SETTING EXPECTATIONS AND RESOLVING CONFLICTS IN GRADUATE EDUCATION

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Nationwide, about 50 percent of all doctoral students will not complete their programs. Broad recommendations for interventions over the past four decades have not improved completion rates. Our program, Setting Expectations and Resolving Conflicts, uses a participatory workshop mode and teaches participants interest-based strategies and skills focused on graduate education situations. Evaluated over a six-year period, the program provides a thoughtful and effective way for faculty and graduate students to develop mutually-understood expectations and to resolve interpersonal conflicts when they arise. This program, along with a series of other initiatives, improved doctoral student completion rates at Michigan State University by 6 percent over the past six years.

INTRODUCTION

Graduate education is a fundamental component of higher education. Graduate students and faculty engaged in doctoral studies contribute to the creation, application, dissemination, and preservation of knowledge that benefits society. Doctoral education is a multi-year, resource-intensive process, requiring an investment of time, intellect, monetary resources, and infrastructure. Yet nationwide, about 50 percent of all doctoral students will not complete their programs (Bowen and Rudenstine, 1992). Despite the con-
considerable research and the broad recommendations for interventions designed to reduce graduate student attrition, the persistence rate of doctoral students by discipline (on average between 33 percent and 70 percent nationwide) has not changed significantly during the past forty years (Tucker et al, 1964; Bowen and Rudenstine, 1992; Lovitts, 2001; Council of Graduate Schools, 2004).

Why do graduate students leave doctoral programs? Some students do not complete for sound academic or personal reasons—conditions that may be beyond the influence of a graduate program or adviser. However, research indicates that attrition is also related to factors that university and graduate programs can and do influence. Nerad and Miller (1996) report that students cite frustration regarding expectations as a primary reason for leaving within the first two years of advanced study. That is, students are unclear about what is expected of them or perhaps disagree with the expectations. Students who leave later in their programs cite poor adviser-student relations that may lead to interpersonal conflicts, the lack of financial aid, and unsupportive departmental climates—all likely interconnected—as their primary reasons for attrition (Lovitts, 2001; Nerad and Miller, 1996; Tinto, 1993). What do these research findings mean for effectively modifying our practices in graduate education to support student success and completion?

Recently, the Council of Graduate Schools summarized the factors that may lead to doctoral student attrition and, more important, provided suggestions that might help improve program completion rates (Council of Graduate Schools, 2004). Improved socialization and academic integration are cited as two related factors that may increase completion rates. Socialization is the process by which individuals acquire the social knowledge, skills, and dispositions to assume organizational roles and become effective members of their communities (Weidman et al., 2001; Golde, 2000; Baird, 1969).

In higher education, graduate students learn, or fail to learn, the norms and expectations of academic culture, in part, through formal means such as graduate student handbooks or university-stated requirements. But understanding a particular role in any organization requires proactive and reactive communication of expectations between an individual member and his or her "role set" (Jabin, 1987). For graduate students, this role set includes faculty advisers, graduate committee members, other faculty, and student peers. Given the need to communicate with others about roles and expectations, it is not surprising that those who complete the doctoral degree identify academic integration and an understanding of informal expectations as the most important aspects for successful graduate education (Lovitts, 2001). Clarity about expectations results in more accountability on the part of both graduate students and faculty (Hartnett and Katz, 1977). Unclear or unrealistic expectations about the process, milestones, and timeframe of doctoral education also relate to how efficiently doctoral students progress through a program (Kehrhaan et al., 1999).

Further, graduate student relations with faculty, especially the faculty adviser or major professor, are regarded by most doctoral students as the most important aspect of the quality of their graduate experience, but many also report it as "the single most disappointing aspect of their graduate experience" (Harnett and Katz, 1977:647).

Lovitts (2001) reports that students usually understand formal expectations but do not have the same understanding of informal expectations. Formal institutional and program requirements are, however, only a small portion of the expectations that need to be met for successful degree completion. In our inquiry, we found that students were uncertain of some or many of the formal rules and policies found in handbooks, Web sites, and other print media. Thus, even explicit, formal expectations are not necessarily understood by all students. More important, or at least more prevalent, is that students are unclear about the many important behavioral, attitudinal, and cognitive expectations that are implicit.
What we, and other researchers and administrators, “discovered” is that expectations about graduate education—by faculty or by students—are rarely made explicit. And we also know from previous research that students who receive useful early information about program expectations develop better working relationships with faculty and are more committed to the program (Green, *Group and Organization Studies*, 1991). The more explicit these expectations, the better the role accommodation and the more productive these students are as measured by the numbers of future publications (Bauer and Green, 1994). The desire for clearly articulated expectations and role clarification may be partially responsible for the increasing number of labor contracts for graduate teaching assistants that lock into legal language a very explicit set of rules and expectations, at least for a portion of graduate student life.

**ADDRESSING CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND EXPECTATION SETTING AT MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY**

In 1995, the Graduate School at Michigan State University launched a study of practices and perceptions concerning doctoral students on our campus. We convened focus groups of graduate students, faculty, and administrators; surveyed enrolled graduate students; and sought input from the Ombudsman, University Intellectual Integrity Officer, Women’s Resource Center, Faculty Grievance Officer, and officers from the Council of Graduate Students. We found that the lack of mutually understood expectations created the greatest potential for interpersonal conflict in the graduate education process—findings substantiated by other studies (Golde, 2000; Golde and Dore, 2001; Lovitts, 2001; Nerad and Miller, 1996). In addition, participants in our study talked about the importance of the student-faculty relationship and the imbalance of power that greatly favors faculty, including such issues as who really makes the rules that are derived from the norms and values of the disciplinary culture and use or importance of graduate students in faculty tenure, promotion, merit increases, and preparation of grant proposals.

Graduate students specifically requested a more effective method to resolve conflicts with their faculty advisers. Their experiences suggested that the options available on campus were designed and effective for undergraduates but did not adequately address issues specific to graduate education (i.e., inability to simply change course sections, the relatively small number of faculty with whom students interact, the norms of the disciplinary cultures, the nature of the long-term professional relationship). In fact, several graduate students in our focus groups implored “just tell us the rules so we can follow them.”

Aware of the impact of unresolved interpersonal conflicts, unmet expectations, inadequate socialization, and academic integration as primary causes of noncompletion, we developed a program for graduate students that would assist them in setting expectations, in understanding the expectations that faculty have of them, and in resolving conflicts they may encounter. The intent of the program was to develop interest-based strategies and skills that graduate students and faculty could use in setting mutually-understood expectations and, if necessary, resolving conflict between them (Fisher et al., 1991). The ultimate goal was to improve doctoral student completion rates. We reasoned that if graduate students could use interest-based strategies to help them understand the expectations that faculty have, the likelihood of experiencing interpersonal conflicts would decrease. Similarly, if faculty members used this approach to set expectations, the likelihood of these expectations being understood would increase. Of course, we realized that everything is not open to such discussion (e.g., completing a dissertation, taking comprehensive exams as required of all doctoral students).

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and that conflict over ideas, as opposed to interpersonal conflict, advances knowledge. We were also careful not to simply blame faculty for all of the inadequacies of the system. However, with their power comes responsibility. Students, like faculty, have personal and professional responsibilities, and our program is designed to assist them in understanding and successfully integrating those responsibilities as they progress in their programs.

**INTEREST-BASED STRATEGIES**

Interest-based strategies to resolve conflicts are used in the public, nonprofit, and private sectors, including faculty mediation services. Roger Fisher and William Ury popularized this approach in their book *Getting to Yes* (1981). The interest-based approach emerged out of integrative theories of negotiation (McKersie and Walton, 2003) with the purpose of fostering interpersonal relationships between two parties. The interest-based negotiation process offers a sensible, productive, and rational way of negotiating and has been used to resolve conflicts, settle differences, set policy, and make decisions in a variety of contexts (Fisher et al., 1991; Friedman, 1990, 1992, 1994).

The strengths of the interest-based approach for graduate education are its focus on flexibility and the fostering of relationships. No two graduate programs are identical, so no two students experience graduate school in quite the same way (Weidman et al., 2001). Interest-based strategies are practical and adaptable to diverse venues and conditions. Thus, these strategies apply to lab-based and document-based research and cut across the academic disciplines from biochemistry, to packaging, to American literature. The focus on the fostering of relationships is critical in graduate education, where the relationship between graduate students and faculty, especially major professors, advisers, and guidance committee members, can make or break a student’s advanced studies and future in the discipline. Unclear expectations or substantive disagreement can lead to conflicts that result in serious delay or noncompletion.

Interest-based strategies focus on the underlying interests, values, and concerns of the involved parties, with an emphasis on crafting options that satisfy multiple parties and their interests. This approach is different from traditional strategies in which the focus is on the position of each party—positions that each party may strongly defend from attack and to which they become increasingly committed (Fisher and Ury, 1981, and Ury et al., 1988). In the traditional “positional” strategy, agreement may reflect a mechanical spelling-out of the differences between final positions rather than a solution carefully crafted to meet the legitimate interests of each (a compromise, in fact, may be struck that pleases no one). Not infrequently, positional strategies often strain and sometimes shatter the relationship between the parties—an outcome in graduate education that may often lead to noncompletion, when the conflict is between a graduate student and key faculty member(s). How can we apply the interest-based approach to improving the graduate education enterprise?

**THE “SETTING EXPECTATIONS AND RESOLVING CONFLICTS” PROGRAM**

In August 1996, the Graduate School offered its first conflict resolution workshop, “Using the Interest-based Approaches to Set Expectations and Resolve Conflict Between Graduate Students and Faculty Advisors.” After seven years of workshops, we continue to hold “sold-out” sessions at Michigan State University and at other universities. Initially focused on using interest-based strategies to resolve conflicts, we quickly expanded the program to use this same approach for setting clear expectations to prevent conflicts. In addition, upon the advice of our Advisory Board (see Acknowledgments) and at the request of graduate students, we also established a companion workshop to teach the elements of effective communication.
Interest-based strategies seem simple and straightforward, but they take practice to perfect. Accordingly, the workshop provides an interactive learning experience for graduate students to practice the interest-based approach in a "safe" environment. In faculty groups or groups of both graduate students and faculty, the same interactive process permits skills acquisition as well as creative problem-solving. In order to stimulate discussion, all of the facilitated interactions use brief video vignettes that depict realistic encounters between graduate students and faculty. The use of video vignettes makes it possible for students (and faculty) to talk about personal or emotional situations in a more objective way and with "actors" other than themselves.

For example, the following is a script from one of sixty-three vignettes that we recorded for use in this program:

Professor: Scott, I think this is great! It is ready for publication.

Scott, graduate student: That's great. I was just at the national conference and the editor of the Western Journal of Quantum Quality said we could have it out by June.

Professor: The Western Journal of Quantum Quality? That would be a waste of a great article. Nothing from this lab has ever been printed in anything but a first-tier international journal.

Scott: But Dr. Mody, those things take forever. I need it out now for my job search.

Dr. Mody: Not in that journal, not from this lab, not with my name on it!

Participants are coached in small groups or in a single large group to state the issue highlighted in the vignette (e.g., where to publish the paper), the position that each person in the video

established (e.g., the specific journals), the expectations that each participant stated or left unstated (e.g., ask for my advice, be proud of me for taking the initiative), all of the other individuals who might be affected by the conflict (e.g., the editors of the journals, other graduate students in the lab, etc.), and the interests that every identified individual might have (e.g., reputation, job search, future funding, maintaining professional relationships, etc.). The group then brainstorms options that might work to resolve the conflict. These options are evaluated by the group, or by small subgroups, in reference to how they effectively address the stated issue and how they promote the interests of the major stakeholders.

Three to four vignettes are used in a 2½-hour workshop. These different vignettes provide varying contexts in which to apply the strategies and practice the skills. The use of different vignettes also provides a degree of socialization by demonstrating phases of the graduate education process and where conflicts may arise. Invariably, at least one participant takes us aside after the workshop and asks, "How did you find out about that situation?" indicating that the vignettes reasonably approximate reality.

Once participants grasp the initial steps of the interest-based approach, they are lead through an exercise in which they "roll the movie back" and discuss what might have been done to prevent the conflict from occurring—what we term "the setting of mutually-understood expectations." Again, the solutions are matched against the issue at hand and the interests of the various parties.

Facilitators augment the discussion of expectation-setting by asking questions such as:

1. How should the rights of students and the rights of professors be balanced regarding research products and publications?
2. How can students best balance their multiple roles and responsibilities? What help is available to aid students when roles and demands conflict?

3. What University policies and practices exist that might help resolve this situation?

4. What might have prevented this conflict from arising?

Students are encouraged to use the skills and understanding of the interest-based process and strategies in preparation for committee meetings or for discussions with their major professor. They also come to understand that waiting too long before attempting to resolve a conflict usually results in complicating the issues and that there are many other people who have a stake in the outcome of their conflict—a point that faculty participants admit they did not often understand either! Faculty members are encouraged to use the interest-based process to set expectations during discussions of program changes, guidance committee meetings, etc.

Evaluation
Formative and summative evaluation was conducted throughout the 3.5-year FIPSE-funded development phase and for the following two years. At the beginning of each of 57 workshops we sponsored at MSU and elsewhere during the period of FIPSE evaluation, we asked participants to complete a registration form as part of our evaluation of the program. A total of 561 faculty, 737 graduate students, and 30 postdocs—1,392 individuals—participated. To evaluate the immediate impact of the workshops on cognitive and affective learning goals, we administered a survey to participants immediately following the workshops. Formative evaluation findings led to multiple content and delivery changes to improve the workshops. The following is a sample of the summative results:

- Two thirds of participants could correctly state an expectation as a well-defined interest; 62 percent of the respondents could articulate an expectation that would meet the interests of both parties.

- The vast majority (89 percent) of participants stated that they were ready to use the interest-based negotiation skills presented in the workshop.

- Eighty-three percent said they would use these skills if they had an opportunity to practice them more.

In addition,

- Nearly all participants (94 percent) found the workshop to be somewhat or very helpful in recognizing their own expectations of graduate education.

- Eighty-eight percent found the workshop to be somewhat or very helpful in their understanding of what others (depending on the respondent, either their major professors or their graduate students) might expect of them.

- Ninety-two percent said the workshop was very or somewhat helpful in their thinking about the long-term impacts of relationships with major professors or graduate students.

We measured long-term understanding and use of the approaches through a survey administered to workshop participants several months after attending the workshop. Many graduate student participants reported sharing their expectations with their major professors more often than before attending the workshop and were now more likely to identify parties and their interests that were associated with expectations.
Below are typical open-ended responses from workshop participants completing the evaluation instruments:

- I am just beginning my graduate program, having only completed two courses so far. I felt the program gave me some heads-up things to consider as I work with faculty members in setting goals and expectations. I have not had any negative experiences yet and found the situations that other participants shared to be helpful as I think about being proactive and assertive. Perhaps I can avoid some of the conflicts that might otherwise have occurred.

- There are so many things that professors take for granted that you are learning by osmosis. Simple things like the value of making an agenda, taking outlines, things I had never thought of before but may have seemed obvious to others. It helped me with my committee meetings, my weekly meetings with my adviser, with my prelims, and now as I am preparing to write and defend my dissertation.

- I was exposed to this workshop during my first semester on campus and I think it's one of the best things I did in terms of shaping my expectations for my doctoral plan of study. It helped me to realize that conflict is inevitable and that even though I'm a student I can negotiate with faculty. I learned to look for the [reasons] underlying . . . positions. . . . I've used these skills in setting expectations for my assistantships and, thus far, conflicts have been handled before they escalate.

Over the past few years, we also conducted our workshop on a variety of campuses and for the Council of Graduate Schools pre-conference workshops prior to the annual meeting and also during the CGS New Deans Summer Institute. We are currently in the process of making the program more widely available.

**SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS**

By using interest-based strategies to set mutually-understood expectations within graduate education, the implicit can be made explicit—a focus since the beginning of this project; faculty and graduate students can bring clarity and understanding to the non-negotiable issues within their graduate program (e.g., writing a dissertation, completing comprehensive exams); and find solution(s) to those issues that are negotiable and that meet multiple interests (e.g., specific dissertation topics, workload, professional development opportunities). An interest-based approach to setting expectations can prevent conflict from occurring—conflict that can lead to an unsuccessful faculty-graduate student relationship and to other consequences (e.g., loss of work, unproductive use of grant resources, litigation) for faculty, graduate students, and graduate programs in general. The underlying principles of the interest-based approach, if fully practiced and applied to the expectation setting by both graduate students and faculty advisers, will positively influence the socialization process of the graduate student and the benefits of graduate education on which faculty advisers often depend for their own success.

The follow-up evaluation data strongly indicate that the interest-based approach used within a participatory delivery setting has great promise in the graduate education enterprise. By using an interest-based approach to set expectations and resolve conflict, graduate students and faculty have a better chance of maintaining, and possibly enhancing, their mutually beneficial relationship. In contrast to broad, general recommendations to improve doctoral student completion, our program represents an explicit intervention grounded in the most current research on the topic.

Although graduate student retention is the ultimate evaluative measure, isolation of variables that may prove effective in improving degree completion is very difficult and, perhaps, impossible. Despite the obstacle of direct assessment of the impact of this program, we can report a 6 percent increase in
doctoral completion across the MSU campus since 1996. We focused on students’ intentions to complete their degree and their satisfaction with the faculty-student relationship as reasonable proxies for retention. We continue to work with graduate program directors and the campus Ombudsman to determine if students who have participated in our program are able to better resolve interpersonal conflicts or at least if they come prepared to talk having carefully thought about the issues using an interest-based approach. We also focused on tracking the completion of each student participant as compared to the general completion rate in each college.

Doctoral education is a system. Our workshop, therefore, is an integral part of a set of initiatives implemented by the Graduate School to encourage doctoral student completion. Some of these initiatives, still in effect today, include factoring doctoral completion rates into the allocation of graduate office fellowship dollars, educating graduate secretaries as well as graduate program directors about the data on doctoral completion, reviewing and improving departmental graduate handbooks to improve the setting of expectations, using completion data as a specific part of graduate program review, and reminders and templates for progress reports. The contribution of each of these initiatives, including our Setting Expectations and Resolving Conflicts Workshop, to the improvement of doctoral student completion at MSU is not known. Despite the lack of precise data, the positive feedback that we receive from participants weeks and months after a workshop sustains our efforts as we continue to develop this program.

It is our belief that by applying the interest-based approach to the clarification and setting of expectations, the frequency and intensity of conflict between graduate students and faculty will be reduced. It is evident that the implicit nature of expectations within graduate education can easily lead to misunderstandings, differences in interpretation, unmet expectations, and, in many cases, interpersonal conflict between graduate students and faculty. Reduction or prevention of interpersonal conflict between graduate students and their faculty advisers can only contribute to improving the retention and successful program completion of graduate students, an issue of top importance for graduate programs across the country.

We expect the program to be more widely available once we have completed the field tests that will help us determine its exportability. More information about our program can be found at http://grad.msu.edu/conflict.htm.

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