PROMOTING PHD SUCCESS

The following practices are adapted from the article, “Ph.D. Completion Project: Policies and Practices Implemented by Partner Institutions to Promote Student Success” in vol. 42, No. 10 2009 of the Communicator, the newsletter of the Council of Graduate Schools. Most programs are doing most of these things now, but there is always more that can be done to improve retention and completion.

1. In recruiting and admitting students it is of primary importance to assure good fit between the needs, interests and abilities of the applicant and your program by:

a. Making personal contact via campus visits or on-line discussions (such as on Skype) with applicants.

b. Being sure that the program website is accurate and up to date as well as thorough enough to give any prospective applicant the information needed to make a good, informed decision about both applying and accepting an offer of admission.

c. Making the program’s admissions decision based on the applicant’s fit with the program. This may involve assuring that there is a faculty member within the program who would be interested in working with the student.

2. Provide good mentoring and advising for doctoral students.

a. Develop resources for students. This will assure that students are familiar with the faculty, courses requirements, other degree requirements (such as qualifying exams and internships), and procedures.

i. If you have not already done so, provide a comprehensive orientation for new students at the program level.

ii. Make sure you have a handbook that is complete and up to date. A template for this can be found on this resource site.

iii. Implement mechanisms to track student progress that integrate course records, student input, faculty evaluations, and benchmarks, such as exams.
b. Establish students with an adviser from the very beginning. This can be the graduate chair or a temporary adviser, but should be someone who can guide the student to a permanent adviser as soon as possible.

c. Implement an annual progress review so that students know where they stand. Ideally, a report orally or in writing, should be given to the student. This becomes critical once all course requirements are completed since many doctoral students tend to drift at that point and lose contact with the program.

d. Offer junior faculty a chance to learn how to mentor from experienced faculty. There is a mentoring guide on this resource site.

e. Give veteran graduate students a chance to serve as peer mentors to new students. They can be especially useful during orientation.

3. Improve the students’ environment.

a. Provide opportunities for students to interact socially and academically with each other and the faculty year-round.

b. Ask graduate students to serve on the program’s committees, for example, the admission’s committee.

c. Highlight the achievements of students on the program website or newsletter.

d. Encourage some kind of graduate student organization within the program and involvement with the Graduate Student Organization on campus.

4. Enhance scholarly opportunities

a. To recruit top undergraduates into your program, provide research or scholarly opportunities for majors in the program as early as their sophomore year.

b. Encourage faculty to collaborate with students in seeking grants on which they can be funded if the award is received.

c. Provide students with a catalog of research or scholarly opportunities in which the faculty are engaged to show them what the faculty are doing.
d. Streamline course requirements to free them to engage in scholarly work earlier in the program. For this reason, it is helpful to them to have courses in methodology and analysis required early.

5. Support and utilize campus wide efforts to assist graduate students.

a. Make use of existing resources, such as this Graduate Division resource website where important data and information are located.

b. Encourage students to participate in events sponsored by the Center for Teaching Excellence and the Graduate Division, such as PFF and dissertation completion workshops.

c. Encourage faculty to contribute their expertise to PFF and other events for graduate students so they contribute to the overall sense of a community of scholars on campus.

d. Encourage graduate students to interact with students outside of the program, for example, by taking a course outside of the department or seeking funding in other areas of the campus.