

SNAPSHOT

CAWG

of
Student Experiences

Crossing the Ph.D.
Finish Line

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

2011 - ISSUE 1

JANUARY

This Campus Assessment Working Group (CAWG) Snapshot is based on the University of Maryland Doctoral Student Survey, administered online by the Retention and Completion Subgroup in Spring 2009. Of the 4,423 enrolled doctoral students, 1,377 (31%) completed the survey. The following analyses focus on the 652 respondents who identified themselves as being in the dissertation stage of their program. Use caution when generalizing.

Who's on the way to timely PhD degree completion?

Nearly all the dissertation-stage respondents (90%) said that at the time they entered their PhD program, they expected it would take them four to six years to complete their degree. Respondents were categorized into four groups based on the combination of their self-reported expected time to degree, degree completion status, enrollment status one year after the survey administration, and number of semesters elapsed since their start in their program. Respondents who had completed a degree were considered "Graduated" regardless of the time needed to complete it. Those who were not enrolled in Spring 2010 were considered "Not Registered." The remaining enrolled respondents were categorized as "On Target" if they were within their expected number of semesters or "Off Target" if they were enrolled beyond their anticipated number of semesters.

	N	Graduated	On target	Off target	Not registered
Overall	652	28%	58%	9%	4%
Age group					
30 or less	327	27%	68%	2%	3%
31+	325	30%	48%	16%	6%
Employment Status					
Employed full-time	139	34%	50%	14%	2%
Not employed full-time	510	27%	60%	8%	5%
Program Discipline					
STEM	389	33%	57%	7%	4%
Non-STEM	220	21%	59%	15%	6%

No significant associations by race/citizenship and gender.

Overall, the majority of respondents had either graduated (28%) or were on target to do so within their own expected timeline (58%). Age, employment, and program discipline are associated with the progress categories, while gender and race/citizenship are not. Significant differences are noted in bold in the table above. For example, two-thirds (68%) of the respondents who are 30 or younger are in the "on target" group as compared to half (48%) of those who are 31 or older.

What hinders and what helps?

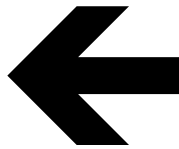
Respondents were asked to indicate their top three current sources of funding, and whether potential barriers were an obstacle to their academic progress. Possible associations between these funding and obstacle variables and respondents' progress were investigated.

As of the time of the survey, the Off Target and Not Registered students...

Relied more on non-assistantship employment for primary funding.

Relied less on assistantships, fellowships, and/or scholarships for primary funding.

Reported at a *higher* rate that the following are an obstacle: Their advisor, their academic department, family obligations other than childcare, and lack of workspace.



As of the time of the survey, the On Target and Graduated students...

Relied more on assistantships, fellowships, and/or scholarships for primary funding.

Relied less on non-assistantship employment for primary funding.

Reported at a *lower* rate that the following are an obstacle: Their advisor, their academic department, family obligations other than childcare, and lack of workspace.



Items not significantly associated with progress categories include:

Loans, savings and/or family funding, lack of affordable housing, availability of daycare for children, immigration laws or regulations, and lack of study space.

What explains doctoral students' satisfaction?

Associations between respondents' program experiences and their satisfaction with the doctoral experience at UM were examined. In addition to reported advisor and department obstacles and frequency of meeting with one's advisor, the following scales were developed as measures of respondents' program experiences:

General advising satisfaction

Advising regarding course selection, advising received during first year, advising about qualifying exams/papers, advising about oral exams, and advising about other program requirements

(Cont'd)

Faculty engagement/accessibility

Inclusion in intellectual community, accessibility of faculty, encouragement of student-faculty collaboration, timely feedback from faculty on academic work, sufficient feedback on academic progress, advising regarding course selection, and first-year advising

Dissertation advising

Advising in developing thesis topic/proposal, advising/supervision of dissertation, criticism/feedback from advisor to improve scholarship, appropriate response from advisor to requests for feedback, and response from advisor in a timely manner to proceed with work

Publication support

Help preparing work for publication, advice about suitable publication outlets, help understanding/responding to comments from reviewers, and contact with editors to encourage consideration of work

These factors explain far more of the students’ overall perceptions of their experience than the demographic and institutional variables* controlled for in analyses. Because demographic and institutional factors play little or no role, only the results associated with students’ program experiences are highlighted below. As indicated in the table below, faculty engagement/accessibility consistently has a moderate positive (→→) relationship with the two measures of satisfaction. In contrast, reporting the department as an obstacle has a moderate negative (←←) relationship.

Additionally, a follow-up analysis showed that having more-than-positive ratings of dissertation advising is associated with an increased chance of graduating or being on target relative to being off target or not registered.

Factors	Enjoy being a doctoral student	Receiving a quality education
Reported advisor as obstacle	←	
Reported department as obstacle	←←	←←
Reported frequency of meeting with advisor		
General advising satisfaction		
Faculty engagement/accessibility	→→	→→
Dissertation advising		→→
Publication support		

Statistically significant effects are indicated as follows:
 (→) weak positive (→→) moderate positive (←) weak negative (←←) moderate negative

* The following demographic and institutional factors were controlled for in analyses: Gender, race/citizenship, academic discipline, gender/discipline interaction, race/discipline interaction, age, RA and TA assistantships, full-time employment, and elapsed semesters since entry.

Questions to Consider

- ⇒ What aspects of assistantships, fellowships, or scholarships enable doctoral students to graduate or stay on target? Are there specific programmatic experiences that come with these awards that assist students in making progress towards degree completion (e.g., funding, mentorship components, meetings with other doctoral students, etc.)?
- ⇒ What specific faculty engagement experiences do students find most helpful? Who provides this support (e.g., advisor, other faculty in the department, other faculty on campus, or other mentor)? How can degree programs enhance these faculty engagement experiences?
- ⇒ What is behind student reports of their advisors and/or departments as obstacles? How can colleges and departments better understand and address the obstacles students attribute to their advisor and/or department?
- ⇒ What influences the larger proportion of STEM PhD students completing the PhD within the year following the survey administration?
- ⇒ Is being “off target” necessarily a negative outcome? Are the targets realistic? Can being so focused on a target date discourage exploration, intellectual challenges, or enriching experiences?

For more information ...

Related Snapshots and Reports:

Campus Assessment Working Group (CAWG)

The Strategic Plan & Graduate Education:
Comparing Campus Objectives and Student
Perceptions Snapshot

www.umd.edu/cawg

The University of Maryland Doctoral Student
Survey 2009 Report

Upcoming Snapshots:

Behavior and Responsibility in the Classroom