



Ph.D. Completion Project Strategies for Success: Exit Surveys and Exit Interviews

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About UMBC

- Research University
- 43 years old
- Suburban Campus near BWI Airport
- \$90 M in grants and contracts
- Strong in science, technology, mathematics, and engineering (STEM)
- 12,300 students
 - 9,600 undergraduate
 - 2,700 graduate (750 Ph.D. students)

Ph.D. Completion Project

- Research Partner: Phases I & II.
- All 24 Ph.D. programs participating in intervention initiatives.
- Fully integrated with our AGEP project.
- Long version of exit survey put online from the beginning using Remark Software. Approx. 17 minutes to complete survey.
- Initially gave option of paper or online version of survey. Now online only (12/08).

Graduating Students: Initial Strategy and Results

- Sent letter with paper exit survey to graduating students explaining survey and asking them to complete and return. Gave link to online version and instructions for accessing.
- Sent reminder email with link to online version.
- Achieved survey completion rate of 21%.

Graduating Students: Current Strategy and Results

- Linked completion of this survey with Survey of Earned Doctorates through single letter asking graduates to complete them.
- Completion of SED is now required for graduation however both surveys are on graduation checklist. Reminders sent out 2 weeks before final deadline.
- Website was made more user-friendly with both surveys listed together.
- Now 85% complete Ph.D. Completion Project exit survey (100% complete SED).

Non-Completers: Initial Strategy and Results

- Students are asked to complete a withdrawal form but most simply leave without informing the Graduate School.
 - We have found that the department was aware of the student's plans in most cases.
- Exit survey and letter was mailed and emailed to all students who submitted withdrawal form and those who had not registered for 2 consecutive semesters.
- Achieved survey completion rate of 5%.

Non-Completers: Current Strategy and Results

- Ph.D. Completion Project Coordinator contacts all students by phone to see if they are willing to participate in a 10-minute exit interview.
 - If they say “no” she asks when would be a better time.
 - Most (87%) ultimately agree to an interview.
- After interview is completed she asks if they are willing to complete the online survey.
- Survey completion rates increased to 18% of non-completers.

Phone Exit Interviews

Data: Non-Completers

- 31 participants:
 - Entrance dates span from 1998-2007
 - Average time to departure – 2 years
 - Average GPA: 3.07
 - Nine departments
 - Full- and part-time students
- 4 refused to complete survey.
- 34% of those who said yes ultimately completed survey.

What Did We Learn From Exit Interviews?

- Departing students really do want to express their views about their experiences.
 1. Balancing school with other issues
 2. Leave early without seeking advice (despite having an advisor)
 3. Some no future plans while others attend graduate school elsewhere
- Can gather some information even from those who will not complete the survey.

What Did We Learn From Process?

- Incorporating exit survey into degree clearance process enhanced response rate for completers.
- Doing exit interviews with non-completers **BEFORE** asking them to complete exit survey increased response rate.

What Did We Learn Overall?

- Ph.D. Completion Project helped us understand the types of reporting and data analysis needed. This was used in implementation of PeopleSoft Student Administration system.
- Helped us improve our website and communication with students and graduate program faculty/staff on withdrawal process

Conclusions and Future Activities

- While our participation rates have increased for non-completers we still need to do more.
 - Use PeopleSoft to identify students who do not register for 2 consecutive semesters in addition to using withdrawal forms.
 - Work with departments to identify non-completers by doing better audit of those on Leave of Absence status.
- More streamlined audit of progressions milestones should help reduce attrition by identifying possible non-completers sooner.

Conclusions and Future Activities (*cont.*)

- We understand that those who were “asked to leave” may be less inclined to share their experiences.
- Survey analysis once we have larger N.
- More empirical analysis (Survival Analysis).