergraduate and doctoral persistence. Challenges include the lack of models specifically intended for master's seeking students, as well as the absence of standardized data collection for graduate student persistence (as compared to undergraduate focused persistence data).

This research identifies the importance of graduate faculty support, self-motivation, and peer support to graduate persistence. While students do not perceive graduate persistence to be an institutional priority, particularly when compared with undergraduate persistence, the heterogeneity of graduate students, from recruitment and admission through program completion, makes it difficult to achieve similar results with similar activities. Nevertheless, institutions have the opportunity for significant improvement with regard to graduate persistence efforts.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Many, if not most institutions pay close attention to undergraduate recruitment and retention, in contrast to the lesser emphasis placed on graduate enrollment. Doctoral programs often are scrutinized, as are subsets of graduate students such as underrepresented populations. However, little emphasis is placed on the largest component of graduate education, namely, students enrolled in master's degree programs. When a student enrolls in an academic program at a public postsecondary institution, both enter into a partnership intended to culminate with the student earning a degree awarded by the institution. Both have responsibilities in this partnership; students must put forth the effort to complete the intended program successfully, while institutions must provide appropriate resources (instruction, evaluation, feedback, and so forth) to allow students to succeed.

Public institutions have a vested interest in student success, as often it is used as a metric in determining the amount of financial support the school receives from the state. In headcount funding models, student success means lower student attrition, which translates into increased funding. Similarly, for funding models based on degree completion, student success represents growth in graduation rates. Students also benefit from completing a degree program. At a basic level, an opportunity cost is associated with attending school. The time invested in earning a degree alternatively could be used for increased work hours or leisure time with family and friends. Additionally, if students take out loans in order to finance a degree, leaving the institution prior to earning it puts students in the unenviable position of accruing debt that does not result in the type of payoff in terms of increased future earnings normally associated with completing a

degree. Many types of student loan debt cannot be discharged, even in a bankruptcy. There are few things more expensive than an unfinished college degree.

Beyond the advantages available to both parties are the responsibilities each must fulfill. Students should be committed to the educational endeavor and perform to the best of their abilities. Not doing so diverts institutional resources that could benefit other students. By admitting a student to a degree program, an institution assumes a moral obligation to provide the greatest opportunity for the student to succeed; taking tuition payments from a student who does not have a reasonable expectation of completing a degree is at best unethical.

Public postsecondary institutions are nonprofit entities. As such, historically they have not been motivated by the same profit maximization focus as businesses, private and for-profit universities. However, in an era of increasingly reduced state funding, public universities have adopted more economies and efficiencies in an effort to ameliorate the effects of diminished support. One means of doing so is to find ways to reduce spending, but there is only so much that can be cut. Another means is through increased enrollment. Enrollment increases at an institution through one of two mechanisms. The first, recruitment, involves bringing new students to an institution. The second is retention, which involves retaining students already at an institution from discontinuing their enrollment prior to graduation.

Problem

Retention is an oft-studied topic, particularly more so in recent years due to its linkage to increased tuition revenue and student loans. However, retention studies have focused specifically on undergraduate students. As many institutions have a much

greater number of undergraduate than graduate students, there is some logic in focusing on the undergraduate population, as the effort put forth will potentially affect more students and achieve the goal of more tuition. Undergraduate populations also are more homogeneous, as the traditional, full-time student cohort comprises the majority of the population at many institutions. Accordingly, many retention studies (particularly early efforts) have focused on this group of students. More recent studies have examined other subgroups, such as non-traditional/adult learners, but the overall emphasis has been on undergraduate retention.

A study of the literature shows a paucity of retention studies applicable to graduate students. Further, the majority are concentrated either on doctoral programs or on specific populations of students based on a common trait such as gender or ethnicity among various graduate study options. The largest group of graduate students – those pursuing master's degrees – has received the least attention in terms of retention research.

The question of that which affects persistence and retention among master's students is a valid one, and the problem to be studied is the effect of different factors have on student persistence and retention at the master's level. One particular factor of interest is "institutional commitment," both in the traditional sense of a student's level of commitment to an institution, but also in terms of an institution's level of commitment to students.

This study is important for several reasons. First, it is imperative that graduate student persistence have the same importance as undergraduate student persistence. All students admitted to an institution deserve the best opportunity to succeed. Universities have a moral obligation to provide students the most supportive environment possible to

ensure student success; without study of graduate student needs, this cannot be accomplished effectively. Second, it is in the best interest of institutions to maximize graduate student retention as a source of revenue, especially if the institution enrolls significant numbers of non-resident and international students. Examining student desires and needs, versus that which is available, is an important first step in aligning these objectives.

Research Questions

Several questions relating to the research problem are explored:

1. What factors influence persistence in master's programs at comprehensive universities in the mid-south?

2. Do or how do comprehensive public universities in the mid-south prioritize graduate persistence, and how do students perceive these efforts?

3. What support services do master's students at comprehensive public institutions in the mid-South level want those institutions to provide?

Among these questions, determining the factors that affect persistence of students in master's programs is the most intriguing. Does the type of program in which a student enrolls have an effect on persistence? Exploring these factors yields insights into whether a common thread exists among students at the master's level, and whether there are factors that can be mitigated to increase persistence.

Second, examining the relationship between institutional commitment and master's student persistence has merit. Multiple student attrition models incorporate "institutional commitment" as a variable, but only in the sense of the commitment from the student to the institution. What is the level of commitment from institution to student,

and does it differ at the graduate and undergraduate levels? If a difference exists, what effect does it have on students who have experienced both environments, i.e., undergraduate and graduate programs with varying levels of commitment? Regardless of whether an actual difference is seen in efforts to retain graduate versus undergraduate students, do student perceive a difference? Given that many enroll in master's programs soon after completing a baccalaureate program, how do students perceive their experiences at each degree level?

Finally, considering graduate student support services further defines the divide between baccalaureate and master's students. Many services are available for undergraduates, due to the specific focus of retention efforts on these students. Defining services primarily intended for one group versus what is intended for the other helps to explore the question of institutional commitment.

Design of the Study

This case study focuses on master's program students at public comprehensive universities in the mid-south. The data are gathered from two schools that, when taken together, combine the characteristics of many other public comprehensive universities. As previously noted, significant research has been conducted on doctoral student persistence, which gives incentive to examine students at the master's level. Those involved in graduate certificate, certification-only, or similar programs also are excluded. Institution type is significant in this discussion, as it examines institutions in which the graduate offerings are primarily at the master's level. Institutions of this type are referred to by The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education as "Postbaccalaureate comprehensive" or "Postbac-Comp," defined as awarding "master's

degrees in the humanities, social sciences, and STEM fields, as well as degrees in one or more professional fields" (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.).

Public institutions enroll greater numbers of students at the master's level than other institutional types, as public universities usually are less costly than their private or for-profit counterparts. Public institutions also are particularly sensitive to tuition revenue, thus examining retention issues on public campuses is relevant due to the budgetary implications that accompany enrollment changes.

Significance of the Study

Very little scholarship exists that explores the factors that influence student persistence at the master's level (Alexander, Kohnke, & Naginey, 2011; Cohen, 2012). As institutions continue to refine retention models in order to maximize enrollment, graduate students (particularly those at the master's level) are a forgotten piece of the enrollment management strategy. Master's programs can serve as an area of growth for an institution that faces stagnant undergraduate recruitment issues, such as a declining number of high school graduates. As more students earn a baccalaureate degree, the value of the degree is somewhat diluted as it becomes ubiquitous. Master's degrees offer a way for individuals (such as job seekers) to differentiate themselves from others who do not possess a graduate degree (Borchert, 2005).

It is unclear whether graduate enrollment is not tracked because it is not reported, or if it is not reported because it is not tracked. A state oversight board such as the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) has a wealth of data available on its website, but the only retention data posted is for bachelor and associate degrees

(Kentucky CPE, n.d.a). One reason for the lack of focus on master's degrees is the view that the only students earning these degrees are those who cannot achieve a doctoral degree (Cassuto, 2015). Viewing master's degrees in this way ignores the numerous programs that are intended as professional or vocational, as defined by Glazer-Raymo (2005). These programs are aimed at students who need specific job training or credentialing, thus meeting the goals of the students who enroll in them.

Students seeking master's degrees comprise the majority of graduate students in the United States, with an increasing number awarded each year (Anderson, 2013; Borchert, 2005). In the 2012-2013 academic year, 522,350 master's degrees were awarded, 70,920 doctoral degrees, and 34,416 graduate certificates across all institutional types; looking specifically at public institutions, 312,380 master's degrees were awarded, compared to 45,081 doctoral degrees and 17,156 graduate certificates (Allum, 2014). While there are fewer graduate students than undergraduates, it is puzzling that a growing cohort of students (i.e., those at the master's level) continues to be ignored. Alstete (2014) identifies retention as a strategy that enhances revenue income. Thus, institutions have a vested interest in retaining as many students as possible. As competition among schools increases to recruit qualified students, it becomes more important to retain as many enrolled students as possible. In a sense, trying to compensate for low retention with increased recruitment is akin to attempting to fill a bucket with a hole in the bottom.

Numerous models have been used to describe different aspects of undergraduate retention (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975). As these models were refined, they incorporated more variables in an attempt to move beyond describing the phenomenon to predicting the likelihood of a student continuing. However, the

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refinement of the models tended to make them even more undergraduate-specific. Of the existing models, many have components that can be used to describe or to predict certain aspects of master's degree persistence (Cohen, 2012). While it cannot be assumed that support needs of master's student are the same as those of undergraduates, common themes exist, such as the "institutional commitment" variable first identified by Spady (1971), which is used to measure a student's commitment to an institution. Spady and others have found that a higher level of commitment correlates to a higher chance of persistence. Little to no research is available that has measured institutional commitment to a student. This could be defined as the level of support services for graduate students, or through the existence of institutional policies designed to be assistive to graduate students, or by many other means. An examination of this variable would be similar to the non-traditional/adult student learner research conducted by Bean and Metzner (1985).

Research Design

This exploratory qualitative case study employs multiple methods of data collection. First, semi-structured interviews are conducted with students enrolled in master's programs or have earned master's degrees from public comprehensive institutions. Second, analysis of relevant policies at public comprehensive institutions is used to provide evidence regarding questions of demonstrated institutional commitment. Interviews are selected as a research tool in order to get personal perspectives on the subjects of interest. By speaking with individuals, it is possible to learn specific information on perceptions of institutional policies such as the level of commitment that students identify as evidence of institutional commitment. Interviews allow follow ups and potential new areas of discovery that could be limited by other research methods,

such as surveying. Finally, themes emerge based on examinations of the collected data to inform the study of topics of interest.

Examining policies as a data collection method allows more objectivity than interviews. By exploring the support services offered to students at different degree levels, it will be possible to discern the relative level of importance an institution places on each group, consciously or subconsciously. It also is intriguing to determine whether any discrepancies appear to be intentional and, if so, their implications.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is the transferability of the findings to different campus types. As public comprehensive institutions are examined, it is unknown whether the same findings exist on private campuses or public research institutions. Similarly, it is unknown whether for-profit schools face the same issues.

Delimitations

One delimitation of this study is the choice to include only comprehensive public intuitions. A response to the potential question of the transferability of findings is the fact that more than 100 institutions of this type are found in the United States, most of which are public universities (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.). Thus, the outcome of this study may be beneficial to numerous students at multiple institutions. A second delimitation is the examination of public institutions in the mid-south. Given the propensity of many students to attend universities physically close to home, it is important to consider the geographic region of the majority of the participants of this study.

Definition of Terms

Institutional commitment – first used by Spady (1971) as a variable in a model used to describe the phenomenon of college dropouts, it measures a student's commitment to an institution. However, it also can be redefined as the measurement of an institution's commitment to a student or a group of students.

Dropout – a student who discontinues college enrollment permanently.

Enrollment management – a method of integrating many or all aspects of an individual's experience with an institution, beginning as a prospective student at an institution and culminating with graduation, with the goal of attracting and retaining students.

Nontraditional student – students older than age 25 who have some combination of factors including part-time status, full-time employment, responsibility for dependents, etc.

Persistence – continuing progress toward an education goal, usually an earned degree.

Postbaccalaureate comprehensive institution – an institution that offers master's degrees with few or no doctoral degrees.

Retention – persuading or preventing students from dropping out/stopping out, similar to persistence.

Stopout – a student who discontinues college enrollment temporarily or on a longer term (but not permanent) basis.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the importance of the study of student retention at the master's level. While a great deal of analysis is devoted to undergraduate retention, substantially less research exists for post-baccalaureate education. Public institutions are

increasingly reliant on tuition revenue, which is affected by retention, thus making the study of graduate retention an important part of graduate enrollment management. The following chapters focus on a review of the literature relevant to this discussion, as well as a description of the research methodology. Additionally, the results of the research and implications are discussed.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Enrollment management is an evolving field at postsecondary institutions that seeks to maximize the number of students matriculating at a school. At its most basic level, enrollment management consists of recruitment and retention efforts, but other aspects of enrollment (such as financial aid, housing, etc.) may be included in more comprehensive iterations. Student recruitment commonly is the most visible aspect of an enrollment management operation. The number of new students recruited to an institution is a mainstay of campus data reporting each year. It is easy for institutions to view recruitment as a limitless resource that allows them to attract as many students as desired; however, the linearity of the relationship of effort expended recruiting students to the number of new students that attend is not constant.

The less-considered component of enrollment management is retention. Retaining a student becomes increasingly important when institutional evaluation stems from outcomes-based assessments, such as the number of graduates or time to degree, rather than an input-based approach, such as headcount or overall enrollment. It is increasingly within a school's best interests to retain students, especially as they near graduation, if for no other reason than the time and effort involved in working with the student up to the point of potential departure. Additionally, an institution that grants admission to a student has a moral obligation to help that student succeed. Therefore, retention is an important field of study that is beneficial both to institutions and to students.

Despite the growth in the number of graduate students, coupled with the increasing institutional dependence on tuition revenue, relatively little information is available on graduate persistence when compared to the abundance of undergraduate-focused retention scholarship (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Xu, 2014-2015). One reason for the lack of data in this area is that schools are not required to collect and disseminate it. The Kentucky CPE oversees all public postsecondary institutions, ranging from community college to doctoral institutions. A review of the CPE Data Portal's "Retention & Graduation Rates" page reveals that the only retention data available is six-year baccalaureate rates and three-year associate degree rates. No mention exists of graduate retention, despite that all of the eight public four-year institutions in Kentucky offer graduate degrees (Kentucky CPE, n.d.a).

Considering the dearth of specific persistence and retention information relating to master's programs, compared to the wealth of data on undergraduate and doctoral persistence, it is illustrative to explore existing models that examine the latter in order to determine their applicability in studies of the former. Both undergraduate and doctoral persistence studies include areas of overlap with master's programs. Doctoral and master's programs are similar in that they are graduate programs, even though they differ in program length and requirements and, thus, have comparable populations. Undergraduate studies that do not focus on the homogenous traditional cohort of students ages 18-22 also have similarities with master's programs, which have a more diverse age range of students. Andres and Carpenter (1997) classified graduate students as nontraditional, likening graduate student issues to subgroups of non-traditional

undergraduates such as "older adult learners, commuters, [and] part-time students" (p. 33).

The Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) is a leading organization in graduate study, as it is the "only national organization in the United States that is dedicated solely to the advancement of graduate education and research" (CGS, n.d.). Its member institutions award over 90% of all doctorate and over 80% of all master's degrees in the US annually. Even with the organization's commitment to graduate education, more information is available on Ph.D. completion than master's degrees. Further, the CGS Master's Completion Project focuses on STEM fields, rather than all master's degrees (CGS, 2013). Some data is provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) through the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) and the Baccalaureate & Beyond (B&B) Longitudinal Study. A report examining data from the B&B Study on students earning bachelor's degrees in 1992-93 found that, by 2003, 40% of the group had enrolled at some point in graduate school: 4% in a doctoral program, 5% in a first-professional program, and the remaining 31% in a master's program (Nevill & Chen, 2007).

Cohen (2012) identified the lack of data for master's persistence as the most significant barrier to study, unlike doctoral and undergraduate programs. Xu (2014-2015) stated, "Attrition from graduate education carries economic, social, and emotional costs; however, to date only a very limited number of studies have examined the factors that influence student persistence to degree attainment in graduate education" (p. 393). The Council of Graduate Schools' Master's Completion Project was a recent effort to examine the factors that affect graduate attrition and persistence, albeit focused on

students in STEM fields (CGS, 2013). Graduate students were surveyed to determine the influences that prompted them to progress toward a degree, or to discontinue their graduate work. The Master's Completion Project preliminary findings identified several elements that affect persistence (CGS, 2013). These factors were classified as either internal or external to the institution; e.g., when considering degree completion, "Institutional or program supports" was internal, while "Supportive employer" was external (p. 76). Similarly, with regard to stopout/dropout, "Lack of institutional or program support" and "Pressure of outside employment" (p. 77) followed the same paradigm. Demographic differences were noted in this report, highlighting the individuality of graduate programs. Comparing STEM fields to MBA programs, disparities were observed on the basis of student gender, ethnicity, and nationality. Even within the different STEM fields, variances in time to completion existed (CGS, 2013). While this study was STEM-specific, it is reasonable to view this data as generalizable to other academic disciplines.

Historical Context of Graduate Education

Graduate education in the US is considered to have its genesis in 1876, with the founding of Johns Hopkins University. While graduate degrees had been awarded before that time, the degrees were "an unearned Master's degree that was awarded only to [an] institution's own alumni" (Berelson, 1960, p. 6). As new institutions were founded, attempts were made to establish graduate-only institutions, but this effort was unsuccessful, leading to the establishment of graduate schools as additions to existing undergraduate universities (Berelson, 1960). The growth in graduate education that followed the founding of Johns Hopkins University can be viewed as paralleling the rise

in undergraduate education. Baccalaureate degree production rose steadily during the early 20th century, but was spurred tremendously by the end of World War II and the establishment of the GI Bill. The bill encouraged students to earn an undergraduate degree, thus increasing the pool of potential graduate students, but also used possibly to fund graduate education, providing a direct path to a master's or doctoral degree (Smith, 2008).

In 2001, three times as many master's-granting institutions existed versus doctoral institutions (Glazer-Raymo, 2005), while master's degrees accounted for "90% of all graduate degrees awarded in 2003-2004" (Borchert, 2005, p. vii). Anderson (2013) noted a 63% increase in the number of master's degrees granted in 2012 compared to 2000, with some schools awarding more master's than baccalaureate degrees. Almost half of colleges and universities in the US offer master's degrees (Borchert, 2005). This demonstrates the current prevalence of the master's degree and makes evident the need for further study of the effect of institutional commitment on student persistence at the master's level.

Master's programs traditionally have been characterized as academic, professional, or vocational, as well as either intermediate (i.e., preparatory for a doctoral degree) or terminal (Glazer-Raymo, 2005). The three degree types each offer different benefits to students and should be considered separately. Academic master's degree programs are more general in nature, as they are not intended to train students for a specific goal. As such, many academic master's programs can serve in an intermediate role, if students choose to continue on to a doctoral program (Glazer-Raymo, 2005).

However, students may intend to complete only a master's degree, in which case the degree is pursued as an end unto itself.

Types of Master's Degrees

As Glazer-Raymo (2005) noted, there are three main types of master's degrees:

1. Academic master's programs

2. Professional programs

3. Vocational programs

In order to understand the similarities and differences between them, it is illustrative to examine each type in order to identify the unique properties and areas of overlap of each.

Academic master's programs. Academic master's programs tend to be more traditional in nature, offering students a theoretical or research-based degree option. The primary purpose of this type of program is not specific job preparation or professional credentialing but, rather, a broad exposure to a field of study. As the most general type of program, academic master's degrees offer several different paths (Borchert 2005; Cohen 2012; Glazer-Raymo, 2005).

For some students, an academic master's degree is a stepping stone to a doctoral degree, with a defined path leading from one type to another. In some instances, the master's degree may be more of a waypoint than a destination, with the master's degree awarded automatically as students move from coursework to candidacy for the doctorate. Similarly, a master's degree may be awarded in lieu of the doctorate for students who cannot or do not earn the higher degree, leading to its characterizations as a "cheap bauble for 'quitters' as well as 'failures'" (Cassuto, 2015). Cassuto (2015) further argued

that the academic master's degree does not suffer from having no meaning but, rather, a multitude of often-contradictory meanings. Lack of clear definition and focus, particularly when seen as a stand-alone degree, can be a weakness of the academic master's program.

Professional programs. Professional programs are designed for students who desire to gain deeper, specific knowledge about a relatively narrow field. More focused than academic master's programs, professional programs often are designed for students with previous experience in the field of study, such as in business or education. These students seek an expansion of their knowledge of an area (Conrad, Duren, & Haworth, 1998; Glazer-Raymo, 2005).

Professional programs benefit from "doing-centered learning" (Conrad et al., 1998, p. 69), defined as having opportunities both in and outside the classroom to practice the lessons learned. Rather than acquiring knowledge as an abstraction, this type of degree strikes a middle ground incorporating both theory and practical knowledge about an area. Borchert (2005) defined this type of program as an "applied master's" (p. 6) and offered several examples, including the Master of Business Administration (MBA), Master of Fine Arts (MFA), and Master of Physical Therapy (MPT). These programs build on content information or experiences that a student already possesses and, therefore, require a strong professional or undergraduate preparation.

Vocational programs. Vocational programs typically are the most narrowly focused of the three degree types, as the goal is employability in a specific field. It is as focused on practicality as the academic master's is on scholarly inquiry. These programs

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also tend more toward homogeneity than the others, as external review or licensure boards often set standards that institutions use as program guidelines (Borchert, 2005).

Given that the rate of return on investment (ROI) of degree programs is under scrutiny as college costs increase, vocational programs include the most direct path to employability of graduates. Cohen (2012) observed that these types of programs can be designed to meet the needs of area or regional employers and can generate revenue for the institution that subsidizes other programs. Amplifying the view of vocational master's as a public good, Conrad et al. (1998) identified programs as "bridges between our colleges and universities and the larger society, thereby benefitting not only individuals but society as well" (p. 76). This program appears to be poised for increasing growth as more explicit linkages between education and employability are demanded by the marketplace.

Changing Models of Graduate Master's Education

Graduate education persistence models almost universally trace their lineage to undergraduate models, as interest in retaining undergraduates traditionally has predominated the conversation. These models tend to emphasize the areas of overlap between graduate and undergraduate persistence, despite the fundamental differences the two education levels exhibit. Some models have more harmony than others, depending upon the amount of overlap in terms of student characteristics shared; e.g., less commonality exists between traditional incoming freshmen and doctoral students than among nontraditional undergraduates and part-time master's students.

Spady (1971) first examined undergraduate dropouts in terms of the relationship between a student and the institution, with the expectation that students more integrated

into the campus culture are more likely to persist (see Figure 1). This theory was based

on Durkheim's Theory of Suicide, as both considered the assimilation of an individual to

a larger entity. Spady's theory is noteworthy in that it identified variables used in

subsequent models by other researchers (Cohen, 2012).
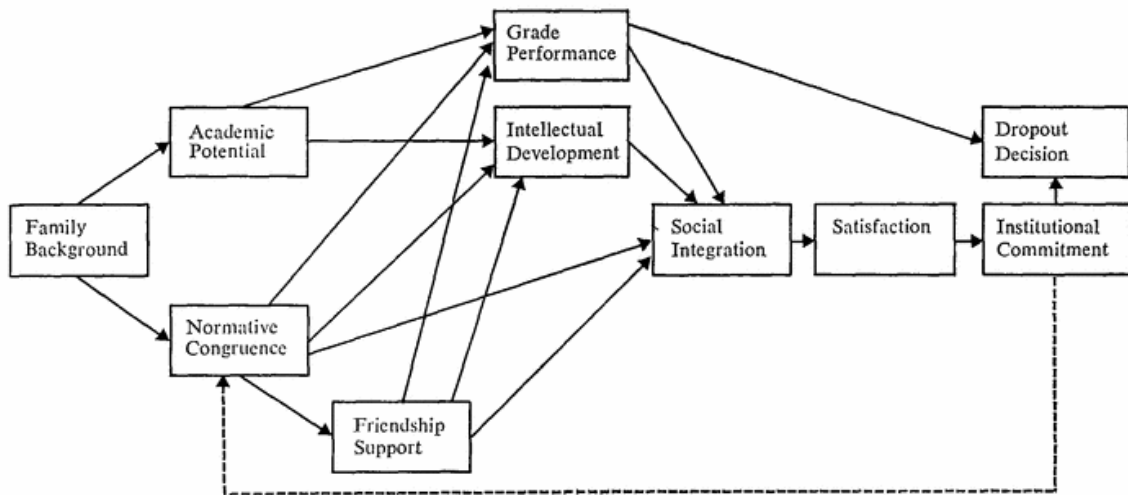
Figure 1. Theoretically based model of the undergraduate dropout process (Spady,

1971).

The concept of integration as a predictor of student success was further explored

by Tinto (1975). Similar to Spady's model, Tinto's Student Integration Model (see

Figure 2) was based in part on Durkheim's Theory of Suicide. Tinto was critical of many

previous models (with Spady's as a notable exception) for being "limited to descriptive

statements of how various individual and/or institutional characteristics relate to dropout"

(Tinto, 1975, p. 90).

Commitments   Academic System   Commitments

```
                        ┌─────────────┐
                        │    Grade    │
                        │ Performance │
┌────────────┐          │             │      ┌──────────┐
│   Family   │          │ Intellectual│      │ Academic │
│ Background │   ┌──────────┐ Development     │Integration│
└────────────┘   │   Goal   │          │      └──────────┘          ┌──────────┐
                 │Commitment│          │                            │   Goal   │
┌────────────┐   └──────────┘                                       │Commitment│      ┌──────────┐
│ Individual │                                                      └──────────┘      │ Dropout  │
│ Attributes │                                                                        │ Decisions│
└────────────┘   ┌───────────┐         ┌─────────────┐                                └──────────┘
                 │Institutional│        │ Peer-Group  │     ┌──────────┐  ┌────────────┐
┌────────────┐   │ Commitment │        │Interactions │     │  Social  │  │Institutional│
│ Pre-College│   └───────────┘         │             │     │Integration│ │ Commitment │
│  Schooling │                         │   Faculty   │     └──────────┘  └────────────┘
└────────────┘                         │Interactions │
                                       └─────────────┘
                           Social System
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Figure 2. A conceptual schema for dropout from college (Tinto, 1975).

Tinto sought to create a predictive (rather than descriptive) model of student attrition. By examining variables that either encouraged or discouraged integration, the model was intended to bring more rigor to the study of undergraduate persistence. Tinto later followed up on this theory, refining it by adding variables and using new data to examine retention programs (Tinto, 1993). Bean (1988) lauded the effort as being intended "first and foremost for practitioners" (p. 710) involved in retention efforts.

Davidson and Wilson (2013) observed that, despite Tinto's "paradigmatic" (p. 340) status in retention studies, applications of the model are limited when considering different student populations, and that institutional type and student type are variables that must be considered. This implies that graduate student retention issues are different from those of traditional undergraduates.

Adult/Nontraditional Student Models

     In an appendix to *Leaving College*, Tinto (1993) noted that "it is surprising that so little research has been carried out on the process of graduate persistence" (p. 230). As Cohen (2012) stated, the majority of research on graduate retention and persistence focuses on doctoral programs, with comparatively little attention paid to master's degrees. Tinto (1993) presented a longitudinal model of doctoral persistence that included factors relevant to a more general graduate population (see Figure 3):
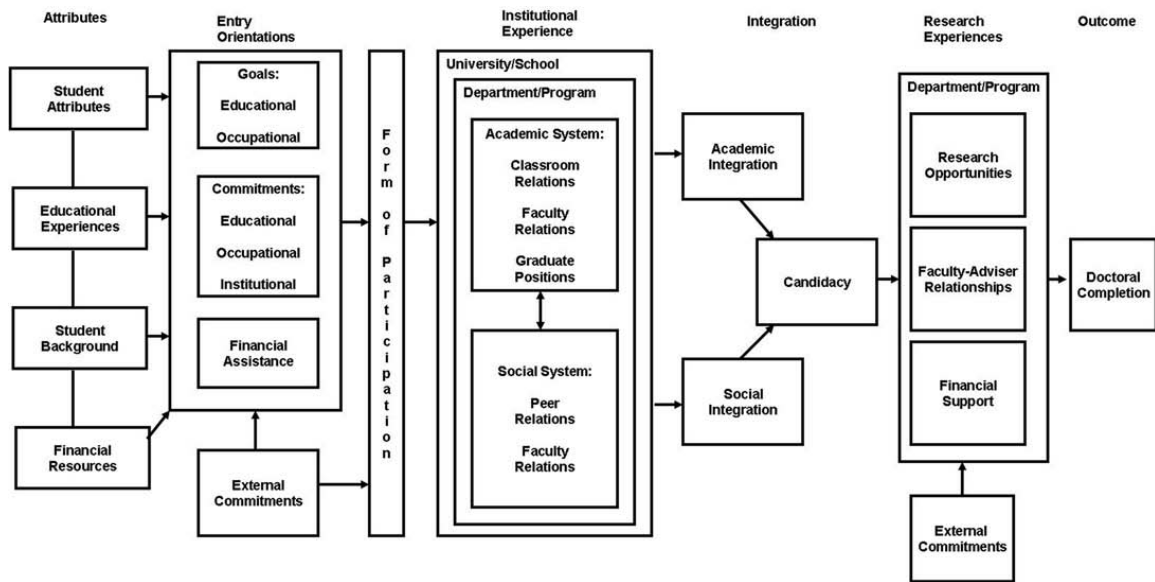
Figure 3. Longitudinal model of doctoral persistence (Tinto, 1993).

     While the model was based on persistence in doctoral programs, it also has relevance to students in master's programs. Institutional Experience was shown as a nested series of components, with University/School paramount over Departments/Program, with Academic System and Social System as components of the metric. Tinto (1993) viewed "institutional behavior" as "shap[ing] the likelihood of

doctoral completion" (p. 242). Davidson and Wilson (2013) examined Tinto's notion of

social and academic aspects of persistence. In one instance, an example of a

misinterpretation of Tinto's model at a community college is directly applicable to

graduate school: when retention rates dipped, a proposed solution was to add student

clubs, i.e., a social solution. Adding student clubs would be suitable in a traditional four-

year undergraduate environment, but when the preponderance of students are part-time,

non-residential, and have significant outside responsibilities (employment, family, etc.),

this is a futile endeavor.

Given the individuality of graduate students and programs, similar to those at the

community college level, it is vital to "assess the needs of students…with the goal of

understanding their unique needs" (Davidson & Wilson, 2013, p. 341). This was echoed

by the Council of Graduate Studies (2015) in a global summit considering the use of big

data in graduate education. One area of focus was data analysis and use to individualize

student experiences and to improve student completion. Interestingly, one of the

challenges identified in using data for this purpose is the fact that "most graduate deans

are resource-limited, lacking access to the analytical staff and the systems that will allow

collection, coordination, analysis, and meaningful interpretation of large data sets" (p.

24), unlike the corresponding data for undergraduates. An undergraduate model that

examined nontraditional student populations was created by Bean and Metzner (1985).

The authors differentiated traditional students from those who are "older, part-time, and

commuter" (p. 485) students. In this model, students do not experience the socialization

into campus culture similar to traditional students, due to nontraditional students' reduced

presence on campus and lessened contact with other students (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 1. A Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition.
Key: → Direct effects
→ Direct effects presumed most important
←-→ Compensatory interaction effects
←···→ Possible effects
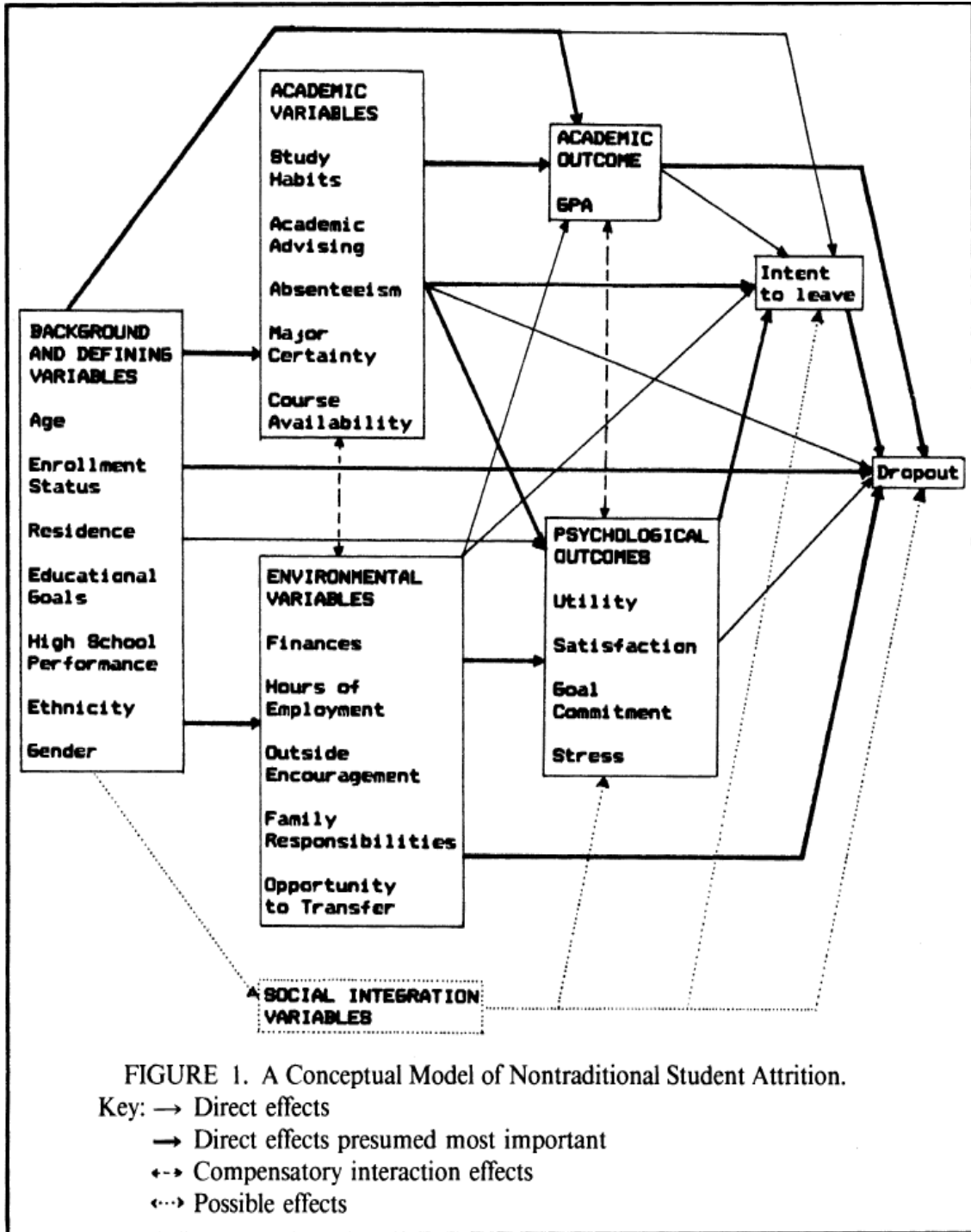
Figure 4. A conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

The importance of this model lies in the implications for graduate persistence. The populations identified in this study were similar to many graduate students (i.e., older, non-residential, and part-time). This model also incorporated new variables that also are applicable to graduate students, such as finances, hours of employment, and family responsibilities (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Distance Learning

Graduate education, by its nature, can work well in a distance learning setting. As programs of study tend to be more specialized than those at the undergraduate level, institutions can attract a larger potential enrollment pool by transitioning programs partially or completely online. Given that many students at the master's level are part-time, non-residential students with other competing time commitments (work, family, etc.), asynchronous options for coursework are popular. Although predating the widespread availability of real- or near-real-time graduate distance education, Tinto (1993) acknowledged a difference of graduate education as being "more national in character" (p. 234) than its undergraduate analogue. This characteristic makes current distance learning opportunities at the graduate level attractive to many students.

Neighbors (2004) explored the reasons students began and completed an online graduate certificate program. The main factors identified were ability to maintain employment while enrolled and the "convenience and flexibility" (p. 161) associated with distance programs. It is interesting to note that none of the students in Neighbors' study who completed the degree had taken an online class previously but exhibited an ability to adjust to an online course of study. This is reminiscent of the original definition of

"institutional commitment," in which students are motivated by completion and are willing to try new methods of education, such as content delivery.

Distance learning, particularly at the graduate level, has evolved due to the technological capabilities that institutions use over time. Cowan and Menchaca (2014) observed that "technology progresses" (p. 71), and multiple avenues of communication and collaboration being available to students encourages the creation of a community far more effectively than having a single predetermined method.

Milman, Posey, Pintz, Wright and Zhou (2015) studied the services that online graduate students found effective and useful, noting the significant differences between undergraduate and graduate retention needs. They observed that, due to the multifaceted needs of graduate students – particularly those in online programs – an effective model for persistence study is one that synthesizes the emphases of earlier models, such as Rovai's Composite Persistence model (Rovai, 2003) (see Figure 5).

Prior to Admission

Student Characteristics *(Tinto and Bean & Metzner)* Age, Ethnicity & Gender Intellectual Development Academic Performance Academic Preparation	Student Skills Computer Literacy Information Literacy Time Management Reading & Writing Computer-based Interaction

After Admission

Internal Factors

External Factors *(Bean & Metzner)* Finances Hours of Employment Family Responsibilities Outside Encouragement Opportunity to Transfer Life Crises	*(Tinto)* Academic Integration Social Integration Goal Commitment Institutional Commitment Learning Community *Student Needs* Clarity of Programs Self-Esteem Identification with School Interpersonal Relationships Accessibility to Services	*(Bean & Metzner)* Study Habits Advising Absenteeism Course Availability Program Fit Current GPA Utility Stress Satisfaction Commitment *Pedagogy* Learning Styles Teaching Styles

Persistence Decision

Figure 5. Rovai's composite persistence model (Rovai, 2003).

Impetus for Career-Based Master's Degrees

The Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education's (n.d.b) "Kentucky Completion Report" examined the changes in higher education from 2004-05 to 2013-14. A key observation is that "the majority of today's jobs, nearly two-thirds, are in high-skill service industries" (p. 1). This has created a "demand for workers with more education and training" known as "upskilling" (p. 1). One of the successes identified in this report was the increase in graduate degrees over the period studied. Observing that "the

upskilling of the American workforce cannot stop at the certificate, associate or baccalaureate level" (p. 17), the report cited a 27% increase in graduate degrees awarded (Kentucky CPE, n.d.b).

Recalling Glazer-Raymo's (2005) classification of master's degrees, two of the three types identified can be considered as fulfilling the need for career enhancement, specifically the professional and vocational degrees. Both of these areas provide students with the academic qualifications to acquire (vocational) or progress (professional) in a career. Postsecondary achievement at the baccalaureate and sub-baccalaureate levels enables master's degree holders to set themselves apart from their peers by nature of their academic achievement.

<div align="center">**Importance of Student Success and Retention**</div>

As state funding of public universities continues to shrink, institutions increasingly turn to increased tuition as a revenue source (Flannery, 2015). However, many are limited by statewide postsecondary regulatory boards in the amount that tuition can increase in a year. Consequently, student retention has emerged as a revenue maximization strategy (Alstete, 2014). Increasing student retention allows institutions to leverage the resources spent in recruiting a student to attend in order to receive tuition income from that student over a longer period of time. Some student attrition is unavoidable due to external factors beyond both the student and the institution's control. Institutions that retain more students simultaneously reap the rewards of a continuing income stream from tuition dollars and avoid the costs associated with recruiting a new student to replace one that does not persist (Marthers, Herrup, & Steele, 2015).

Postsecondary retention is "one of the most widely studied areas in higher education" (Tinto, 2006-2007, p. 1). An examination of the literature showed that the preponderance of work is aimed at undergraduate issues, with comparatively little in the graduate realm. Within the limited area of graduate student retention, most studies have involved doctoral programs (Cohen, 2012). Thus, master's programs received the least amount of retention study, despite enrolling greater numbers of students than other graduate degree programs (Allum, 2014).

National Issue for Undergraduate Students

As state funding of public institutions has decreased, a commensurate increase has occurred in tuition costs. While many state schools are constrained by oversight boards or legislative entities that cap annual tuition increases, the net effect has been to attempt to replace some portion of lost state funding with tuition dollars. Students have responded to increased prices by financing more of their educational costs. The Institute for College Access & Success (March 2014) found an increase in the average debt load for students trending upward from 2004 through 2012, with 71% of graduates from four-year institutions having some form of student loan debt. Over a four-year period, the average debt load went from $25,550 to $29,400.

Research has suggested that high student debt loads can act as a disincentive to enrollment, which obviously is an unintended consequence of student loan programs. Student debt exceeding $10,000 "may depress graduation rates and harm post-college financial security" (Elliott & Lewis, 2013, p. 2). In terms of graduate education, students who incur significant debt at the undergraduate level have fewer resources available to pursue graduate studies. As student loan debt cannot be discharged through bankruptcy,

this can be a long-lasting burden that prevents enrollment in a graduate program, even if it is advantageous to the student.

State Pressure

Public postsecondary institutions receive some portion of their overall funding through state appropriations. As state revenues have fallen, costs such as P-12 education have risen as much or more than postsecondary education (Dougherty, Natow, Bork, Jones, & Vega, 2013). When all parties require a larger portion of an ever-shrinking budget, it is inevitable that funding is reduced. With decreased funding, calls to increase efficiency became more strident. The demand to "do more with less" has become a mantra from many state legislatures. Additionally, schools are held to higher standards with regard to transparency of finances, thus making postsecondary institutions more business-like in their approach to revenue (Dougherty et al., 2013).

The result of state funding reductions has been less per-student spending, coupled with staff and program reductions at many public institutions (Mitchell, Palacio, & Leachman, 2014). As states recover fiscally, funding other areas in which costs have risen, such as healthcare and prisons, become a greater priority. When universities receive less state appropriations and cannot make up the difference through tuition increases, difficult decisions must be made.

Career Goals

Many students choose to pursue graduate education in order to further their careers. This represents an opportunity cost for students, as the cost of enrolling in a graduate program, coupled with the time required, requires significant commitment. Time away from other important pursuits, such as family, also is a part of this equation.

Seibert, Kraimer, Holtom, and Pierotti (2013) found that students who are intrinsically motivated in their careers are more likely to enroll in a graduate program than those extrinsically motivated. Further, they discovered that potential students who had positive professional experiences, such as successfully completing a major project, are more confident in their ability both to start and to succeed in a graduate program.

This study also identified enrollment in a graduate program as the "quintessential human capital investment" (Seibert et al., 2013, p. 176). Viewing graduate education as an individual investment implies short-term sacrifice to increase the potential of long-term benefits, such as career advancement. Institutions also realize the personal investment of students, as well as the career aspirations that bring them to their programs. Duranczyk, Franko, Osifuye, Barton, and Higbee (2015) observed that, when establishing new master's programs, best practices include "track career outcomes and job placement" and "broaden the focus of graduate education to include development of professional skills" (p. 151). Clearly, this issue is important to all involved in graduate education.

Student Retention Imperatives

Institutional experience tends to be markedly different at the graduate level than at the undergraduate level, especially in terms of institutional commitment to retention and persistence. The relative lack (or perceived lack) of institutional commitment to student success at the graduate level, as compared to a student's undergraduate experience, can negatively affect student persistence (Kern-Bowen & Gardner, 2010). Girves and Wemmerus (1988) presented a general model of graduate student degree progress, based on the academic integration identified by Tinto (see Figure 6):
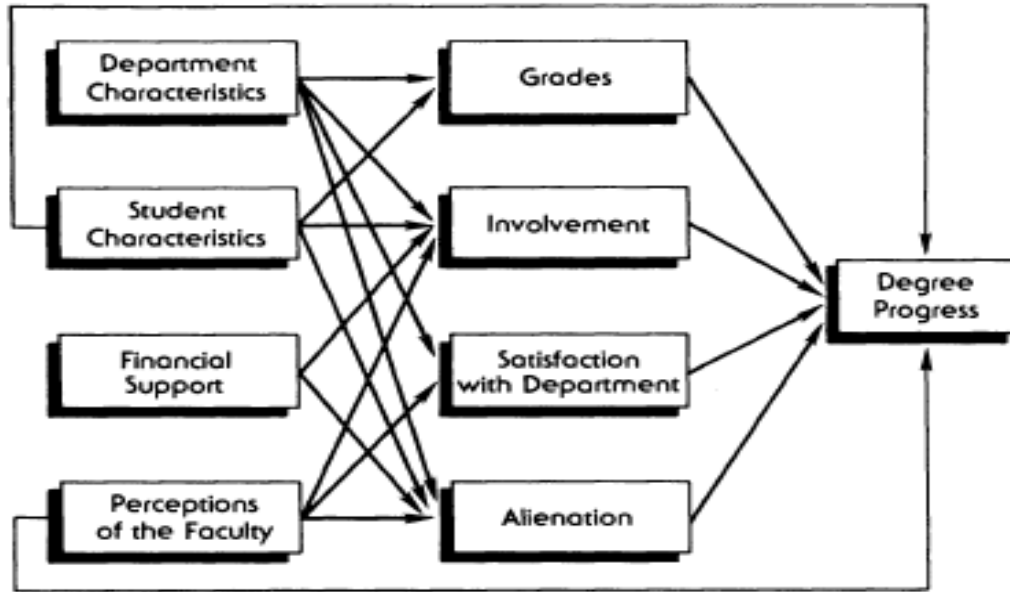
Figure 6. Conceptual model of graduate student degree progress (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988).

This model "replace[s] the idea of 'retention' or 'success' with the concept of 'degree progress'" (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988, p. 166), noting the difficulty in defining retention and success at the graduate level, unlike the undergraduate level, in which success was defined as earning a baccalaureate degree. Unlike most other models, Girves and Wemmerus delved further into the general model to create empirical models for degree levels. A model specific to master's students included these factors, as noted in Figure 7:
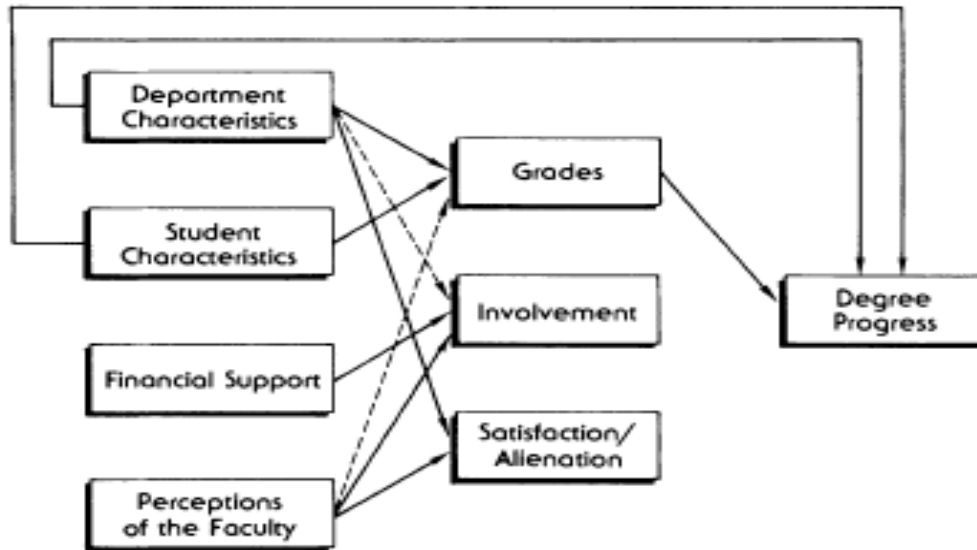
Figure 7. Empirical model of master's student degree progress (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988).

It is interesting to note the differences between the overall model and the master's model (an additional model was created with doctoral data). Girves and Wemmerus (1988) recommended further study using the empirical models, noting that the differences in students and programs should be considered. They also observed that "retention strategies may differ by group" (p. 187). Another study of the demographics of master's students, using National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NSPAS) data, indicated that students in 1999-2000 are "older, more diverse, and more likely to be employed than their predecessors in the 1980s" (Glazer-Raymo, 2005, p. 17). As the average age of master's students trends upward, it is important to examine other retention theories that deal with this demographic.

Regardless of the models used to describe or to affect graduate student persistence, if efforts by postsecondary institutions are not perceived as intended, then

they have a much greater likelihood of failure. A study of undergraduate student involvement found that persistence is positively affected by "positive perceptions of institutional and peer support" (Berger & Milem, 1999, p. 659). Similarly, a study of student perceptions of campus climate among those of varying socioeconomic status posited that "perceptions of the institutional climate could also have roots in the cultural norms of the institution" (Browman & Destin, 2015, p. 13).

Student perception is linked inexorably to student satisfaction. Gregg (1972) noted that "the degree of satisfaction experienced by the graduate student may be important not only for his level of performance but also for his remaining in graduate school and attaining his degree rather than dropping out before completion" (pp. 483-484). Particularly for students who have more recently earned a baccalaureate degree and, thus, experienced the retention initiatives intended for undergraduates, the comparative lack of institutional importance given to graduate student support may be detrimental to graduate student persistence.

Moral Imperative

Beyond the mechanics of persistence, institutions assume a responsibility to students admitted to any academic program. Comprehensive public institutions face a difficult balancing act between providing access to students, as befits their public mission, while also ensuring that no student is set up for failure. This is particularly challenging when tuition revenue, as represented by student enrollment, must be maximized. Bowles-Terry (2015) summed the concept: "we are not doing right by our students if we don't help them to earn the degrees they came for" (p. 3). While touching on the linkage between admission standards and likelihood of retention, she also made

the salient point that persistence efforts must be effective for the students currently

enrolled, not the students those wish they had or plan to acquire in the future.

The concept of institutional obligation to students admitted to a degree program

was echoed by Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith, and McKay (2012). In a discussion of

effective postsecondary teaching methods, they observed that "universities have a social

and moral responsibility to ensure the highest level quality of teaching and support to all

students" (p. 6). Supporting existing students entails a commitment to retention that

institutions must fulfill.

Fiscal Impact

Student retention is important to all institutions. Aside from the moral obligations

discussed previously, enrollment at public institutions positively correlates to tuition

revenue. Every student who does not persist equates to lost revenue. As tuition revenue

becomes one of the last sources of funding within schools' control, maximizing retention

is a key factor in financial stability. Milman et al. (2015) noted that graduate student

enrollment growth in some areas, such as online education, outpaced that of

undergraduates. Due to the fragmented demographics of graduate students, providing

support is much more complex but is necessary in order to allow this growing segment of

students to continue to increase.

Direct student revenue is not the only fiscal effect of student persistence on a

campus. Retention often has been factored into different college ranking systems, and

campuses that improved or maintained positive retention profiles increased their

standings in these systems (Sukhatme, 2015). As ranking lists are used by any students

to establish or to narrow their college search parameters, this could lead to increased

future enrollment. Alstete (2014) reported that a higher percentage of public master's universities are in better financial health than public baccalaureate schools, and the percentage is rising. This indicated that four-year public institutions with significant graduate programs fare better in difficult financial time than those without. Consequently, retaining the students enrolled in those programs helps to perpetuate the positive results.

Conclusion

In previous years, graduate student enrollment at many public four-year institutions has not been viewed as important as undergraduate populations. However, with decreased public funding, retention at all levels has risen in prominence as a revenue source. Much more research has been conducted on undergraduate retention than on graduate retention, demonstrating the relative lack of importance traditionally associated with graduate enrollment. The retention research that has involved graduate students has tended to focus on niches such as doctoral programs or underrepresented student groups. Very little research exists on master's programs. Given the dearth of graduate-specific study, it is useful to examine research on students that has transferability to graduate students. Some undergraduate models are helpful in this regard, as well as community college research and adult/nontraditional student models.

Graduate students tend to be a more heterogeneous group than undergraduates, which is another reason that less research has been conducted on graduate retention. Nevertheless, postsecondary institutions would be well served to examine their own policies and procedures to determine whether graduate and undergraduate students are treated equitably on their campuses.

Chapter III discusses the methodology of the study, including the data sources, research design, and the qualitative paradigm.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Scope of the Study

This study examined graduate student persistence in terms of institutional prioritization and student perception. Also included were multiple viewpoints in an effort to compare institutional allocation of effort to students at the graduate and undergraduate levels, as well as students' perceptions of those decisions. Student retention is a well-known and intensely studied phenomenon at the undergraduate level, but comparatively little is known about the efficacy of retention efforts with regard to graduate students.

This was a qualitative study of the amount and effectiveness of graduate retention efforts at two public comprehensive universities in the mid-south in which master's students comprise the majority of the graduate population. By examining institutional documents, it was possible to determine the relative prioritization of the retention of students at the two degree levels. Additionally, semi-structured interviews of students currently enrolled in or who have graduated from a graduate program provided insight into how or the extent to which students perceive a difference in the retention efforts aimed at graduate versus undergraduate students.

Due to the dearth of persistence models for master's students, this study used Tinto's (1993) Longitudinal Model of Doctoral Persistence, realizing that the penultimate Research Experiences section varies somewhat as applied to non-doctoral students. Using this model as a starting point allowed the examination of persistence efforts intended for graduate students. This chapter presents information regarding the elements of the qualitative study. The qualitative paradigm chosen is discussed, as well as the sources of and methods used to collect and to code the data. Further, the role of the

researcher is explored, and a discussion of data collection methods and justification is included.

Research Design

The central question of this study was: "What factors influence persistence in master's programs at comprehensive universities in the mid-south?" It is necessary to consider additional questions in this qualitative context that support the central question. One such question was: "Do or how do comprehensive public universities in the mid-south prioritize graduate persistence, and how do students perceive these efforts?" This is an important gauge of the relative importance of retention at the different degree levels at each institution. Additionally, this study asked, "What support services do master's students at comprehensive public institutions in the mid-south the master's level want those institutions to provide?" This information was useful in contrasting the efforts observed with the level of recognition (or lack thereof) of students. These questions were essential and were the beginning of the research.

This case study used interviews and document research to obtain data. Using a set of questions (Appendix A) developed to conduct semi-structured interviews with participants allowed rich data to be obtained from the former and current students at these institutions. In particular, information about student motivation to begin and to complete programs at the master's level was useful in determining the degree of extrinsic motivation that can be seen as within an institution's sphere of influence. Asking students the reason they chose their current graduate program revealed important details about their choice of one of the three types of master's programs discussed in an earlier chapter. Asking students whether they plan to complete their academic program

provided insight into their enthusiasm for their field of study, and led to follow-up questions that examined the way in which this decision was influenced by the amount of support they felt they received from the institution. Similarly, asking the students to discuss their most significant challenges during their program allowed the identification of factors that affect persistence from a student perspective.

Another important area of inquiry focused on the experience of students in their undergraduate program. As it is common for them to attend a graduate program at the same institution at which their undergraduate degree was earned, it was helpful to clarify whether student perceptions of the support mechanisms available to them differed at each level. These students possessed the experience to make the most direct comparisons, but also had a unique perspective in that they may have felt more comfortable in a graduate program because they were more aware of their surroundings than in their previous degree; the sense of belonging established during their undergraduate years could have made lessened retention efforts a moot point. However, also it was of interest to determine whether students from varying graduate and undergraduate institutions had a different awareness of the persistence efforts at each school.

Asking students to compare the extent to which they felt prepared to complete a graduate program to how they felt as an undergraduate provided insight into the degree of self-awareness of each student regarding persistence. While in some sense this was a check of the self-efficacy of a student, it also spoke to their internal or external locus of control in terms of their degree program. Institutional commitment to graduate student persistence can be an influencer in this regard.

The second source of data was document research. Institutions produce

voluminous documentation related to undergraduate- and graduate-focused plans and

initiatives. Examining these documents provided insight into institutional priorities (even

those not explicitly stated) by showing the efforts and activities that were most important

to the institution. Comparing course catalogs at the two degree levels was another means

of investigating the persistence mechanisms and initiatives available to students. Schools

often choose to tout the availability of these services to students, implicitly recognizing

the value of a course catalog as a potential recruitment instrument as well as a resource

for currently enrolled students. The relative emphasis on student persistence at the

different degree levels at each institution served as a measure of importance.

Universities publish annual "fact books" that distill a great deal of institutional

research into a more easily digestible format. Similar to the catalog research mentioned,

the amount and type of information presented on students from each degree level was

telling, as it demonstrated the importance of data collection for each group. Institutions

tend to spend more time and effort tracking that which is more important to them. One of

the most fertile sources of institutional prioritization was strategic planning (or action

plan) documents. These documents are among the clearest communication from an

institution about their emphasis in future endeavors and served as a bellwether for an

institution's proposed strategies. As these plans often are written at the behest of the

president or the university board, they represented more than simply a proposal; rather,

they were guideposts for forthcoming action, as they are endorsed by the upper levels of

administration.

Similarly, considering documents specific to university boards (in this case, each institution had a Board of Regents), such as agendas, minutes, and reports, signified the items considered sufficiently important to be discussed at meetings. Communication functions both upward (in the case of a report from a department or academic area to the board) and downward, if the board requests additional information on a particular topic. In either case, this was an important data source to observe. A more ephemeral (but also very current) source of information was promotional material, such as university websites and press releases. In many instances electronic publications supplanted print material, due to the ease of maintaining current information. However, examining these materials revealed an unconscious bias toward a particular group or degree level, which was another indicator of the institution's priorities.

Qualitative Paradigm

This was a qualitative research study. This research method was selected as a result of how little study overall has been conducted on graduate persistence, especially in the areas of institutional commitment and student perception; however, much of the scholarship available has been from a quantitative perspective. The apparent disparity in the persistence efforts between the two groups was studied in order to learn more about this issue. Institutional commitment was a variable in many of the retention models but was defined as the student's commitment to the institution. It was intriguing and illustrative to turn this characterization around and to examine the institution's commitment to the student. Using this definition, institutional commitment often was touted by universities with regard to undergraduate students but less visible in the graduate realm.

Stake (1995) asserted that the "cases of interest in education" involve "people and programs" (p. 1), and cases have "boundaries and working parts" (p. 2). Further, Stake observed that "it is not unusual for the choice of a case to be no 'choice' at all" because "we have an intrinsic interest in the case" (p. 3). This was true with this research study, as graduate persistence was an important but overlooked issue. More precisely, persistence at the university level was espoused as having universal applicability to all students, when in reality it was guided by an implicit set of assumptions that make its focus almost exclusively on undergraduates. In this instance, the examination of retention efforts for all students was worthy, as it was of increasing importance as an enrollment management (and, therefore, revenue-generating) tool.

Thus, the specific case that was studied was the importance placed on graduate persistence at the institutional level, through the lenses of student perception and the intentionality of institutional behavior (as defined by that which an institution says versus what an institution does). While enrollment and revenue were important reasons to study this issue, when a student is admitted an institution assumes a responsibility to provide the opportunity for the student to be as successful as possible. Facilitating and encouraging student persistence at the graduate level fulfills this important social contract.

An examination of student perception of the factors affecting persistence allowed the identification of areas of consistency or inconsistency between graduate and undergraduate retention efforts. If a marked difference in institutional persistence initiatives (especially if an institution places greater emphasis on undergraduates) was noted, student perception of the inconsistency could lead to a belief that the institution

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was less committed to graduate retention, leading to a drop in student commitment to persist. This case study fulfilled a need for additional knowledge about graduate retention at two similar institutions. A need exists for understanding the mechanisms and motivations of retention of master's students, as this group represents the majority of all graduate students at the type of institution studied. The more knowledge institutions had about the phenomenon of graduate persistence, more effective policies intended to affect graduate retention positively could be designed.

Recent educational policy funding proposals have emphasized outcomes-based assessments of postsecondary institutions. This represents a major change from the traditional enrollment-based "headcount" funding models, which assumed that increasing the inputs (admitted/enrolled students) would cause a commensurate increase in the outputs (graduates) of an institution. In an outcomes-based model, the number of students initially enrolling is less important, but the ability to shepherd those students through the process of completing a degree is even more significant. The typical case sampling method was used to examine the two institutions. Both were public, four-year universities with graduate program offerings ranging from certificates to doctorates, with the most prevalent offerings and enrollment at the master's level.

This case study used data obtained from interviews with current and former master's students, as well as document research conducted on various institutional publications, including graduate and undergraduate catalogs, university fact books, strategic plan/action plan documents, Board of Regents agendas/minutes/reports, university websites, press releases, and other communications. Additionally, it

incorporated the researcher's expertise in higher education as an enrollment management professional.

<center>**Participants**</center>

Institutions

This case study focused on graduate persistence at two public comprehensive universities in the mid-south. The institutions were chosen because of their mix of similarities and differences. They were comparable in many ways: both were founded as teacher's colleges; both were public; both were located in Kentucky (and regionally in the mid-south); and both had similar academic standards for admission.

The two schools differed in overall enrollment (one enrolled approximately 10,000 students, while the other enrolled 20,000), as well as in proximity to urban population centers. One school was located in a city with a population of approximately 60,000, while the other in a smaller city (approximately 17,000). One was remote from urban areas, while the other had three major population centers within 150 miles.

Individuals

A cross-section of students (program of study, gender, and ethnicity) from each institution was interviewed. The study also included non-participant data from the document resources outlined in the preceding sections.

<center>**Procedures**</center>

Two primary research procedures were utilized in this study. First, the semi-structured interview questions were a procedure, as they led to the discovery of data. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher for coding using the NVivo

<center>45</center>

program. Second, the observations from examining the aforementioned documents also were coded using NVivo.

Data Sources/Collection

This study utilized interviews conducted both in-person and via remote services. While in-person interviews offered some advantages (i.e., there can be a stronger connection between the interviewer and the interviewee), using remote services mitigated some of the disadvantages associated with an email interview. Interviews included a cross-section of students currently or previously enrolled in a master's program. Differences in perspective were noted between students in progress versus those who were not; e.g., students currently completing a program had a more immediate, visceral reaction to the questions but may not have had a more holistic perspective, given that they were in the midst of the experience. Conversely, those who had been enrolled in an academic program may have had a different viewpoint. They no longer had any academic pressure on them in terms of classwork or other academic obligations, but their memories also could have been influenced by their post-master's experiences.

The latter group consisted of two subsets: students who completed a degree and those who stopped out or dropped out prior to completion. Both groups potentially had very different experiences, but both yielded valuable data in terms of the way their decisions to persist were influenced by various factors. By using semi-structured interviews, the goal was to have a basic framework of questions common to each interviewee that allowed individual stories to be told. Using this interview paradigm provided a beginning for each individual to identify the impact of different mechanisms

of persistence, which was important because the same factor may have had varied effects on different students.

Semi-structured interviews were appropriate because the factors influencing retention at the master's level were difficult to quantify, which was a reason a qualitative study was being used. In order to facilitate the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewees, all interviews were recorded (audio only) for later review and transcription. This allowed more attention to be paid to the individual during the interview. While notes were taken, they focused on more general observations rather than an attempt to capture all that was uttered.

The document research for this study was conducted using texts publicly available from the two institutions. A wealth of information was available from university archives that could be examined in order to determine institutional priorities with regard to student persistence at the undergraduate and graduate levels. These publications were produced by different areas of the institution – catalogs tend to be produced by a registrar's office (or equivalent) – other documents, such as strategic plans, more commonly were the product of a president's office or a university board.

Examining documents gave a much different perspective than speaking with students, which was a goal of the study. While the interviews encapsulated student perceptions, which can be mutable, the documents represented a more static view from the institutional point of view that represented the goals and aspirations at the time of publication.

Implicit in the data derived from document research was an organizational structure component. The way in which an institution was arranged illustrated that which

was valued by those responsible for its configuration. This also spoke to resource allocation to support different units. This information carried significant weight when contrasted with that which an institution espoused in order to determine whether the two were congruent.

When conducting a qualitative study, data collection "begins before there is a commitment to do the study," and "the pool of data includes the earliest of observations" (Stake, 1995, p. 49). Thus, the data collection began prior to the completion of any interviews or document research, as informal observations occurred in the time leading up to the commitment to complete this project. In viewing the case of graduate persistence, it was helpful to consider the multiple perspectives involved in the situation, namely, students and institutions. At its most basic level, these were the two primary actors in the situation: a student cannot persist without an institution; an institution cannot have persistence without students. Therefore, examining data from each of these points of view proved valuable.

The student perspective, as represented by personal interviews, focused on student perception of retention efforts they experienced at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The interview questions were designed to draw out details on student support at the different stages of their academic careers, as well as its effect on their decisions regarding persistence. While many factors contributed to retention, these questions were intended to determine the amount and efficacy of institutional commitment to students at each level. The documents chosen for examination were common not only to both schools, but also to many similar institutions (i.e., four-year public comprehensive universities). Having the opportunity to compare and to contrast documents both inter-institutionally

and intra-institutionally allowed for greater depth of study. While the results of this study are not necessarily transferrable to other institutions, the methodology could inform future research.

In terms of choosing institutions to study, the decision to focus on a specific type (public four-year comprehensives) was influenced by the large percentage of master's degree students enrolled at this type of school. As regional universities, both MSU and WKU attract similar students and could have comparable policies and procedures with regard to student persistence. In-person and remote interviews were used. While in-person interviews were preferred, due to time and distance constraints some conversations were performed via remote services. Research was conducted on documents obtained from each institution.

Data Analysis

The data for this study were collected through personal interviews and document research. It was necessary to code the data for interpretation, which resulted in the identification of themes both in the student responses and in the institutional observations. NVivo software was employed in order to organize the data collected from these sources.

Time Frame

The data were collected January-September 2016.

Instrumentation

Interviews

Interviews were semi-structured in order to allow participants to provide rich details of their stories while also allowing for individual follow-up questions based on the

responses received. Recorded responses were coded and analyzed using NVivo software to determine trends and themes.

Interview Questions

- Why did you choose your graduate program?

- (If a current student) Why do you plan/not plan to continue in your program?

- (If a former student/graduate) Why did you/did you not complete your program?

- What are the most significant challenges you face/faced as a graduate student?

- Describe your experience in your undergraduate program.

- Do you feel you had more mechanisms of support available to you as an undergraduate than as a graduate student? What were they?

- Do you believe you are/were more prepared to persist in a graduate program than in your undergraduate program?

- What support services (or types of support services) would you like to see/have seen as a graduate student?

- What support services were useful to you as an undergraduate? Were those services available during your graduate program?

- What support services were/are available to you as a graduate student that you did not have as an undergraduate?

<center>**Role of Researcher**</center>

My professional expertise informed much of what I did in this study. My career in higher education has included working with undergraduate recruitment and retention as well as graduate enrollment research and recruitment at three different public

postsecondary institutions. For those working in the undergraduate enrollment

management area, the effects of institutional student recruitment and retention policies on

all students (i.e., not only undergraduate students) rarely (if ever) are considered.

Gaining experience on the graduate side of an institution gave a sense of the small

amount of attention graduate students seemingly merit in the overall enrollment goals and

plans of the university.

    As with any qualitative study, the researcher was the research instrument.

Information gained through interviews gave a sense of student perception of the

persistence efforts put forth by the institutions. Examining the documents that

universities produced for information regarding retention efforts and initiatives afforded a

sense of the manner in which schools publicized and prioritized their persistence plans.

Comparing the two allowed an appreciation of the point of intersection.

    The role of a case researcher "may include teacher, participant observer,

interviewer, reader, storyteller, advocate, artist, counselor, evaluator, consultant, and

others" (Stake, 1995, p. 91). Also implicit in the case study paradigm was the role of the

researcher as the research instrument. Thus, the validity of this study rested on the

expertise of the researcher. In order to ensure familiarity with one institution did not

color the findings, a second was included for confirmation. Further, as multiple data

types were sampled in this study, the information was triangulated.

<div align="center">**Limitations**</div>

    One limitation was the source of research data. Document research was used as a

data source in order to examine institutional intentionality with regard to prioritization of

graduate persistence, but interviews with administrators at the institutions studied could

<div align="center">51</div>

have given a different perspective. These interviews could have placed the data into a different context by providing information unavailable through the texts.

The students selected for interviews also were a limitation. While the goal was to incorporate a diverse group of viewpoints from the students interviewed, it was unknown regarding the extent of the feasibility. Additionally, other difficulties may have surfaced during the research.

Delimitations

A delimitation was the type of institutions chosen for study. These schools encompassed a relatively wide range of size in terms of enrollment, and were representative of comprehensive public universities in the mid-south. The findings, therefore, were more specific to schools of this category.

This study focused specifically on students in master's programs and did not consider other graduate enrollment such as doctoral programs. Doctoral programs have been the subject of other research studies, while little information exists that specifically has considered master's students.

Summary and Plan for Narrative

This case study examined the phenomenon of graduate persistence – specifically, retention of master's-level students and the comparability of those endeavors to undergraduate efforts – using the perceptions of current and former students as well as information gleaned from documents produced by institutions. As it was a qualitative research study, it was important to consider the overall narrative. The big picture was the importance of institutional commitment to promote persistence for all students, without favoring one level over another. Retention was personally important to students (as they

completed academic programs) and institutions (in order to maximize student success, enrollment, and revenue); and it was valuable to convey the story of the functions of master's student persistence functions.

Chapter IV is a story of the findings and themes identified in the research. This story used Tinto's Longitudinal Model of Doctoral Persistence (used in this case with master's students) initially to show the points at which the themes were consistent with the model. Anecdotes arising from student interviews were used to illustrate areas of success and to highlight points in which improvement could be made to facilitate success.

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH FINDINGS

This research study considered graduate student persistence, specifically focusing on students at the master's level, at comprehensive public institutions in the mid-south. The study also examined the way in which these universities prioritized graduate retention, as compared to the numerous other institution priorities that competed for both funding and attention. Additionally, factors that could lead to greater student satisfaction and, thus, retention for master's programs were identified. Tinto's (1993) Longitudinal Model of Doctoral Persistence was used initially as a basis for examination of the factors of graduate persistence, taking into account that the elements of the model specifically related to doctoral persistence were not included. Current or former (i.e., graduated) students from each institution provided data for this study. Semi-structured personal interviews permitted the use of a common set of questions for all interviewees, and also gave the opportunity for follow-up questions based on previous responses given. From this data, common themes were identified that related back to the central research question: What factors influence persistence in master's programs at comprehensive universities in the mid-south?

Research data were obtained from two sources. First, interviews were conducted with current or former master's program students from the two institutions. Participants were chosen using a snowball sampling technique. Second, document analysis was performed on publications from these universities. The interview data yielded rich results. An examination of the interview transcripts identified 91 "nodes" or categories of data. A total of 14 interviews were conducted, with seven students chosen from each institution. NVivo 11 software was used to classify the interview data and to create the

distinct nodes that each reference mapped to specifically. In all, there were 1089

references to the 91 nodes identified in the coding process. The 91 nodes were grouped

thematically into primary topics that encompassed a unique set of nodes. The topics and

references are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Primary Topics and References

Topic	References
Student Demographics	213
- Decision to Attend Graduate School	
- Graduate Student Goals	
- Student Descriptors	
Barriers, Behaviors, Challenges, and Successes	805
- Barriers to Graduate Success	
- Student Perception of Institutional Behavior	
- Graduate Student Challenges	
- Factors Influencing Graduate Success	
Graduate Persistence Improvement Suggestions	71

These topics are presented and considered in detail throughout the remainder of this

chapter.

Topic I: Student Demographics

This topic consisted of the elements of the study that delineated the participants

and their motivations with regard to pursuing a master's degree. These elements included

participant characteristics (Student Descriptors), the participants' determination of whether to begin a program (Decision to Attend Graduate School, Other Factors in the Decision to Attend Graduate School), the participants' methods of choosing areas of study (Graduate Program Selection), and that which the participants wanted or expected as a result of their efforts (Graduate Student Goals).

Student Descriptors

Fourteen individuals (seven from each of the institutions) participated in this study, with 11 distinct graduate programs represented. Nine earned or were earning their graduate degrees at the same institution at which they earned their undergraduate degree, while five attended different institutions at each level. Four of the students had transferred between institutions as undergraduates, while one had transferred during their graduate program. Six attended or were attending graduate school as part-time students, while eight attended or were full-time students. Seven of the participants were drawn from each of the two institutions, in order to have balance in terms of the campus experiences observed and described by the participants.

Six of the students were either currently enrolled or planned to enroll in a doctorate or professional program after completing their master's degree, while eight did not. Of the students enrolled in doctorate programs, none were enrolled at the institutions studied; all of the participants currently enrolled in a doctoral program attended institutions outside Kentucky. These students provided particularly rich insights on their master's program experiences, as they possessed first-hand knowledge from other graduate programs and institutions that allowed them to comment with greater breadth of perspective.

Decision to Attend Graduate School

In order to make determination about the likelihood of persistence, it was instructive first to consider the way in which students selected their graduate programs: students chose programs based on different criteria; therefore, it was valuable to know how and the reason students made decisions about where they attended (and whether they attended at all). This information helped to clarify the examination of the probability of persistence and the effectiveness of institutional efforts aimed at the retention of those students.

An interesting factor that was encountered regarding comprehensive public institutions involved the capacity of each graduate program. Unlike undergraduate programs, which had much more flexibility in the number of students that could be accommodated, graduate programs were limited by resource availability (faculty/advisors, lab/classroom space, etc.) to a much greater extent. In practical terms, the fact that the graduate admission process necessitated that students were admitted to specific programs meant there was significantly less student mobility between programs (analogous to an undergraduate student changing their major) than that observed at the undergraduate level. Therefore, it was important to determine a good match between prospective graduate students and the appropriate graduate program in order to improve the chance of persistence among the group.

Graduate Program Selection

All participants in this study discussed the dynamics of their graduate program selection. Therefore, a great deal of information was available on this factor, which provided significant insight into the thought processes of students considering graduate

programs at comprehensive public institutions. Most graduate degree programs required

students to possess some level of prerequisite training or education in order to be eligible

to enter; for the most part students had significant freedom when choosing a program.

Therefore, they were free to incorporate other factors into their decision-making process.

In one example, a participant noted that she chose her graduate program in part because,

"to be quite honest, it did not require the GRE test," a sentiment echoed by another

student who stated, "I didn't want to take the GRE." This demonstrated the attention that

prospective students placed on the entrance requirements for a specific program and

served as a precursor to the practicality that students exhibited later in their enrollment as

they made decisions concerning persistence.

Another viewpoint emphasized the cautious approach to choosing a program

prompted by the experience of a previous unfinished graduate degree. A student

expressed hesitance in returning to graduate school after he became disillusioned with a

prior program, ultimately discontinuing his participation:

> I almost feel like the graduate coursework was a vacuum, and you left the real
>
> world behind and you stepped into this little sealed container of this class, and this
>
> is this graduate class, and then you stepped back out and the real world was there
>
> again. You spent all this time writing these papers that had no salience for me,
>
> and reading these assignments and doing things like that that was not connecting
>
> back to me. I think, for me, that was the biggest reason that I left the program. I
>
> felt like it was like penance. I was doing the time, but it wasn't connecting to me
>
> at a level of where I was and where I wanted to go.

When he chose to return to graduate school, this student took a more practical approach, as he selected a degree program that was shorter in duration than others that may have been more aligned with his interests (30 credit hours versus 48). He also opted for a program that was available online, which better accommodated his work schedule and family obligations.

For others, graduate school provided a new professional opportunity. Upon determining his future goals, one participant returned to school in order to prepare himself to make a change:

> After I graduated with my undergraduate degree, I worked for almost three years in industry, and then decided to come back to pursue a completely different career path. I'm actually pursuing a career in medicine now – I just applied to med school. But the main reason that I decided to do this graduate coursework is one, if something happened with the whole med school thing, I'd at least walk away with a master's degree.

Overall, the most common reason for choosing a graduate program related to personal satisfaction. The participants articulated specific goals they desired to achieve by earning a master's degree but also articulated the importance of their time and energies. One student stated, "At the point I am in my life right now, I want to do things that are interesting to me," a theme that was repeated often.

Other Factors in the Decision to Attend Graduate School

The other factors identified as relevant to the participants' decision to attend graduate school were relatively small when compared with the preceding ones. Therefore, examining them as a group was more appropriate than discussing them

individually. Some unique reasons explained why students chose their graduate

institution. One person had specific intentions of attending an institution located in a

different state and was offered a graduate assistantship there; but "when I went and

visited it just didn't feel like the right fit for me," and she instead chose a school based on

a friendship formed at her undergraduate institution.

Participants also identified the size of the graduate institution, as well as the size

of the graduate program, as influencers of their decision to attend graduate school.

Finally, an important factor was the recruitment activities that influenced students. As

one student remarked, being recruited to a program "just really sold me" on it, which

emphasized the worth of student recruitment, even at the graduate level.

Graduate Student Goals

A subject identified during the research study referred to the goals of graduate

students. Understanding that which students desired as a result of their investment of

money, time, and effort into a graduate program was vital to any discussion of

persistence. Students indicated that, without being aware of these goals, they felt

institutions were at a distinct disadvantage in their efforts to encourage graduate student

persistence.

Outcomes. By far the most significant aspect of this topic was related to

outcomes. Participants consistently discussed their motivation in terms of that which

they received or anticipated receiving at the completion of their programs. The outcomes

ranged from those specific to one respondent, to more collective ones shared by nearly all

respondents. The most basic goal was self-differentiation. Participants saw earning a

master's degree as a way to separate themselves from others who chose not to go to

graduate school. As one student stated, "I guess it's just the sense of wanting to pursue and go higher, just that drive to get something more than just the undergraduate and kind of stand apart."

This view was especially prevalent among students who saw a graduate degree as a means of professional advancement. One participant said, "I want to continue to move up in my position here, or anywhere else." She further explained that she was motivated by the knowledge that there were "positions out there to obtain once you were finished with your degree." Similarly, another student commented, "I know that a graduate degree's important, I know that a master's is essential for whatever I do next in my career path here, and even in my current position, because I'm supervising people with master's degrees." Clearly, several viewed a graduate degree as the most direct way to influence their career paths, whether via advancement in a current position or through preparing for future opportunities. Others, though, had more specific motivations, particularly if the master's degree was a waypoint to further education, such as a doctorate. As a student who was currently enrolled in a Ph.D. program reflected:

> Well, I mean I kind of looked less from an academic perspective and more from a career perspective, because to me, the classes, you go to class, you complete the credits, but the majority of your focus within our department was working on your thesis and completing your thesis, and that was your big moment and your big contribution. So to me the incentive wasn't to finish and get my degree but it was to have a really good thesis. I wasn't really focused on finishing, it was more focused on, like, here's my research and I'm proud of what I've done with my time here.

Although her plans changed, another student originally intended to earn her doctorate in order to teach in her discipline. She remarked, "At the time that I started my graduate program I wanted to teach [in my discipline], and so I knew that in order to teach I had to earn a master's degree." Similar to others, she was focused on her master's program more as a way of producing something tangible, not simply earning a degree: "I did a thesis is because I intended to go on, and if you go on to a terminal degree you have to have a thesis."

Another student who also was enrolled in a doctoral program shared the satisfaction felt with that which he received from his time in his master's program, remarking that in his current institution, he feels "fully prepared for this Ph.D. position." This was a further example of the alignment of the outcomes for the doctoral students. Finally, the self-satisfaction associated with earning a master's degree was identified by multiple participants. Students who had this goal but were previously unable to pursue a program were especially appreciative of the opportunity. One participant stated, "Earning my master's degree is something I always wanted to do. It's always been one of those goals I had for myself."

Doctoral program. Several of the participants were either currently enrolled in a doctoral program or intended to enroll. They tended to possess a different view of their goals while in a master's program. Their anticipated outcomes were somewhat different than those for whom the master's degree was the ultimate objective.

The students with doctoral aspirations viewed the master's degree as a useful (albeit intermediary) step toward their ultimate goal. As such, their goals while in the master's program were more directed toward doctoral program preparation. It was

interesting to note that none identified earning their master's degree as their goal. Rather, they identified the tangible accomplishments achieved along the way, such as refining their research techniques or producing a quality thesis, as more highly valued.

Career advancement. The participants who focused specifically on leveraging their graduate degrees to improve their career opportunities were entirely motivated by the prospect of earning the degree. Many were simultaneously enrolled in classes while employed full time; therefore, the allure of professional advancement was balanced by the stress involved with devoting time to both responsibilities. The desire to achieve this goal was strong and served to spur participants to persist. As one student stated, "it was probably easier for me to say I want to quit this program. There were many, many days where I felt like I just didn't even want to do this," but was motivated to continue "because it most closely matches what I do [professionally]."

Ultimately, students had to perceive the reward associated with persisting to degree completion as more valuable than what they were giving up to achieve it. Participants who held full-time jobs while enrolling full time in classes at times viewed this as overly taxing, though one student noted that "everything's very flexible, so I'm able to work it in," and saw herself as "just lucky to be satisfied" with the current arrangement, which was indicative of the strength of this goal.

Topic II: Barriers, Behaviors, Challenges, and Successes

The elements of this topic involved four main areas. Specific factors were identified that influenced student success in master's programs: one dealt with the factors identified as shaping participant achievement (Factors Influencing Graduate Success); two involved the personal and systemic obstacles that master's students faced (Barriers to

Graduate Success, Graduate Student Challenges); and the last included student perception of institutional behavior (Undergraduate Mechanisms of Support).

Factors Influencing Graduate Success

The most referenced element that emerged from the study related to the factors that students identified as having influenced their persistence in master's programs. This included several nodes (graduate faculty support, self-motivation, and peer support) that were common to almost all interviewees. As several of the respondents had completed their master's programs, their insights into that which they found helpful throughout their journey was enlightening, particularly when those factors were echoed by others whose programs were in progress. Within this subject, it was evident that students found their greatest support was from the faculty in their programs, from their peers, and from themselves. These three factors alone accounted for over half of the references in this theme. While several factors were considered, the predominant effects resulted from the actions and interactions of these primary influencers.

Other factors could not be ignored. Although their effects were weaker, they exerted a cumulative force that affected graduate persistence. Among these lesser influencers, factors included social (connections to campus, friends); technological (the convenience of online classes); and internal (students felt they were more prepared to persist in their graduate programs than in their undergraduate programs). The roles of these factors were examined in aggregate.

Graduate faculty support. Master's programs differ fundamentally from undergraduate programs in a myriad of ways, but one that was commonly referenced was in terms of student interaction with faculty. All interviewees cited this multiple times as

a primary influencer of their decision to continue or to complete their master's degree. Graduate faculty tended to have much more individual contact with students in master's programs than in undergraduate programs. This appears to be intuitive, given that the institutions studied enrolled many more undergraduates than graduates, thus making it easier to focus on a smaller group. Other mechanisms of contact, such as graduate assistantships, also fostered greater interactivity.

Faculty acted as educators, as mentors, and as an important support system for students. Because of this closer association, faculty were in a position to know more about students than anyone else on a university's campus and, thus, served in a unique position with regard to graduate persistence. They had the most immediate access to students both in and out of the classroom. The relationships that students and faculty formed at this level were fundamental to student decisions to persist. This was especially helpful to part-time students who often had other demands on their time (work, family, etc.), as they did not have other means of interfacing with a campus outside of their affiliation with their academic department, as evidenced by this student comment:

> Overall I felt like the professors specifically and the program specifically also helped encourage me and push me along, as opposed to just saying, "If you finish, you finish; if you don't, you don't – we don't care." I do feel like they really cared, and wanted me to succeed. They wanted me to get through all my classes and they wanted me to graduate.

Graduate faculty also served as conduits to connect students with resources that encouraged persistence. This was attributed to the more individualized knowledge of the students in their departments, which allowed faculty to be more cognizant of their needs.

However, simply knowing an issue existed was insufficient to exert positive influence; faculty had to be willing both to recognize and to act upon their observations:

> More one-on-one communication and outreach that you get… in the program as far as faculty, and my advisor is also faculty and I see them every Saturday, but just that outreach that they do and that they make sure if you need help, it's identified, and there's a way to connect you to any resource that you need.

Similarly, another interviewee stated:

> Again, that mentorship from professors was huge. I had a few key professors that wound up being on my thesis committee that were just amazing, and I could go to them with any question whether it was about their class or another class and they were always…they genuinely cared and wanted to see me succeed.

However, students had different expectations and needs regarding graduate faculty support. For those more involved in online or on-demand programs, there was more focus on responsiveness and facilitation than students who were more campus-based required. As many students self-selected into online programs due to the convenience it afforded them, as well as the ability to schedule their coursework around other obligations, graduate faculty support that enabled students to fulfill academic obligations was appreciated:

> As far as support, I don't have incredibly frequent conversations; in my time in my graduate programs I've never gone to a professor's office for an office hour meeting. I have on occasion emailed, but it's been more specific things like, a very specific situation – I had to upload this file as a .pdf as opposed to a Word document because it changed the formatting.

All participants indicated that graduate faculty support was the most influential factor that encouraged (or was encouraging) them to persist. The importance of faculty interaction cannot be overstated, particularly when considering the relative dearth of student support services offered to graduate students in comparison to undergraduates. Graduate faculty were identified as indispensable elements of a public comprehensive university's effort to foster persistence in master's programs.

Self-motivation. The second most referenced factor influencing graduate persistence was self-motivation. With one exception, all interviewees characterized their internal drive to complete their degree as a primary reason for their persistence. The participants considered it a matter of course that they would complete their academic programs and seemed surprised when the question arose:

> Honestly, I think if I wasn't as determined as I am then I probably would not have stayed here because last year was just kind of like, I don't know, it was rough… I don't give up easily, so, I mean, that was the major thing. I was like, 'I'm just going to finish this, get done with it, and move on.'

Others also echoed this sentiment:

> I think once, because of all those external life factors, once you commit to a graduate degree, you're going to finish it, because otherwise it's a waste of your time, it's a waste of your money. At the undergrad level, you just kind of go because that's what you do, but taking that extra step and deciding to continue…for me, at least, it never was a question of whether I'm going to finish.

Several possible reasons existed for the relative weight placed on self-motivation. One could have been the age and maturity level of the students, particularly when

compared with undergraduates. As participation in master's programs was more of a choice than an expectation, students who decided to enter graduate school effectively engaged in self-selection. Those who lacked the prerequisite self-motivation essentially opted not to enter in the first place.

> I think as an undergrad there was just a place in my life, there were times when I thought about just giving up, so I definitely think now I'm more at a place in my life where I definitely want to persist and see this thing through.

Similarly, another student also discussed the importance of self-motivation in her program:

> There's a lot of the self-motivation, you have to find ways to keep yourself going, and there's a lot of problems that you have to figure out, rather than as an undergraduate where people were more happy to just give you the answer.

> For some, self-motivation to complete a graduate program transcended

international borders. One respondent came to the United States from Nigeria in order to pursue her studies. This added an extra dimension to the self-motivation discussion, as it entailed the student not only persisting in a program, but also adapting to a different culture:

> I just worked my way through and there was no time I sat down and thought of quitting or that I found any program or the school not working right for me. It was just something I feel was good for me, and I just worked all the way through.

> For others, self-motivation was the only prerequisite to persistence. For this

subset of students, additional retention activities were seemingly superfluous, as students perceived no additional value from the effort expended. While this was not the case for

all, it was interesting to note that in some instances graduate student self-motivation trumped everything else. Once again, age and maturity level were considered when examining this factor. One participant, a student who worked full time while carrying a full-time class load (nine graduate hours) each term, summed up the thought process:

I think with a master's it so much personally motivated. I don't know if it's worth maybe enhancing the retention effort, if that makes sense. I don't know if that's going to help. I think people that pursue their master's are going to do it anyway, no matter if there was that push there or not. It's more of a personal choice.

For the majority of students, self-motivation was an intrinsic element of graduate persistence. As it was very inherent in the student mindset, most did not consider it consciously when thinking about that which pushed them to continue, and appeared to take it for granted when asked. Self-motivation also appeared to be inherent in the decision-making process when students considered whether to attend graduate school, which further highlighted its importance. It was illustrative to note that the converse of self-motivation – external motivation – was referenced only nine times, which further demonstrated the significance of self-motivation as a factor.

Peer support. The participants in this study identified peer support as another factor that influenced their decisions to persist and ranked it slightly below self-motivation. With the inclusion of this factor, all human elements of a graduate course were accounted for: the professors (graduate faculty), the student (self-motivation), and the others in class (peers). These, then, were the primary components of persistence. Having others with whom to share similar academic experiences gave them additional opportunities to discuss and to digest course materials, apart from their interactions with

faculty. It allowed peers to share experiences and expertise not necessarily connected with the academic program that helped contextualize the material presented in class.

Peer support was a less formal method of interaction that students occasionally had with faculty. Personal relationships between students also fostered a sense of mutual accomplishment that reinforced self-motivation. In some cases, students maintained the peer relationships formed in graduate school beyond completion of the program, while faculty relationships more easily waned when students were no longer actively engaged in the department. As one student observed:

> You can have that social support from family, but having it from direct friends in the classroom that you can start to build friendships with outside that, definitely influenced it because you start to realize, OK, they're going through the same thing I am, we can use each other as resources, we can start networking with one another and build these connections for later on.

Of course, peer support also resulted from relationships outside the classroom. Having connections to others who have experienced a graduate program had distinct value, as those peers could offer advice and guidance on how they handled similar situations previously. Especially for peers who completed a program, they served as examples that the student could emulate in order to persist. This was particularly evident for students who balanced a full-time job with a master's program and, thus, had less direct interaction with peers in their program:

> Actually, I have a lot of coworkers that are in graduate programs, so they've been a source of encouragement, and I can ask them questions about this course and that course, so they've definitely been a good support system for me here.

In contrast, students who were on campus full time with classes and graduate assistantships in the department had a more immersive experience, as their interactions with their peers were much more involved and frequent. When students were with the same peers in both a classroom and a work environment, often for extended periods, different connections were formed. One student, who enrolled in a STEM field Ph.D. program upon completion of his master's, described his peer support:

I mean, there were a couple of groups of people who were super supportive, especially my lab mates and colleagues. It was an excellent situation, we all got along really well, we all worked really hard. We also had a lot of fun together. My advisor would have us over for barbeques, and we would go hunting together or go fishing. So, first thing, it was a great work family, right? So that made going to work and doing all the work fun. Also, friends, other graduate friends in the department were fun and good people to be around. Also, my family's super supportive – I could complain to them about the environment, or this and that. So then my main support came from just your typical friends and family, but a lot of it was work family, it's definitely important. I think that's a big part of graduate life; you're surrounded by those people way too many hours so you need to make sure you get along with them or have a good relationship with them.

Clear delineations existed between the different types of peer support, with each student relying on a mode of support appropriate to the individual situation. In any case, no matter the form of peer support, it was an important element that influenced persistence, forming the "third leg of the stool" with graduate faculty support and self-motivation.

Other factors influencing graduate success. Eleven other factors were

identified during the course of data analysis that referenced graduate success. However,

in contrast to the three previous factors, only one was mentioned by more than half of the

participants. Thus, they were considered in aggregate, as they carried lesser weight and

significance than the predominant influences. Of this group, several factors merited

discussion. One was "connections to campus," as it was valued by some but not others.

As with other factors previously discussed, there appeared to be a division regarding

those students who found this important: students who began a full-time graduate

program immediately after completing their undergraduate program (especially when the

two programs are located on different campuses) were more apt to identify this as an

influencer, while those enrolled in a program as part-time students after a break in

enrollment were less interested. This highlighted the more transactional, outcome-

focused view typical of many of older, part-time students, as opposed to the expectation

that graduate school was more akin to an extension of the undergraduate experience. One

student, who attended a small, private institution as an undergraduate, stated:

> If you don't get connected to people in your program, and you are not connected
>
> to the institution, then it's very different, so when I came to graduate school
>
> straight from undergrad, I had my undergraduate experience that I absolutely
>
> loved, and I get here, I don't know anybody and now I'm in a classroom just with
>
> twenty students, I don't know anybody and it takes a little bit of time to start to
>
> grow and build those relationships. It's like starting a new foundation, and when
>
> you're not connected at all to the campus and you're in an even smaller cohort,
>
> that's where I'd like to see more effort made is to, you know, help students stay

connected to campus and become passionate about the campus that they are

receiving their graduate degree from, and so I think that that could potentially be

an effort to help with retention initiatives.

Another factor mentioned was the availability of online courses in a program.

While this pertained primarily to part-time students, for some it was a prerequisite for

participation in a program. Although online courses also were a source of frustration, as

will be discussed later in this chapter, the flexibility afforded by this method of course

delivery allowed some students access to begin and to complete a graduate program. One

participant, a working professional who had recently completed an online master's

degree, explained her appreciation for online courses:

> Honestly, I wouldn't have taken it if it had any face-to-face classes… I'm an
>
> example of someone that's married and has kids and commuting, I mean, I
>
> commute over an hour every day, both ways, it's an hour and ten minutes. By the
>
> time I do all that, I don't want to have to sit in a classroom for a few hours after
>
> work. So, I started that communications program and I was like, "I can't do this,"
>
> because I feel like I was never home. So yes, the fact that it was online…I feel
>
> like I got just as good an education, just as much experience and quality education
>
> as I would have in a face-to-face course

The one factor in this group that was referenced by more than half of the

participants was that they felt more prepared to persist in a graduate program than they

had in their undergraduate program. In some ways this was not surprising, as the

graduate environment appeared to have more in common with the undergraduate

environment than the undergraduate environment had with secondary education, thus

making the undergraduate-to-graduate transition somewhat easier. This also hearkened back to a point discussed in conjunction with self-motivation, namely, that students self-selected graduate program participation to a much larger extent than as undergraduates. Thus, those who chose to begin a program may have been more prepared, or had a greater sense of self-efficacy, than students at the undergraduate level.

This sense of preparedness was discussed by a student who, as a working professional, was beginning a master's program after an extended break from his undergraduate studies:

> I think your preparation…I think persistence is determined by kind of what comes before that. I don't feel like I was prepared to persist in undergrad, in that my high school did not do a great job of preparing me for college. I feel like college did a great job of preparing me for graduate work. I don't feel like it's just a completely different world and something I'm not used to, but it's just that life kicks in right after college and you've got other things going on. It's not that I'm unprepared for graduate coursework. I did feel a bit underprepared for undergrad; I don't feel that way about grad school.

While these factors alone exerted a reduced amount of influence, it was important to remember that they did not work alone. Students were subject to the cumulative effects of both the greater and lesser influencers; furthermore, each had an individual set of influencers that applied to them but may or may not have affected others. An example was the importance of online class or program availability, as it was vital to a particular group of students but had a neutral (or detrimental) effect on others, underscoring the

heterogeneity of graduate student needs and, therefore, factors that influenced graduate student success.

Student perception of institutional behavior. In contrast to the previous element in which a relatively small number of factors were identified as the principal determinants, much greater parity was noted among the aspects of this component, which spoke to the individualized nature of institutional perception as it was focused through each participant's observations and experiences. Perceptions also were mutable, and the timing of the question to participants (in relation to their progress in their programs) may have affected their assessments.

 Responses in this theme were related both to graduate and undergraduate institutional experiences, as most participants compared and contrasted the two. As students formed a sense of their interactions first at the undergraduate level, it was understandable that using undergraduate experience as a gauge of later graduate experiences was a common metric. Student perception of institutional behavior was interesting in that it was highly subjective. While institutions may have had a specific intent with regard to a policy or decision, students' interpretations potentially were different. Perception also varied among students, which demonstrated that a particular institutional action was perceived in different ways by individual students.

Undergraduate retention as an institutional priority. This factor was referenced by more students than any other in this group, which was an indication that students routinely viewed their undergraduate institutions (or the undergraduate component of their education, if both degrees were earned at the same institution) as promoting retention as an institutional priority. It was notable that, while all were

enrolled in or graduated from one of two institutions at the graduate level, much more variation was seen among the undergraduate institutions attended, which made this perception even more striking. A student who earned his master's in a STEM field and was in the process of applying to medical school described the attention afforded to undergraduate retention at his institution in this way:

> Even higher up, the university was under a couple of different presidents while I was there, they seemed to encourage retention as they had these big goals of wanting everyone to graduate and stay through their degree programs, so throughout the institution from the president on down to the faculty and the chairman of the department, everybody just seemed to want you to be successful and to make it through the program.

One possible reason for the commonly-held view that institutions placed significant emphasis on undergraduate retention was due to the visibility of undergraduate-focused programs. The schools tracked certain undergraduate persistence metrics, such as the oft-quoted freshman retention rate or the six-year graduation rate, thus these measures were a part of the vernacular for most students. As these were public schools, this data were collected for reporting to a state oversight board. Simply establishing a visible manifestation of a retention effort, such as a dedicated office, sent the message that undergraduate persistence was important institutionally. One respondent, currently a Ph.D. student, described her view that undergraduate retention was an institutional priority:

> I would say yes…I knew one of the guys that worked in the retention office at

[my undergraduate institution], and so I knew kind of the department personnel

and their work ethic and priorities, and I really saw that they prioritized students.

Also, I knew some students who were part of the watch list, or kind of had been

reported as having trouble with studying or understanding material, and they

would actually be assigned a tutor to kind of keep them accountable.

Regardless of the reasons, students viewed their undergraduate institutions as

placing high emphasis on undergraduate retention. This potentially colored the

perception of the way in which the same students saw (or did not) institutional graduate-

focused retention efforts when they enrolled in a master's program.

Undergraduate Mechanisms of Support

Given that undergraduate retention was seen as an institutional priority, it was not

surprising that the factor in this element that received the most overall mentions related to

specific undergraduate mechanisms of support, defined as specific actions taken by

institutions that students perceived as supportive of undergraduate persistence. A student

who attended a small, private undergraduate institution explained the reasons she felt the

school was particularly focused on retention:

I think my undergraduate program was supportive of persistence not

academically, but just in focusing on how I could get to, but I was much more

focused on the activity side of things in undergrad than my academic side of

things, so I feel like I had more support there to persist to be able to get me to

graduate school. Academically, I knew that support was there in undergrad, and I

would be fine.

Other specific mechanisms identified were "career services and academic advising and anything I needed," "student activities and student affairs professionals…who knew exactly where to go and what to do," "writing service help" and "the writing center." Regarding university writing centers, participants expressed uncertainty as to whether they, as graduate students, were eligible to use that service. These mechanisms of support were well publicized and students were cognizant both of their presence and their usage. Due to of the attention given to undergraduate persistence, these mechanisms appeared to be beneficial to institutions that sought to preserve and to improve undergraduate student persistence, as these efforts potentially increased tuition revenue by keeping more students enrolled.

Graduate retention as institutional priority. The inclusion of the factors relating to undergraduate support may have appeared odd at first blush, as this study focused on graduate retention. However, an examination of the undergraduate perception allowed the contextualization of the perception of the priority of graduate retention by comparing the two. In contrast to the almost unanimous view that undergraduate retention was an institutional priority, participants were much more restrained in their assessment of graduate retention as an institutional priority. One interviewee explained, "I don't think it's an overt thing, you know, this attention to retention, but I'm sure there's a lot going on behind the scenes that I'm not aware of." Another stated, "both for accreditation purposes and to look good in the department, they genuinely want the students to succeed."

Similarly, a participant who was pursuing a master's degree at the same institution at which she earned her undergraduate degree assessed the institutional emphasis on graduate retention as follows:

> I definitely think it is. I don't think it's stressed as much as undergraduate – you don't have the email notifications and stuff as regularly as you would for undergraduate. I don't know if they just assume you're more of an adult now and you make that decision yourself, but I don't get it as much but I still feel that they are encouraging us to stick with it and to continue on. You do get the one or two emails at the beginning of the semester to kind of keep that connection and contact going.

Clearly, much less perceptions existed regarding institutions making graduate retention a priority. One possibility resulted from the different expectations of the two degree levels, with undergraduates viewed as needing more overt assistance (or, at least the offer of assistance), while graduate students were assumed to be more cognizant of their needs and better equipped to solve their own issues. Alternatively, due to the closer connection between master's students and their departments, much more of the traditional retention activity could have been seen as originating in the department for graduate students. No matter the motivation, students perceived a significant difference in retention efforts by institutions at the two degree levels.

Graduate retention not an institutional priority. Due to the tepid descriptions of institutional demonstrations of graduate retention as a priority, it was not shocking that an equally held view stated graduate retention was not an institutional priority. Interestingly, this assessment was espoused both by participants who attended the same

institution for both degree levels, as well as for those who did not. The fact that students

saw this occurring in both instances spoke to the pervasiveness of the belief. Students

recognized that retention efforts happened at the graduate level, indicating that this could

not be interpreted as students being blind to all sources and forms of support; rather, the

attribution of the support to the source was the crucial point of differentiation. Students

were very aware of the origins of the retention efforts, as one student explained:

> At the institutional level? I do remember within the department the professors
>
> and the department head were very hands-on and wanted to see me succeed
>
> academically. I don't remember that being a university-wide initiative, though, as
>
> a graduate student.

As mentioned, this phenomenon was independent of whether a student attended

the same institution for both undergraduate and graduate degrees. However, students

who enrolled in both programs at the same institution obviously had a better basis for a

direct comparison, as they observed the school's actions from both perspectives. A

currently enrolled master's student who said that her institution had "not so much"

promoted graduate retention, made the following observation:

> I just don't think there's the same effort behind the graduate level as it is at the
>
> undergrad. You don't see it marketed on social media, it's not advertised on the
>
> home page as much…I think maybe just in general.

All of this emphasized a key point: Did students truly see graduate retention not

as an institutional priority, or was it just perceived as less of a priority in comparison to

undergraduate efforts? One comparison succinctly stated, "Yes, I think it would be fair

to say that they are different. Not necessarily unequal, but different." This certainly

could explain the reason perceptions were split on whether graduate persistence was an institutional priority.

Barriers to Graduate Success

This element addressed the barriers that tended to prevent persistence. They were more serious, systematic obstacles than those in the Graduate Student Challenges group. These barriers were identified as situations or conditions that actively discouraged students as a group from continuing in or completing a degree program, while the "challenges" in the following section were more individual issues that provided personal, not group, difficulties.

Another distinction between these two categories was the student sense of their locus of control. Barriers to graduate success were more environmental, which led to an external locus of control as opposed to "graduate student challenges" which were more easily overcome, thus providing an internal locus of control. Therefore, the barriers were of greater concern, as they were larger and more pervasive both to institutions and to students.

Barriers to graduate education were referenced at roughly one-fourth the rate of factors that influenced graduate success, which indicated that students at these comprehensive public universities perceived a significantly greater amount of support than deterrence. Nonetheless, because these barriers impeded persistence, studying them allowed greater understanding of the obstacles.

Unawareness of graduate support. The factor in this group referenced by the most participants alluded to the fact that master's students typically were not cognizant of the support available to them. This represented a lack of congruence between the options

that graduate students were conscious of versus that which actually was available. Operationally, services that were offered to students of which they were unaware were functionally equivalent to those not offered. This was detrimental for all parties concerned; the institution (or some subunit thereof) invested resources into an unused (or underutilized) activity, thus paying an opportunity cost of effectively wasting time or money involved. Similarly, students missed an opportunity to increase their satisfaction or improve their chance of persisting (or both).

Even currently enrolled master's students who attended the same undergraduate and graduate institutions were puzzled by provisions that were available with regard to persistence:

> They need to start a centralized kind of way to connect graduate students to resources that are available…I don't know if there's a centralized kind of way for someone who's kind of struggling to reach out to a place on campus or a program official on campus and have the connections to those resources that they may not know about that would help them continue to persist, you know, and be successful, so I think that might be something, I don't know if it exists – perhaps it does and I'm just not aware, but I think that would be helpful, very helpful.

It could have been argued that graduate students' high level of self-motivation somewhat obviated the need for the same level of publicity and promotion for graduate services given to undergraduate support mechanisms. However, this did not appear to be the case, as students specifically referenced the need for more and clearer information. This was especially true for students who attended a different institution for their baccalaureate and master's programs:

Well, the first thing is that not coming from [the institution where I earned my master's degree], I came here and there was nothing to tell me how to set up my email account, my [student record account] - the orientation was more about, "Hey, if you're stressed out there's a counseling center," things like that. I can find that stuff online, but the things that are more difficult, finding out the different types of what exactly resources are there for graduate students… are just very hard to figure out when you first come here.

However, even students who were familiar with an institution from their undergraduate experience did not feel comfortable with their knowledge of available resources at the graduate level. If they generally were aware if the way in which to access the information, they begrudged the extra effort it required:

I know I can go down to the dean's office and ask, but maybe time to kind of explain things like, or send out emails about, the pre-req[quisite]s for certain things, and just the course outline. I'm sure I could find all that online after some digging, but just some easier accessibility to what courses are offered at certain times, and kind of get a track how my courses are laid out.

Undoubtedly, graduate students perceived a deficiency in the under-provision (or under-promotion) of retention services from various areas within an institution. While this may or may not have been true, it appeared that additional institutional effort clearly delineating and disseminating information concerning these offerings would have been institutionally beneficial.

Work or job as a barrier. Half of the participants identified work as a significant barrier to their graduate education; those who did not typically were full-time

students not employed in a position other than a graduate assistantship. Again, this pointed to a divide among master's students between those who could focus entirely on their studies versus those who added a graduate program to a panoply of other time-intensive activities, such as a full-time job.

As previously discussed, self-motivation was a significant factor for graduate students in terms of persistence. Therefore it was unsurprising to consider that same self-motivation extended to other aspects of their lives, such as work. Students in these courses exhibited the same dedication to their jobs as to their studies, which sometimes led to conflict when attempting to meet their personal high expectations while adding a master's program to their professional workload. As one student stated, "It's an issue with working full time and trying to do your best for the courses," and "I think, looking ahead, that the only thing I could see that would keep me from persisting to graduation would be just not having enough time, you know, with work and the courses."

For some students, their choice of a master's program was influenced by their employment situation. Course offerings and modalities may not have matched a student's availability if their work situation was not compatible. For example, some classes were offered only as face-to-face courses on weekends, but some student jobs required them to work on those days, which meant they could not participate in that program. This student's experience was indicative of the situation:

Honestly, the time requirement. There are several programs that seem more closely aligned to what I do – student affairs, primarily, is one of them – but let me give you two reasons: the time required; and it's availability as a web-based program. My thoughts are, a master's degree's a master's degree, and why take a

forty-eight hour degree path when I can do a thirty hour degree path? With fall

schedules and travel and family obligations, I can't commit every Thursday night

to be in class from 5:00 to 8:00.

Other barriers to graduate success. Beyond the factors discussed, the

remaining factors in this group were substantially segmented – they had fewer references

and were mentioned by fewer participants. As such, considering them collectively

allowed a brief examination of the more intriguing components. Two factors dealt with

the lack of perceived affiliation with other groups. "Disconnected from campus" and

"disconnected from peers" both touched on the anomie faced by some students during the

course of their graduate programs. The participants who identified these barriers came to

their graduate institutions predominantly after completing their undergraduate degrees at

other institutions; thus, the adjustment required to adapt to a new environment was

understandable.

Students adapted to this change individually, which meant that not all overcame

this barrier at the same rate. One participant, who attended a small, liberal arts school as

an undergraduate, recounted a particularly difficult transition period:

I think it was just the social aspect and I think that where I'm not from [my

graduate institution] I had a lot harder time, because I'm a very social person, I

like to talk, and in my graduate assistantship I sit in an office in the back and I

don't really talk to anybody and I go home and I live by myself so I'm like, "I'm

going crazy," just because there's not a whole lot of social interaction between

graduate students and getting them, kind of, to mingle, I guess.

Finally, some technological barriers also were identified. It was interesting to observe that they all related to online courses in some way, as online courses were cited previously as a factor that influenced graduate success. However, it also was noted that there were relatively fewer mentions of online courses as a barrier than as a positive factor.

The barriers presented by online classes were associated with one of two areas. First, the experience of taking online courses did not appeal to all students. For some, the lack of personal interaction with faculty and other students was troubling. One student, whose graduate program was a hybrid of online and in-person courses, remarked:

> I'm not as good of an online student because I don't have that face-to-face interaction. If I have to have homework done on Thursday, it's more of an independent thing and I'm not as good about that, so I try to take them in person for that reason.

The other reason students disliked online courses was associated with the course management system. Students found the lack of standardization of basic information (syllabi, course assignments, messages from the instructor, etc.) frustrating. This issue was associated predominantly with students who had a break between their graduate and undergraduate programs, as often they had not taken online courses prior to the master's level. This unfamiliarity, coupled with the variation among instructors who developed their online courses somewhat different, served as a barrier for several students.

Graduate Student Challenges

This element addressed challenges faced by graduate students in order to persist in their degree programs. As previously mentioned, this group was related to the

previous element (Barriers to Graduate Success), but the difference was found in the magnitude of difficulty. Barriers were show stoppers, while challenges were hindrances. This did not mean that challenges were inconsequential, as a critical mass of challenges easily could have functioned as a barrier, but individually a challenge was more easily overcome. Students had less influence over barriers but adapted to them with some effort.

This distinction was important. As barriers often were outside a student's control, it can be argued that many should have been ameliorated by the institution. Conversely, as challenges were within a student's power to surmount, it was incumbent upon them to solve these issues. Unfortunately, students tended to be unaware of these challenges until they were encountered during the graduate degree program.

Time management. Of the challenges identified, the most significant and pervasive was time management, as almost every participant referred to it. In particular, the difference in time management requirements between the undergraduate and graduate levels took students by surprise. As one student explained:

> [As an undergraduate] I did the work, I did the assignments and turned them in, but I also had time to do everything else, too. I had time to hang out with my friends, and when you're in class fifteen hours a week and you work another ten hours a week as a student, I still had time to dedicate to studies and then kind of compartmentalize parts of my life out. It's much more difficult to compartmentalize my life now.

There were several reasons for these perceived differences. First, students typically had other responsibilities during their graduate programs. Part-time students

frequently held full-time jobs and/or had family responsibilities, while full-time students often had graduate assistantships that required teaching classes or working in some other capacity for several hours each week. Second, students often found that the academic demands of a graduate program were more challenging in terms of the difficulty of the coursework, or the amount of work required for each class. Increased reading and writing requirements (as compared to undergraduate classes) also took some students by surprise until they acclimated to the new environment.

One student discussed the difference in time management between his position prior to returning to school for his master's program, and the new demands on his time caught him by surprise:

> That was kind of an adjustment to make. Being out in the working world, once you leave your job at five o'clock you don't really have to think about it the rest of the night or on the weekends, but here you have to get back in the routine of studying. You've got a couple of hours of homework to do at night, you've got the weekends where you have to study and worry about that, so there's a time management aspect of it that's quite a bit different.

Time management did not mean that students simply added their academic responsibilities to their other obligations; it involved a rebalancing of various aspects of student lives. Time management issues appeared more prevalent among participants who were involved in programs on a part-time basis, as they tended to have multiple outside responsibilities to be accommodated. However, even full-time graduate students were not immune to the struggles associated with finding an appropriate work/life balance:

> A lot of people do get really stressed out and get carried away with research, and

it can be a slippery slope where you end up working way too hard, not getting

sleep, and just generally kind of going down that path of becoming a workaholic

and developing bad life strategies – unbalanced, all work/no play sort of thing.

Finally, time management also was a challenge for an unexpected reason. For

students who were extremely involved in various student activities at the undergraduate

level, graduate school did not have as many opportunities to be as involved, which was

an issue. This was more evident when students attended different campuses for the two

levels of study and initially felt less integrated into their graduate program environment:

At first when I started it was a challenge because I felt like I'm not being

challenged enough, I don't have my schedule laid out, I have so much free time. I

don't know how to manage free time, which is a negative thing which I need to

work on.

Prior to beginning a graduate program, it was common for students to judge the

amount of effort required on the basis of their undergraduate experiences. This led to

some cognitive dissonance when their expectations did not match the reality of the

situation, which required the adoption of new perceptions more in line with that which

was required to persist.

Cost. Another significant challenge for graduate students was the cost of a

program. As with other factors, this affected students in various ways; e.g., some were

employed in positions in which tuition waivers were available as an employment benefit.

One such student commented, "I think I'd be insane not to take advantage of that."

Others received tuition stipends in conjunction with a graduate assistantship; the

participant who acknowledged that the assistantship offered to him provided "a financial

aspect" that allowed him to complete his master's degree in preparation for medical school.

At the public comprehensive universities studied, significantly fewer merit-based graduate student scholarships (outside of assistantships) existed as compared to the opportunities available for undergraduates. While assistantships were lucrative in that they potentially offered both tuition remission as well as a stipend, students who were unable to commit full time to school and the additional obligations an assistantship entailed were effectively blocked from that avenue of financial support. Thus, assistantships were available to only a subset of graduate students. For those unable to pursue those opportunities, limited options were available.

Student behavior at the undergraduate level also played a part in the graduate school cost issue. Those who accrued high debt as undergraduates were understandably hesitant to assume more financial liability to fund their graduate program. This led some to seek job opportunities in which tuition waivers were available benefits. One participant indicated that this was a consideration in her decision-making process when she accepted a position at a "place that was going to pay for" her master's program in business administration.

Both of these comprehensive public universities had differential tuition rates for students who were residents of the state in which the institution was located, versus students who were nonresidents. State residents received a subsidized tuition rate based on their participation in the state's economy as taxpayers. Nonresidents paid higher rates, as they did not receive the same benefit as state residents. One school also charged international students a rate higher than the nonresident rate, which caused additional

challenges. One international student gave specific first-hand insight into the financial

difficulties faced by students who come to the United States for graduate programs:

> I don't know if you're aware that international students pay lots of money, more
>
> than any other students. It doesn't matter where you're from, international
>
> students pay more money. This is why some students have been struggling so
>
> hard; you have a lot of students that are really, really ready to continue whatever
>
> program they're in, but most of them have a lot of difficulty borrowing, or making
>
> payments.

International students. As observed in the preceding section, international

students faced some distinct adversities (increased tuition costs, for example) not

encountered by domestic students. Further, international students had to adjust to a new

culture while simultaneously beginning a graduate program. It therefore was

unsurprising that international students encountered a host of unique challenges. These

students faced several hurdles when coming to the US for a graduate program. For

students who were not native English speakers, the language barrier presented an

additional complication, as well as the aforementioned cultural differences. Being apart

from friends and family for extended periods was disconcerting, as frequent international

travel was cost-prohibitive. Furthermore, the American system of education involved

significant disparities from that of many other countries, which necessitated students'

rapid familiarization with the new system in order to succeed, without inadvertently

committing an unintentional gaffe such as plagiarism.

The previous factor dealt with costs generally as a challenge for all students;

international students had additional considerations. Immigration rules do not allow

international students to work (other than on campus) in the US as a student visa holder, which limited their earning capacity beyond that of domestic students. This made scholarships an extremely important issue, as it was one of the few cost mitigations the students could access. An international student that participated in this study affirmed the importance of scholarships to herself and to her peers:

> I'm international, and I think a lot of friends at the school are looking for
> scholarships to help them. That would be my number one thing I would advise a
> school… provide more scholarships, and if you talk to any international students
> I'm sure they're going to have something to say about that.

> International student issues were recognized even by domestic students.

Although international students could enter almost any academic program, there were some disciplines in which international students made up a disproportionate amount, such as STEM fields. Institutions had a vested interest in ensuring that they were accommodated in order to perpetuate the revenue stream that they brought. Thus, even more efforts were expended to ensure that international students had the best possible chance for success. A student in a STEM graduate program stated:

> It's a little different for this graduate program, because a majority of the students
> – I'd say at least ninety percent – are international students, and so they certainly
> still do want them, they're looking for these high retention rates, because these
> students are paying a lot of money to come get their education at [this institution]
> and so they certainly do want them to be successful in this degree program. It
> helps them greatly for job placements. A lot of them are from India, and so this
> degree program really helps them out when they return to India with a master's,

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so both for accreditation purposes and to look good in the department, they genuinely want these students to succeed. It may be a little bit different twist to it, being a lot of international students, but they do want higher retention rates, as well.

Other graduate student challenges. Several other challenges were identified, but none were as prevalent as those previously mentioned. However, some were worthy of attention, as they were somewhat unexpected; e.g., several participants mentioned unmotivated peers as a barrier. More specifically, some peers were perceived as not having worked as hard in their graduate programs as other students, but received the same degree and recognition, which rankled numerous participants. One student commented, "There are some people that were in the department that I felt didn't want to get as much out of it, or they didn't care to, but they still got their degrees and everything," while another said:

> Sometimes I'd get frustrated, though, to recognize, just in general, across campus and across different degree programs that students who, you know, don't put in as much effort or try as hard are receiving the exact same degree as I am, which is the same at undergrad, too, but I think when you get to graduate school it's just a little different because I just physically can't understand how they aren't motivated, or how they don't want to do their best to promote themselves for their future.

Participants also referred to being surprised by the ease with which they found their coursework at the graduate level. This perhaps was a mismatch between the participants' perception of that which graduate school should be versus their experience,

but nonetheless it gave the students pause. As one participant stated, "The coursework really wasn't that bad. I mean, the hardest class I took was the research methods, and it was doctoral level, so that wasn't hard at all," while another more directly remarked, "When I thought about graduate school, I didn't know how I would get through graduate school, but then when I was there I thought it was really easy to me and I didn't know what I was doing wrong!"

Topic III: Graduate Persistence Improvement Suggestions

Several issues were identified by participants that, from their perspective, could have been changed in order to provide a more supportive environment to encourage greater graduate student persistence. Some of these factors were specific and implementable (Graduate Orientation, Graduate Student Organization, Social Support), while others were articulated less explicitly, which indicated a broad desire for more support from institutions (General Improvement Suggestions).

These suggestions ran the gamut from the nearly universal (i.e., could potentially benefit a large number of students) to the intensely personal. In some ways, the latter reflected the graduate student experience; each student was on an individual path to complete their program. The primary specific factors are discussed first, followed by the omnibus general category.

Graduate Orientation

The single factor in this element referenced by the most participants related to graduate orientation programs. This included full-time and part-time students at both institutions studied, which indicated its importance in the mind of graduate students, as well as the opportunity for institutions to establish or improve suitable orientations for

students. This issue hearkened back to the concept that students evaluated their graduate experience through the lens of their undergraduate experiences. As undergraduates, their programs began with an orientation; thus, having an orientation at the graduate level was seen as symbolic of a new beginning. A graduate orientation was of particular practical importance for students who attended different graduate and undergraduate institutions, as it was the first opportunity for students to begin the cultural adaptation to their new school and program. However, it was helpful for students who continued their graduate studies at the same institution as their undergraduate degree, as it served as a clear delineation that demonstrated the student had entered a different phase of education.

Participants referred to a desire for "some type of orientation for how to succeed," or "definitely some kind of 'something' when you get [to your graduate institution], just to say, 'here's how you do things'." Further, "an orientation program where it's not so much working through the formalities" was specifically mentioned as a positive for students. Based on student input, it appeared to be easy for institutions to overlook the importance of having an orientation program for graduate students. As graduate students were much more heterogeneous in comparison to undergraduates, a "one size fits all" orientation that was equally beneficial to all students was impossible.

Social Support

Several references were made regarding the desirability of greater social support for graduate students. While participants also mentioned departmental events as a means of support, suggestions were made for a more all-encompassing way of fostering social interaction among graduate students. Interestingly, those who saw more of a need for this were full-time students who attended different institutions for their undergraduate and

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graduate programs. As previously discussed in conjunction with international students, beginning a graduate program at a new institution required a cultural adjustment for all students, even if it was a lesser magnitude for domestic students.

Social events that included more than a students' academic programs, or even their academic college, were mentioned specifically. The goal of "just showing that there are things out there besides what's in your cohort and bringing that community aspect further" was echoed by another participant, who observed that there was "not anything specific from [my graduate institution] that I felt like was a social gathering for graduate students." Obviously, social events were more of an incentive for students in somewhat close proximity to campus; those enrolled in online programs far from campus derived little benefit from social events.

Graduate Student Organization

Another factor that emerged in the study was a desire for some form of graduate student organization. As was the case with social events, this suggestion related to expanding the offerings at the department and college levels to the entire graduate population. The perceived need for an organization of this type went beyond academic disciplines to a more global view of graduate studies, which was viewed as potentially benefitting graduate persistence by giving students more voice in graduate affairs. Several suggestions for student organizations were made. One option was a "graduate association steering committee" that would provide a student viewpoint on various aspects of graduate student life, and the way it could be improved. The thought was that this type of group could have been used as a sounding board for policy changes, similar to the graduate faculty boards in place at many institutions.

Another recommendation involved a graduate student ambassador organization. This was envisioned as a more practical, task-oriented group that could be involved both with persistence and recruitment activities. However, an organization of this type would be more limited in scope than other alternatives, as it would require students to be on campus for specific activities effectively excluded students taking classes remotely. Unlike social events, a graduate student organization (particularly a steering committee) was seen as useful for students enrolled in online-only programs. There was high perceived value in having students from the disparate groupings of graduate students, such as distance learners and part-time students, participate in this type of organization, given their direct first-hand knowledge of the persistence needs of students in similar situations.

General Improvement Suggestions

This factor consisted of the improvements pointed out by students that were general calls for support, or appeared to apply to their own situations. Although many of these suggestions lacked specificity, they served to highlight the need and desire for improvements to their graduate experiences. Flexibility in terms of assignments and grading was one such suggestion. The participants of this study uniformly expressed their aspirations for high grades in their graduate programs; therefore, situations perceived as threatening to their grades were stressful. An example of this was articulated by one student:

> If something comes up and we have a birthday party to go to on Saturday and
> church on Sunday morning and a family cookout Sunday afternoon, if I had the
> flexibility to postpone that assignment without negative consequences on my

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grade, that would be support for me. I would consider that support and something that would help me persist.

Other supports identified included a wish that institutions "offered child care for their students and faculty" and "easier access to free printing, or even like if they had printers that you could pay with a card, rather than with change." The "need to start a centralized kind of way to connect graduate students to resources that are available" and the opportunity to learn "a lot of those little things that would have helped me…learning some of those ins and outs would have been helpful" were examples of the less structured requests that would have required more delineation for implementation.

Document Analysis

In addition to the participant interview data discussed to this point, document analysis was performed on a variety of texts produced by the institutions. The goal of this analysis was to examine relevant documents (including strategic plans, annual reports, convocation speeches, committee reports, etc.) for evidence of the way in which the institutions prioritized graduate education and persistence among the numerous other issues that demanded attention. Document analysis used the data from texts produced by the universities to identify themes that illustrated the underlying assumptions on which these documents were based. At times this link was quite clear, such as in the case of institutional planning documents, as the analysis revealed that which was important to the institution. Similarly, budgeting documents illustrated where resources were allocated, which provided an even plainer declaration of prioritization.

In total, 79 documents (49 from Western Kentucky University [WKU] and 30 from Murray State University [MSU]) were examined. Documents are listed by type in the Table 2:

Table 2

Document Analysis Sources

Text		Number Reviewed
Strategic Planning		30
WKU	19	
MSU	11	
Fact Books		26
WKU	9	
MSU	17	
Convocation Speeches (WKU)		11
Annual Reports		10
WKU	8	
MSU	2	
State of the University (MSU)		1
Presidential Speech (WKU)		1
Total		79

As was expected, the content of these documents was reflective of the student populations of the universities themselves, in that they focused almost exclusively on

undergraduate students and issues. Graduate education and issues received little attention from either institution.

Unconscious Exclusion

The most prevalent theme was that of "unconscious exclusion," which was defined as broad, sweeping statements found in the texts studied that purportedly applied to all students at an institution. However, upon closer examination these statements referred to only undergraduates, not graduate students. This theme of assuming all students were undergraduates was prevalent in texts from both institutions. In the MSU "Strategic Directions Statement" from May 2011, it was declared that "We envision Murray State to be the university of choice for high school seniors, community college transfer students and nontraditional students in West Kentucky and the surrounding region." While graduate students perhaps were intended to fall under the "nontraditional student" rhetoric, this statement clearly referred to undergraduate students.   Similarly, the "WKU Challenging the Spirit Action Plan 2012-2018" illuminated an objective to "increase student retention, persistence, and timely graduation," which was immediately followed by targets and strategies that included only undergraduates.

The "WKU Strategic Guide 2010-12" also followed this paradigm. The "Academic Quality" section referred to "rais[ing] the University's admission standards," then catalogued a detailed discussion of the new standards, all of which pertained exclusively to undergraduate students. The one reference to graduate students in this section was found in a directive to the Graduate Studies office to "increase the yield rate of incoming students." While some of the documents mentioned graduate education, the most prevalent topic throughout the entirety of the analysis was the assumption that

actions, decisions, and considerations were overwhelmingly slanted toward the viewpoint of undergraduate education.

View of Graduate Education

Perhaps the clearest expression of a school's views of graduate education was found in the "WKU Challenging the Spirit: Strategic Plan for 2005/06 – 2007/08" document. In part, the Statement of Purpose read:

> WKU provides students with rigorous academic programs in education, the liberal arts and sciences, business, and traditional and emerging professional programs, with emphasis at the baccalaureate level, complemented by relevant associate and graduate-level programs.

Comprehensive public universities traditionally have been viewed as undergraduate-focused, but it was interesting to observe graduate programs equated to undergraduate, pre-baccalaureate associate programs. A possible explanation for this view was found in the November 2014 meeting notes for the "MSU Scholarship, Research and Creative Thought" committee, in which the question was asked, "What's the vision for graduate students on campus?" The reply was, "Depends on the college…Several departments don't have graduate students."

Institutionally, it appeared that graduate education was not ignored; it simply was not thought of in the first place. Even when it was considered, it often was discussed in the context of undergraduate education. The "WKU Guide for 2010-12" referred to graduate studies as a "strategic priority" but described it in this context:

> Graduate Studies must remain a priority in the improvement of academic quality at WKU. Strong graduate programs enhance institutional quality, enrich the

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undergraduate experience, and synergize the research, creative and scholarly

activities of the faculty and staff… A healthy and broad graduate portfolio will

strengthen undergraduate disciplines across the University and will enhance the

University's research and scholarly capacities while serving the economic

development needs of the region.

Clearly, graduate education was not envisioned as at the forefront of the mission of

comprehensive public universities, but rather as a support for the primary mission of

undergraduate research. Thus, decisions that prioritized undergraduate education and

concerns were to be expected. This did not necessarily indicate a diminution of graduate

education, but it served to define the parameters of its importance and helped to provide

context for the broad concept of graduate education, as well as the narrower concerns of

graduate persistence among the priorities supported by the institutions.

Summary of Findings

Through interviews with current and former students at two comprehensive public

universities, as well as document analysis of texts produced by these institutions, a

considerable amount of data were compiled as a result of this study. The interview data

were organized thematically into three topics, while the document research produced two

main areas, all of which related to graduate education and persistence, specifically for

master's programs. The first topic addressed how and why students chose to attend a

graduate program. It was important to establish a baseline for attendance that was useful

in informing the persistence data. Students chose master's programs for different reasons

that primarily fell into one of two categories. Based on their long-term goals, students

went into master's programs as a necessary preparation for doctoral work, or they selected a program with the goal of personal or professional advancement.

Interesting differences were noted between full-time and part-time students. Most of the full-time students were younger and took classes on campus. They were more likely to have graduate assistantships. Part-time students were more likely to be older, to take classes online, and to have other responsibilities such as full-time employment and family obligations. The second topic dealt with the factors identified by students that influenced persistence, student perceptions of institutional behavior, and the barriers and challenges students encountered during their programs. This topic yielded a considerable amount of data related to the issues studied. With regard to persistence, students were influenced by their graduate faculty, their self-motivation, and their peers. While several other factors exerted influence, these were the primary considerations that shaped their behavior.

Students faced several barriers and challenges during their master's programs. A significant challenge was the time management needed to complete the academic work, as students were surprised at the amount of effort required in a graduate program. They found it to be more difficult than their undergraduate programs. Additionally, the cost of graduate programs was challenging to some, particularly those who did not have access to tuition waiver benefits through their employer or via a graduate assistantship.

In terms of barriers, which students saw as more difficult to surmount than challenges, students identified job responsibilities and family obligations that impeded persistence. While they were somewhat student-specific, they were referenced by multiple participants. Data collected in the study indicated that students believed

comprehensive public institutions placed a lower emphasis on graduate issues in general, as compared to undergraduate issues. The document analysis demonstrated the general case, and student perceptions agreed with that view to a large extent.

The third topic was focused on the changes or improvements students wished to see with regard to graduate education. The data indicated some areas in which institutional action could be taken, but exploring the student motivations and goals also yielded answers. Several suggestions touched on the issue of graduate student isolation. Many students, especially those who transitioned directly from an undergraduate to a graduate program, noted the relative lack of activities intended for graduate students. Suggestions were made for social opportunities that allowed graduate students the opportunity to go beyond the individuals in their department or academic college, as well as ideas about graduate student orientations and student groups.

Chapter Summary

This chapter focused on reporting the data collected in this study through student interviews and data analysis. The interview data were grouped into three topics of discussion, while the document research data were considered separately. The findings are examined in Chapter V, which also includes discussion regarding the conclusions and recommendations gleaned from this information.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This qualitative study examined the factors that influence persistence in master's programs at comprehensive universities in the mid-south to determine how (or whether) they prioritized graduate persistence (as well as students' perceptions of their efforts). The study also examined the support services that master's students desired. The research questions were as follows:

1. What factors influence persistence in master's programs at comprehensive universities in the mid-south?

2. Do or how do comprehensive public universities in the mid-south prioritize graduate persistence, and how do students perceive these efforts?

3. What support services do master's students at comprehensive public institutions in the mid-south want those institutions to provide?

The focus on master's students at public institutions arose because master's students comprise the vast majority of graduate enrollments at institutions of this type. Public universities have been focused on tuition revenue as a way of mitigating significant funding reductions from states in recent years (an example has been an increased reliance on the higher tuition generated by international student enrollment, which also has made graduate retention an important consideration). Increasing graduate persistence is a means of increasing tuition revenue, as well as degree completion, which continues to be significant as states begin to shift toward outcome-based funding formulas for postsecondary education.

More important, providing all students with an environment that gives them the opportunity to succeed is the moral responsibility of any institution that admits the student and accepts payment; to do otherwise is unethical. Public institutions have responsibilities that include providing access to higher education, but that access must be tempered by the expectation that students admitted to the institution have a reasonable probability of completing a degree. A university does not guarantee that all students admitted will graduate but should guarantee that all students admitted will have the support of the university as they pursue their studies.

The research data for this study were generated through two sources, one being interviews with current students enrolled or who had graduated from master's degree programs at two public comprehensive universities in the mid-south. The second source was document analysis of texts produced by the institutions that documented institutional priorities (documents related to budgeting, planning, and reporting). While voluminous data were found regarding undergraduate persistence efforts and assessment, very little was available regarding graduate persistence. This study was intended to examine the phenomenon of graduate persistence in order to increase an understanding of it, to consider the way in which graduate persistence is prioritized institutionally in relation to undergraduate persistence, and to identify ways of increasing graduate persistence to the benefit both of institutions and students.

The findings of this study were illuminating. Graduate persistence was shown to be affected primarily by three factors: graduate faculty support, self-motivation, and peer support. Of these three, the most unexpected was the significance placed on self-motivation as an influencer. Students perceived a lower prioritization of graduate

persistence from an overall institutional perspective than undergraduate-focused efforts at their previous institutions. This finding was supported by documents produced by the universities that demonstrated graduate education as having lower significance. Students identified desired areas of support; interestingly, these were much more segmented than expected. While some of the requests were applicable to a majority of graduate students, others were more specific to individual situations, which underscored the necessity of graduate persistence efforts to be targeted, intentional, and ongoing.

Discussion

The first research question, "What factors influence persistence in master's programs at comprehensive universities in the mid-south?" was designed to determine the factors identified by students as influencing their decisions to continue and to complete their graduate programs. The factors identified included graduate faculty support, self-motivation, and peer support. While others emerged, these three were pinpointed as the most important through the results of the study. The role of graduate faculty support as the primary factor affecting graduate student persistence was significant. Throughout the study, evidence indicated that master's students at these institutions identified much more closely with their specific academic departments than as a part of the university as a whole. Therefore, it was not surprising that the faculty members of the department had the most direct link to the students and, thus, wielded the most influence with regard to student persistence.

At institutions of this type, undergraduate enrollments are basically unlimited, as students admitted to the university can choose almost any academic major in any department at the time of entry, or they can decide to change their major after the point of

admission. Conversely, graduate enrollments were much more tightly controlled by the academic departments, as departmental representatives (usually faculty members) review applicant files to make recommendations during the admission process. As each department had different criteria for admission, the review process was designed to gauge each applicant's possible success in completing the program. As a result of this individual scrutiny, departments recommended a subset of the applicant pool for admission based on factors specific to the applicant (undergraduate preparation, standardized test scores, professional experience, etc.), as well as factors related to the institution (number of "slots" available in highly selective programs, number of faculty available to take on new students in programs requiring a thesis, etc.). In theory, this pre-screening should have had a positive effect on persistence by eliminating lesser qualified applicants.

A potential downside to this finding was that comprehensive public institutions enroll many more undergraduate students than graduates, which can lead to faculty members devoting more of their time to the larger group. When faculty workloads were more heavily weighted toward undergraduate students, graduate students did not receive the same amount of attention, although it is more required and desired for success in the program. This would not be an issue in academic programs that are graduate-only, but most programs at the comprehensive public universities had undergraduate components or counterparts.

Because graduate faculty members were vital to master's students with regard to persistence, it seems logical that the best way to increase persistence would be to initiate or to increase faculty-led (or faculty-involved) efforts. However, this ignores the

increasing demands that have been placed on faculty as a result of financial pressures. As university budgets continue to be reduced, faculty have been asked to assume increased course loads or teach larger sections of courses, in addition to their research activities. Additionally, faculty may not see student retention as a part of their jobs, particularly in light of the aforementioned responsibilities. Also, for faculty who do not have student retention efforts as a metric for promotion and tenure, it is probable that more effort will be given to factors that are related to promotion and tenure.

As such, graduate faculty members should be made aware of their importance to student persistence. This may be painfully obvious to some, especially those who actively participate in persistence efforts, but reminding faculty of their role in retaining the graduate students in their departments is a way to promote persistence institutionally that would have virtually no cost. By simply articulating the willingness to help students, whether in a syllabus, the first meeting of a class, or in an individual meeting, the expectation of persistence would be reinforced.

Graduate faculty support can be more difficult under certain circumstances, such as in online-only programs (or even in online course sections). In this scenario, finding ways to make the connections are necessary but must be done in such a way that the efforts are supportive, but not overwhelming. As many online-only students in this study chose those programs in order to have the scheduling flexibility to accommodate other responsibilities in their lives (full-time employment, family, etc.), additional time needed for activities they saw as extraneous (such as specific persistence efforts) was a net negative from the student perspective. Thus, it would be beneficial to integrate support efforts or information into related activities.

While graduate faculty support was an anticipated influencer of persistence, a more unexpected finding was the relative importance of students' self-motivation. It was interesting to note that self-motivation basically was taken for granted by students throughout the study, as it was identified more as an assumed trait. Stated different, the study participants recognized it in themselves but did not give it any special significance, as they felt it was normal and necessary. Conversely, participants were puzzled when they discussed others who did not exhibit the same level of self-motivation, as they did not understand the reason others did not possess the same drive. Further, students expressed resentment when others who they felt exhibited minimal levels of effort received the same grades and earned the same grades as their more motivated peers.

Postsecondary education in and of itself is an educationally differentiating activity. If a high school education is viewed as the baseline for academic achievement, undergraduate education at the baccalaureate level sets students apart. However, as bachelor degree attainment rises, it could be considered the new baseline. In this instance graduate education becomes the differentiator, allowing those who wish to separate themselves in terms of educational achievement to do so by completing a graduate program. Any student enrolled in a graduate program has demonstrated some measure of self-motivation. While some may have been motivated by external factors, such as an employment-mandated educational requirement (such as a P-12 teacher who is required to earn a certain number of graduate hours in a specific time frame), most students chose programs for personal reasons. Thus, self-motivation played a part of the graduate experience from the beginning of their affiliation with a program and extended to the decisions affected by persistence in this study.

As with any activity, earning a master's degree has an opportunity cost. Students must give up something in order to do that which is necessary to complete an academic program. This cost can include time (spending time with family or friends), money (working fewer hours or not assuming additional work), as well as in other ways. Students must decide if the short-term consequences of participating in a degree program are worth the perceived long-term benefits that earning a degree will afford them. Further, students who begin a program but do not finish receive the worst possible outcome, in that they incur the opportunity cost of participation but not the reward of completion. Therefore, self-motivation is required to maximize individual outcomes from graduate school participation.

One potential source for this self-motivation is prior education experiences. As one participant pointed out, their undergraduate program prepared them for graduate school much more effectively than their high school program prepared them for their undergraduate program. As the graduate students in this study had successfully completed a baccalaureate degree, they were better equipped to handle the rigors of a master's program and were more aware of the requirements to succeed. Self-motivation is a difficult factor for institutions to leverage in order to increase persistence. Similarly, determining a student's level of intrinsic self-motivation can be problematic to determine at the point of admission to a graduate program. It could be assumed that graduate students already possess some measure of self-motivation, for the reasons previously discussed, but that does not account for some students who are insufficiently self-motivated to overcome other obstacles and barriers to complete a program. One solution would be to monitor student self-motivation throughout an academic program, either

formally through ongoing assessments such as surveys and other feedback mechanisms,

or more informally through faculty observation and interaction. Ideally, some

combination of the two would allow institutions to gauge self-motivation and attempt to

intervene when it appears to be flagging. It was clear from the study that self-motivation

was an important, intrinsic quality that positively influenced graduate persistence.

Peer support also was identified as a factor associated with persistence. More

specifically, students valued peers who exhibited similar amounts of self-motivation,

while unmotivated peers (or those who did not put as much effort into their work) were

not valued. Students liked being able to rely on others as "member checks" to ensure

they understood an assignment, to discuss program-related issues from a student point of

view, or to have someone with a common experience to whom they could express and

share their frustrations about aspects of the academic program. In programs with a cohort

model, students take a substantial amount of classes with the same group, and peer

relationships can form that are very supportive. If a member of the group experiences

outside pressures that hinder persistence, the peer group can sustain that individual until

the issue passes. In time, the member can reciprocate the support to others as needed.

Students also viewed peers as validation of their own decisions to enroll and to

persist in academic programs. If a student doubts themselves when deciding to continue

in the program, observing others going through the same requirements and continuing

can influence a student to continue. As previously observed, students, peers, and faculty

members comprised all of the human elements of the classroom experience (even if that

classroom was virtual), so it was not surprising to discover that these elements made up

the majority of the factors identified during this study that affected persistence.

However, examining only these factors did not take into consideration the place of graduate persistence in the university as a whole.

Looking at the way in which graduate persistence (and, by extension, graduate education) was prioritized at comprehensive public institutions was the focus of the second research question: "Do or how do comprehensive public universities in the mid-South prioritize graduate persistence, and how do students perceive these efforts?" In order to examine this question, multiple data sources were employed, including student/graduate interviews, as well as analysis of documents produced by the institutions. This presented a more comprehensive picture of the situation by triangulating the data. First, inspecting university fact books as compendia of important information that are produced annually demonstrated the data deemed relevant by the institutions, especially in terms of persistence and graduation. In short, schools measured data that were important to them in order to track and study it. Fact books for both institutions were examined, spanning at minimum the previous decade. While some minimal information about graduate enrollment was presented, no data about graduate retention or graduation were available. Conversely, significant data concerning undergraduate retention and persistence were presented, which ranged from first-year retention rates to six-year graduation rates.

As previously observed, the relative homogeneity of undergraduate students differed significantly from the comparatively heterogeneous makeup of graduate enrollments. This could be a factor in the lack of data on graduate persistence that is collected and disseminated by public comprehensive institutions, versus the relative wealth of data available on undergraduate persistence. Also, as state postsecondary

oversight organizations, such as the Council of Postsecondary Education in Kentucky, do not track graduate student data gives impetus to the de-emphasis of the importance of institutions gathering this type of information.

This was indicative of a general trend observed during this study, namely that graduate students tend to be forgotten or not considered when institutions make decisions involving planning or resources. To be clear, it did not appear to be a concerted effort against graduate students, but rather a benign inattention to them. A primary theme identified in the document research was that of the "unconscious exclusion," defined as any statement or decision that purported to be for all students, but in fact applied only to undergraduates. An example of this was found in the 2011 WKU Fact Book in a section titled, "WKU's Rally for Retention Campaign" (p. 60). The section touted the formation of the Retention Task Force, a group that outlined four goals:

1. Apply data-driven decision-making principles to identify and strategically intervene with at-risk students.

2. Expand retention efforts and strategies beyond the first year.

3. Identify and reduce barriers that prevent students in good standing from graduating within six years.

4. Engage the university community in advancing a comprehensive emphasis on student persistence and graduation.

Each of these admirable goals was in keeping with the institutional effort to increase student persistence. However, unstated in this description was that the Rally for Retention and the Retention Task Force did not include graduate students as part of their missions, despite the assertion in the fourth goal that promoted a "comprehensive

emphasis on student persistence and graduation." To be accurate, it should have stated that it emphasized a "comprehensive emphasis on *undergraduate* [emphasis added] student persistence and graduation." The apparent disparity of institutional effort and emphasis on undergraduate and graduate persistence at public comprehensive universities was the impetus of the questions that led to this study. Institutions of this type appear to be very focused on undergraduate persistence, while graduate persistence is not discussed or promoted institutionally. Some basis for this view was seen in documents such as the "WKU Challenging the Spirit: Strategic Plan for 2005/06 – 2007/08," in which graduate education's role as "complementing" undergraduate education was stated explicitly. Based on the institutions studied, this was a common perception of graduate education and, therefore, persistence.

Graduate persistence undeniably is more difficult to assess than is undergraduate persistence. Master's programs vary in length from 30 to 48 credit hours, and students may have irregular attendance patterns based on outside obligations. Rather than a regular, predictable progression toward degree completion, graduate students may proceed in fits and starts, with periods of inactivity followed by relatively frenetic action. However, simply because something is difficult does not mean it should be avoided, particularly when both students and institutions would benefit from the effort. Study participant responses reflected this general trend. While most viewed undergraduate retention as an institutional priority, the view of graduate persistence was different. Half of the participants said graduate retention was not an institutional priority, while fewer than half identified graduate retention as an institutional priority. While it was important to note that students did not necessarily attend the same institutions for their

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undergraduate and graduate programs, because these perceptions were prevalent spoke to the relative absence of institutional behavior that was seen as promoting graduate retention.

Based on the data, it was clear that institutions could do more to promote persistence at all levels – including graduate students – through some small changes. First, presenting information on graduate persistence in university publications such as fact books would be one such avenue. This would necessitate the collection of the information, which would focus further attention on the issue. Presenting this data would serve to show that the institution was supportive of graduate persistence. Second, making campus constituencies (including faculty, staff, and students) aware of the importance of graduate programs by referencing them regularly would make progress in bringing graduate programs to the forefront of the collective consciousness. Highlighting different aspects of graduate programs during campus-wide events, such as start-of-semester faculty and staff convocations, referencing graduate programs during undergraduate student orientations, or even saying "undergraduate students" (when a policy or action refers exclusively to undergraduate students) in place of the common "all students" misnomer would result in positive effects.

While students did not view graduate persistence as an institutional priority, they saw it as an academic departmental priority. Given that graduate faculty support was named as an important influencer of persistence, students were inclined to look to their academic departments for support. This expectation fit with the third research question, "What support services do master's students at comprehensive public institutions in the mid-south the master's level want those institutions to provide?" Students identified their

departments as accommodating but perceived somewhat of an isolation from campus units beyond the department. Especially for students who attended differed undergraduate and graduate instructions, a disconnect existed in terms of the services master's students knew were available to them as graduate students.

Making students aware of the existence of the services available is a first step. Perhaps part of the reason these services are not well publicized is due to their relative lack of presence. On one hand, graduate students would not need the same number or volume of services designed for undergraduate students, as graduate students were shown to exhibit higher levels of self-motivation. However, this does not mean that graduate students do not have support needs. Graduate support services presents a tough balancing act for institutions, as there may be less return on investment for resources spent to provide support services intended solely or primarily for graduate students, although increased persistence could make it profitable. Still, it is a tougher sell for schools to provide significant graduate student services when graduate student populations are much less visible on campus at comprehensive public institutions as compared to undergraduates.

Social support was another need that students desired to be addressed. Specifically, this related to giving students opportunities to interact with those outside their department or academic college. This activity fell squarely into the category of institutional responsibility, as it cut across multiple academic areas. To be sure, this was a greater need for more traditional, on-campus students, as online students were unlikely to see this as a valuable resource. Due to the segmented nature of graduate enrollments, no one activity or support service likely appeals to every student. This should not serve

as a deterrent to institutions providing services but should emphasize the importance of adopting a more nuanced approach when considering the needs of students enrolled in master's programs. Calibrating expectations to realize that graduate persistence, similar to graduate admission, is a targeted activity favoring quality over quantity would serve institutions well.

The importance of a relevant graduate orientation program represented another identified need. The key concept was "relevant," as respondents were disdainful of orientations that did not provide useful information. Orientations should be available in a variety of ways (both on campus and online, for example) in order to be useful to the greatest number of students. Making such programs concise yet effective represents a challenge for institutions, but the benefits could be far-reaching. While it is obvious that such a program would be beneficial to master's students who completed an undergraduate degree at a different institution, it also would be an effective way to speak with students who are continuing their studies at the same institution. Helping them realize that a graduate program requires different outlooks and strategies would ease the transitional difficulties some students face.

Another opportunity for institutions at graduate orientations or similar programs is to set forth their expectations. It can be argued that this is unnecessary, as these students are (or should be) aware of what is expected of them, but real value exists in ensuring this is stated explicitly at the time students begin their programs. With regard to persistence, informing students that the school expects them to complete a degree program sends a powerful signal, particularly if this message is repeated at different points throughout a student's career, as it can reinforce and reaffirm students' innate self-motivation.

This research question was intriguing, in that students did not identify the amount of graduate student support service needs as was anticipated prior to the beginning of the study. There are several potential explanations for this, such as the idea that many master's students at public comprehensive institutions view their academic participation as transactional, and they are enrolled specifically to accomplish a specific outcome, i.e., earn a degree. In this scenario, there is less of an expressed desire for support services, as students merely grind though the program requirements. Even in this case, students would benefit from having an expanded array of support available. This is analogous to tracking financial data in a paper ledger versus an electronic spreadsheet; it is certainly possible to achieve the same outcome using either method, but one is substantially more convenient and more accurate, which heightens the probability of a favorable outcome.

Another possible reason students did not identify a greater number of student support services was they received some support from their academic departments. Due to the way in which respondents identified more closely with their departments, as opposed to the larger institution, they may have seen this as the more logical source of support needs. If so, it should not preclude additional institutional efforts, as program-supplied support would be potentially uneven, as it is dependent upon the particular program supplying it in the absence of an overall institutional effort.

Conclusions

The primary conclusion of this study was that significant inequality exists between undergraduate and graduate persistence efforts at comprehensive public institutions. However, due to the fundamental differences between students at these two educational levels, the magnitude of the inequality does not directly correlate with

student persistence decisions. Second, a comprehensive public institution that invests in and promotes graduate persistence would differentiate significantly from other similar universities and would provide a competitive advantage in student recruitment, as well as retention. While institutions must decide whether the effort is worth the cost, the opportunity exists for schools to distinguish themselves in the graduate enrollment area.

Finally, graduate persistence is an extremely fragmented target for institutions that choose to support it. It requires a much more comprehensive portfolio of strategies, rather than a concerted effort into one solution. Due to of the many types of graduate students, a commensurate number of approaches must be adopted, requiring a more fine-grained methodology. Similarly, the effect of such efforts would not be immediate and would necessitate a long-term institutional commitment in order to be successful.

Recommendations

This study generated interesting and surprising data regarding persistence at comprehensive public institutions. Examining this data inevitably would expose additional issues that can benefit from additional research on the topic. Also included are recommendations for changes in institutional practices regarding graduate persistence. The first recommendation is to repeat this study at different types of institutions, in particular ones in which a greater emphasis on advanced graduate studies. While many similarities were found between the two universities, how would the results be different at schools in which graduate research is more prevalent? Similarly, would students at institutions offering more doctoral programs have different responses? By varying the institution type, the mix of respondents would be different, as schools with a greater research/doctoral emphasis may include more students pursuing a master's degree as a

waypoint toward a doctoral degree and, thus, would have different factors influencing their persistence. It would also be of interest to see if different types of institutions prioritize graduate education in a similar manner. Also, considering institutions in different geographic areas would be another option.

A second recommendation is to replicate this study, but focusing on students who have dropped out of a graduate program or otherwise failed to complete it. Determining the barriers perceived by the students would benefit institutions seeking to encourage graduate persistence. The points of view held by these students would be valuable alone, particularly when considering the factors that encourage (or discourage) persistence, as well as the challenges and barriers encountered. The study would be even more powerful when the results are compared to those of other students who completed programs.

The third recommendation is for schools to track graduate persistence data in an effort to improve support for graduate student persistence to degree. Tracking student data would better inform the institutions regarding the support needed and the type of support that would be most helpful. As discussed, graduate data are more difficult to track than undergraduate data, but it is by no means impossible. Collecting and examining this data would lead to greater emphasis on graduate persistence, as the data would be accessible and easily compared longitudinally. Further, creating standards for comparing graduate persistence data across multiple institutions would bring an even greater emphasis to this data from numerous institutions, though this likely goes beyond the scope of any single institution's influence.

A fourth recommendation is to identify and to celebrate the successes on campuses with regard to graduate persistence. This could be a result of data collection,

effective strategies, and implementing them in other environments on campus. Acknowledging these efforts and attainments may reveal differences among opportunities available for students when graduate education is a more prominent part of the institutional mission.

Summary

Graduate persistence differs significantly and fundamentally from undergraduate persistence. Students come in to each degree level with diverse experiences, expectations, and maturity levels, leading to various methodologies required for success at each level. Comprehensive public institutions typically have a strong focus on undergraduate programs and persistence, with a reduced emphasis on graduate persistence. Master's degree programs comprise the bulk of graduate enrollments at comprehensive public institutions; thus, the advantage of studying how best to facilitate persistence to degree completion for these students is beneficial for all parties involved. Students benefit from earning a credential that can help them advance professionally, educationally, or personally, while public universities fulfill their mission of educational access and maximize tuition revenue in a time of decreasing state funding. Schools also assume a moral obligation to students they admit to provide a supportive environment that provides the greatest possible opportunity for student success.

Students in master's programs indicate their interactions with two groups – graduate faculty and their peers – are significant influences as they continually make decisions related to persistence. These students also report self-motivation as having a significant impact, allowing them to overcome barriers and challenges both internal and external to the university. Graduate persistence, similar to graduate programs, is highly

nuanced. It is difficult to characterize it in a grand, sweeping way, as it represents a varied, individual challenge for both students and institutions. Institutionally, simple changes could have positive effects on the persistence of students in master's programs. These changes are not insurmountable operationally or technologically but would require a shift in the way in which graduate education is perceived and prioritized, which could be the greatest challenge of all.

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APPENDIX A:

Semistructured Interview Protocol

- Where did you earn your undergraduate degree?
- What was your undergraduate major?
- What graduate program are you enrolled in/did you graduate from?
- At your undergraduate institution, do you feel undergraduate retention was an institutional priority?
- Why did you think undergraduate retention was/was not a priority?
- Did/does your graduate institution make graduate retention a priority?
- Do you feel the emphasis on retention was different at the two levels of study?
- How do/did retention efforts at the graduate level influence your decision to complete your academic program?
- As a graduate student, what was the biggest source of social support?
- Was this source of support internal or external to the university?
- How does/did this source of support influence your decision to complete your academic program?
- Why did you choose your graduate program?
- (If a current student) Why do you plan/not plan to continue in your program?
- If a former student/graduate) Why did you/did you not complete your program?
- What are the most significant challenges you face/faced as a graduate student?
- Describe your experience in your undergraduate program.
- Do you feel you had more mechanisms of support available to you as an undergraduate than as a graduate student? What were they?
- Do you believe you are/were more prepared to persist in a graduate program than in your undergraduate program?
- What support services (or types of support services) would you like to see/have seen as a graduate student?
- What support services were useful to you as an undergraduate? Were those services available during your graduate program?
- What support services were/are available to you as a graduate student that you did not have as an undergraduate?

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project Title: Graduate Persistence Study
Investigator: Scott Gordon, Educational Leadership Doctoral Program, scott.gordon@wku.edu

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Western Kentucky University. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project.

The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask any questions you have to help you understand the project. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read this explanation and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have.

If you then decide to participate in the project, please sign this form in the presence of the person who explained the project to you. You should be given a copy of this form to keep.

1.   **Nature and Purpose of the Project:** The purpose of this project is to examine perception of efforts of universities to encourage graduate student retention, versus the perception of the institution's undergraduate student retention efforts.

2.   **Explanation of Procedures:** This study will consist of document research and semi-structured interviews.

3.   **Discomfort and Risks:** There are no known risks to participating in this project.

4.   **Benefits:** There are no personal benefits to participation in this study beyond advancing the knowledge that exists on this topic.

5.   **Confidentiality:** Confidentiality will be maintained on all information obtained via interviews. No personally identifiable information will be reported, and all data will be securely kept.

6.   **Refusal/Withdrawal:** Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty.

You understand also that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and you believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____
Witness   Date

  • I agree to the audio/video recording of the research. *(Initial here)* _____

THE DATED APPROVAL ON THIS CONSENT FORM INDICATES THAT
THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY
THE WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Paul Mooney, Human Protections Administrator
TELEPHONE: (270) 745-2129

WKU IRB# 16-238
Approval - 5/17/2016
End Date - 9/30/2016
Expedited
Original - 12/15/2015

Interview Coding Nodes

Node	References
Academic rigor	9
Adjustment to graduate school	5
Age	14
Attending graduate school	7
Barrier to graduate education	39
Barrier to undergraduate education	2
Best practices	1
Break between undergraduate and graduate	7
Career advancement	8
Challenges to graduate persistence	13
Connected to peers	16
Connections to campus	37
Cost	12
Course availability as a barrier	4
Decision to attend graduate school	0
Different retention emphasis at different levels	9
Differentiated graduate support programs for different groups	1
Disconnected from campus	16
Disconnected from peers	12
Doctoral program	10

Doubts about graduate program	4
Drop out of undergraduate program	1
Ease of graduate program	8
External motivation	9
Face-to-face class	7
Factor positively influencing persistence	17
Family	20
Friends	10
Frustration	8
Full-time graduate student	4
General improvement suggestion	32
Graduate assistantship	13
Graduate degree in progress	1
Graduate faculty support	89
Graduate institution selection	14
Graduate mechanisms of support	9
Graduate orientation	8
Graduate program	32
Graduate retention	7
Graduate retention as institutional priority	16
Graduate retention not a priority	8
Graduate retention not an institutional priority	15
Graduate school similar to a community college	2

Graduate student organization	9
Graduate student recruitment	2
Graduate support services	1
Information for graduate students	2
Institutional size	8
International students	13
Internships	2
Lack of graduate support services	2
More prepared for graduate persistence	14
New start	1
No break between undergraduate and graduate programs	3
Nontraditional undergraduate student	6
Online classes as a barrier	4
Online courses - convenience	27
Outcomes	34
Peer support	44
Persistence support - graduate over undergraduate	3
Personal goal	2
Positive undergraduate experience	2
Private undergraduate institution	6
Programs at different institutions	5
Programs at same institution	9
Religious-affiliated school	1

Research	13
Retention decrease	3
Retention initiatives	1
Self-motivation	63
Similar retention emphasis at different levels	2
Size of graduate program	5
Size of graduate school	2
Size of undergraduate program	1
Social events - institutional	7
Social media	3
Social support	9
Stress	4
Technology as a barrier	8
Time management	29
Transfer student	7
Unawareness of graduate support	31
Undergraduate major	14
Undergraduate major selection	1
Undergraduate mechanisms of support	45
Undergraduate retention as institutional priority	18
Undergraduate retention not an institutional priority	8
Undergraduate retention prioritized	2
Undergraduate-focused campus	2

Unmotivated peers	10
Work or job as a barrier	16

Strategic Planning

- Academic Excellence Committee Meeting Minutes October 2014 (MSU)

- MSU Comprehensive Plan August 2011 (MSU)

- Murray State University Strategic Plan (2015-2022) (MSU)

- Scholarship, Research, and Creative Thought Committee Town Hall October 2014 (MSU)

- Scholarship, Research, and Creative Thought Committee Meeting Minutes October 2014 (MSU)

- Strategic Directions Statement May 2011 (MSU)

- Strategic Priorities with Budget Emphasis August 2016 (MSU)

- Scholarship, Research, and Creative Thought Committee Meeting Minutes November 2014 (MSU)

- Student Success Committee Meeting Minutes October 2014 (MSU)

- Student Success Initiative Meeting Minutes October 2014 (MSU)

- Student Success Initiative Town Hall October 2014 (MSU)

- 15 Years: 15 Points of Progress 1997-2012 (WKU)

- 1997 – 2002 The Beginning of a Transformation (WKU)

- A New Century of Spirit 2007 (WKU)

- Challenging the Spirit 1998-1999 Progress Report (WKU)

- Challenging the Spirit Performance Indicators 2002-2006 (WKU)

- Challenging the Spirit Strategic Plan 2003-06 (WKU)

- Challenging the Spirit 2004-2005 Progress Report (WKU)

- Challenging the Spirit Strategic Plan for 2005/06 – 2007/08 (WKU)

- Challenging the Spirit Strategic Plan for 2007/08 – 2011/12 (WKU)

- Challenging the Spirit 2013 Progress Report (WKU)

- Challenging the Spirit Action Plan 2012/13 to 2017/18 (WKU)

- Challenging the Spirit Action Plan Progress Report Summary 2015 (WKU)

- Draft Strategic Goals and Objectives December 2011 (WKU)

- Notice of Open Forums March 2013 (WKU)

- Post Open Forum re: WKU Guide for 2010-12 (WKU)

- Retention Update January 2013 (WKU)

- Revised WKU Strategic Plan 2010-12 (DRAFT) and Notice of Campus-wide Forum (WKU)

- Strategic Guide for 2010-12 (WKU)

- Western Kentucky University Strategic Plan 1998-2003 (WKU)

Fact Books

- Fact Book 1999-2000 (MSU)

- Fact Book 2000-2001 (MSU)

- Fact Book 2001-2002 (MSU)

- Fact Book 2002-2003 (MSU)

- Fact Book 2003-2004 (MSU)

- Fact Book 2004-2005 (MSU)

- Fact Book 2005-2006 (MSU)

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- Fact Book 2013-2014 (MSU)

- Fact Book 2014-2015 (MSU)

- Fact Book 2015-2016 (MSU)

- 2007 Fact Book (WKU)

- 2008 Fact Book (WKU)

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- 2010 Fact Book (WKU)

- 2011 Fact Book (WKU)

- 2012 Fact Book (WKU)

- 2013 Fact Book (WKU)

- 2014 Fact Book (WKU)

- 2015 Fact Book (WKU)

Convocation Speeches

- Convocation 1999 (WKU)

- Convocation 2000 (WKU)

- Convocation 2001 (WKU)

- Convocation 2002 (WKU)

- Convocation 2003 (WKU)

- Convocation 2005 (WKU)

- Convocation 2006 (WKU)

- Convocation 2007 (WKU)

- Convocation 2008 (WKU)

- Convocation 2009 (WKU)

- Convocation 2013 (WKU)

Annual Reports

- Academic Affairs 2014 Highlights (MSU)

- Building Quality – Moving Murray State Forward 2015 (MSU)

- Western Kentucky University Annual Report 1997-98 (WKU)

- Western Kentucky University Annual Report 2002-03 (WKU)

- Western Kentucky University Annual Report 2003-04 (WKU)

- Western Kentucky University Annual Report 2004-05 (WKU)

- Western Kentucky University Centennial Annual Report 2005-06 (WKU)

- Western Kentucky University Annual Report 2007-08 (WKU)

- Western Kentucky University Annual Report 2009-10 (WKU)

- Western Kentucky University Annual Progress Report 2013-14 (WKU)

State of the University

- 2015 State of the University Address: 93 Years of Progress (MSU)

Presidential Speech

- Improving the Educational Attainment of Kentuckians at All Levels (WKU)

APPENDIX E:

Interview Question to Research Question Crosswalk

Interview Questions	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
Where did you earn your undergraduate degree?	X		
What was your undergraduate major?	X		
What graduate program are you enrolled in/did you graduate from?	X		
At your undergraduate institution, do you feel undergraduate retention was an institutional priority?		X	
Why did you think undergraduate retention was/was not a priority?		X	
Did/does your graduate institution make graduate retention a priority?		X	
Do you feel the emphasis on retention was different at the two levels of study?		X	
How do/did retention efforts at the graduate level influence your decision to complete your academic program?	X	X	X
As a graduate student, what was the biggest source of social support?	X		X
Was this source of support internal or external to the university?	X		X
How does/did this source of support influence your decision to complete your academic program?	X		X
Why did you choose your graduate program?	X		

(If a current student) Why do you plan/not plan to continue in your program?	X		
(If a former student/graduate) Why did you/did you not complete your program?	X		
What are the most significant challenges you face/faced as a graduate student?	X		
Describe your experience in your undergraduate program.	X		
Do you feel you had more mechanisms of support available to you as an undergraduate than as a graduate student? What were they?	X	X	
Do you believe you are/were more prepared to persist in a graduate program than in your undergraduate program?	X	X	
What support services (or types of support services) would you like to see/have seen as a graduate student?			X
What support services were useful to you as an undergraduate? Were those services available during your graduate program?			X
What support services were/are available to you as a graduate student that you did not have as an undergraduate?			X