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Bobbette M. Morgan

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Luis F. Alcocer

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

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Hispanic Doctoral Students Challenges: Qualitative Results

Bobbette M. Morgan, Ed. D. and Luis F. Alcocer, M.A.M.
The University of Texas at Brownsville, College of Education
Brownsville, Texas

Abstract: Fifty doctoral students and graduates of a doctoral program in education on the Mexico border responded to five open ended questions which are part of the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (CID). According to the CID developers, Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel and Hutchings, "the purpose... is to examine the relationship between student experiences in a doctoral program and the outcomes of doctoral education. The responses address the full range of responsibilities which may be expected of a holder of the doctorate, including research, teaching, and the application of knowledge and skills in the discipline to practical problems in the world outside the university." Preliminary analysis of findings indicate that Hispanic doctoral students feel more supported with a structured format to assist them in the development of their proposals, social events to promote bonding of members, and structuring classes to keep cohorts moving forward together through core courses and specialization clusters.

Keywords: Hispanics; doctoral education; graduate studies

Introduction

Major changes to the institution will occur in the fall of 2015. In order to capture a clearly defined picture of the Doctor of Education in Curriculum and Instruction program status, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching survey was distributed to all doctoral students from the beginning of the program in August 2007 through August 2014.

Purpose

The purpose of the study is to analyze our doctoral student responses based on the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (CID) open ended questions from each of five sections. The sections of the survey used focused on the following:

- I. Your Experiences as a Doctoral Student
- II. Your Experiences with Advising and Mentoring
- III. Your Understanding of Your Doctoral Program
- IV. Your Sense of Community
- V. Outcomes of Your Doctoral Program

A focus group of recent graduates (December 2014) was organized to further reflect on the topics covered in the survey's open ended questions. Qualitative summaries of written feedback and oral reflections from the focus group are shared. Quantitative results are forthcoming.

Participants

The convenient sample consisted of all students who had been accepted into the Doctor of Education in Curriculum and Instruction program since its approval by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board in July of 2007 through August 2014. Participation by students and graduates of the program was voluntary. Participants were primarily first and second-generation immigrants from Mexico, South America, and Cuba and often the first in their family to attend an institution of higher learning. A 47% response rate is represented by 50 respondents from across the entire sample of 116 surveyed.

Literature Review

The percentage of Hispanics receiving doctorates rose only slightly from 1991 to 2001. Hispanics receiving doctorates in the United States have increased from two to three percent nationally and in Texas from three to five percent. In the U.S. and Texas, Hispanics are proportionally underrepresented in doctoral education in relationship to their numbers in the population. Currently, according to the U.S. Census 2013, 38.4% of Texans are of Hispanic heritage, yet only 3-5 % earned doctorates compared to whites at 80.3% of the state's population having 80% of the completed doctorates (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007).

Not unlike doctoral students in every program in the country, Mexican American doctoral students generally enter their programs with differing interests, strengths, and personal responsibilities that eventually affect their success (Valverde & Rodriguez, 2002). According to Easley, Bianco, and Leech (2012), the strongest motivation (*ganas*: Spanish term for expressing "want to do" or "desire to do" willingly or enthusiastically and also related to attitudes for changes or improvement) issues center on acknowledgment of parental struggle and sacrifice, strong value of family and family history, parental admiration and respect, a desire to repay and pay forward as well as resilience and willingness to persevere.

Nettles and Millet (2006), and Barker (2011) found that Blacks and Latinas/Latinos have higher attrition rates compared to Asian American, international, and White doctoral students. The number of doctorates granted across Texas is disproportionate. According to the document "Doctoral Education in Texas, Part I: Past Trends and Critical Issues," doctoral degrees awarded in 2003, per 100,000 population were the lowest in South Texas (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, July 2004). Because of the underrepresentation of this group in doctoral education, they are also underrepresented in fields that require doctoral degrees, such as in academia, medicine, engineering, and scientific research.

Methodology and Results:

Van Manen's (1990) "hermeneutic phenomenological" approach to sociology provides a basis for assessing students' reflections about the experiences of doctoral students. Van Manen suggests that

...when we raise questions, gather data, describe a phenomenon, and construct textual interpretations, we do so as researchers who stand in the world in a pedagogic way. Pedagogy requires a phenomenological sensitivity to the lived experience...a hermeneutic ability to make interpretive sense of the phenomena of the lifeworld...[and]...play with language in order to allow the research process of textual reflection to contribute to one's pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact. (1990, pp. 1-2)

The specific language of the doctoral students and graduates in this study discussing their experiences provides richness and insight that is valuable to gain a true understanding of the shared experience.

The open ended responses collected for this study occurred from May 2014 through August 2014 with students and graduates of the Doctor of Education in Curriculum and Instruction Program at an Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) located on the Mexican/American border in the south most tip of the State of Texas. The instrument used, was developed by the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (CID). The consistency of open ended questions allowed the researchers a starting point to analyze what respondents reflected on about their experiences and responded using narrative to expand their ideas in each of Sections I, II, III, IV and V of the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (CID)survey. The survey was manually entered into the SurveyMonkey website and sent to the potential participants via email. Response information was retrieved from the SurveyMonkey website. Section by section was exported to a Microsoft Excel document. One data analysis sheet was created for each Section of the survey.

With the collaboration of two independent reviewers all answers were first classified as "Mostly Positive", " Neutral " and "Mostly Negative". Responses were also color coded. Green was used for positive, red for negative, and magenta for neutral. Through a second reading, main ideas for every response in every section were identified and highlighted, in order to create an analytic categorization. Words featured in students' responses and questions were identified as keywords. A third reading was completed to verify classifications made by the independent reviewers.

In Section I, Your Experiences as a Doctoral Student, participants responded about their experiences doing activities that might be required during regular courses or optional parts of their program. Comments were mostly positive and are demonstrated best by the students own words:

"I began my doctoral studies a year ago and I feel that the introductory courses and orientation/guidance provided by our professors and their insightful instruction is very beneficial and of a preparatory nature in Cohort 7...."

"The doctoral program not only gave me the tools to improve as an educator, but also opened the doors to amazing opportunities in the field."

Negative concerns were also expressed. Examples follow:

"There needs to be more independent work. There needs to be more on-line courses offered. Changes to Programs of Study should be discussed with students."

From the focus group we gained this insight:

"I can tell you that there were [many] instances where I was learning and...going through the program, participating, and completing assignments. I would take what I was learning and incorporate it into my job. I applied what I was learning. For me, that was a great experience."

Comments regarding students' active participation in fulfilling course requirements, as part of the doctoral classes, demonstrate construction of practical visualization of the curriculum. They remark about the realistic application of the learned instructional and research techniques through classes and assignments, as well as the newly developed skills which added to their performance at work. The new information learned and skills applied led to new career opportunities. Areas to be addressed in the doctoral program are institutional communication and reviewing the number of online classes. These two issues were consistently brought up in survey results and in the focus group.

Section II, *Your Experiences with Advising and Mentoring*, inquires about student experiences specifically with faculty. This section asks questions of doctoral students about the faculty members who are responsible for guiding them through the program. Again, positive and negative responses were received. Samples follow:

"Overall, my professors... encourage me and are ready to help and offer advice. I am very happy with them, and feel that I can count on them for anything."

"Faculty members were always available and prompt."

"I have an advisor, but have not yet met to discuss anything."

From the focus group we learned:

"It was difficult to find a Chair for our dissertations. We had one that agreed to work with us, but then she retired and we were in limbo for a while."

Doctor of education students in this program perceive faculty support as a very essential factor for a successful path towards degree completion. Comments centered on professors being readily available. Students noted that they could

easily ask questions and faculty provided timely responses via email. The high level of academic information provided and accurate advising are two additional aspects widely commented on as positive support. An issue to attend to in this section on mentoring and advising is the identification of the dissertation committee. The selection of the dissertation members is perceived as easier said than done.

Section III, *Your Understanding of Your Doctoral Program*, explores the students' understandings by determining the degree of clarity of the requirements and expectations to earn the Ed. D.

"I think that our... faculty have done their best to prepare us for the doctoral program. Thank you!"

"It was always clear."

"Sometimes we need a little explanation or elaboration of the overall program components and expectations that are realistic and not overwhelming."

Members of the focus group shared:

"...for me some of the classes were an eye-opener. I was able to implement content across the curriculum, use it in my work with teachers. It made a difference. I tried out a lot of strategies with my teachers.

"In *Advanced Models of Teaching* we had to go back into classes and actually teach lessons. As an administrator sometimes you lose touch. I've been an administrator for ten years already, I've been out of the classroom for that long, so it was good to go back and actually work with the kids using specific teaching strategies. The teachers learned to use the strategies, too."

Students' input indicates that the program is generally well understood. Comments about expectations on students' academic performance, and to fulfill requirements in order to complete the doctoral degree reflect that expectations are clear. This is attributable to faculty, advisors and the program director's efforts to generate and distribute information with the aim of maintaining constant communication. Respondents also expressed clarification of specific requirements were sometimes needed, but overall, the information shared was clear, understandable, the knowledge gained can be immediately replicated and disseminated, and used to increase social interaction among colleagues.

Section IV, *Your Sense of Community* inquires about Doctoral students' formal and informal participation in communities of scholars.

"I took additional course work beyond the requirements of the program in educational research. I also worked as a doctoral teaching assistant during my last three years in the program. This gave me a lot of opportunities to interact with faculty and staff throughout the department."

"We have a great sense of community in the Rio Grande Valley and the cohorts."

“This knowledge in this area of the doctoral program is limited for me at this time but the connections are slowly developing.”

A focus group member shared an activity that she used with staff to enrich her own school community:

“Actually there is one activity that we did in the Adult Learning Strategies course that I used at the beginning of the year. It was the timeline, using a long strip of calculator paper for each person. They tell their life story on it and share. I did that with the staff at the beginning of the year. They loved it! They were sharing with each other their experiences. We have people that worked there 30 years or more. It is an older campus, so we have people that have worked together for years. With day to day activities they get so caught up in whatever is happening in the classroom that they really don’t get to know each other, and so that was one activity I used this year. Everybody was presenting to each other. It was a good way to start—to build on community.” As expressed in multiple ways by respondents, the Rio Grande Valley is built on a strong sense of community. The cohort model supports the belonging sensation as it creates a system of inclusion that is needed to succeed. The cohort model is purposefully designed and incorporated into the doctoral program. Graduates often discuss and share the importance of cohort membership. Their cooperative experiences provide a way to increase the quality and effectiveness in delivery of a variety of strategies in their workplaces while completing their doctoral program assignments. Doctoral students and graduates interact with scholars and colleagues at the same time while covering assignments. This shows that they are supporting the creation of a learning community that can enhance integration of research based instructional strategies into their teachers and colleagues daily lessons and activities.

In Section V, Outcomes of Your Doctoral Program are addressed. Questions explored students and graduates overall assessment regarding the knowledge of norms and standards, skills, and habits that students have internalized through the doctoral program.

“I am extremely happy with the skills, research, management, and teaching that I obtained throughout my doctoral experience. I have been and will continue to use the skills in future endeavors.”

“No program is perfect, but this program has met my needs and given me the confidence to feel and act as a leader in my field. I believe that I have learned more than I realize and that sentiment is affirmed when I find myself engaged in conversations with others in the field.”

“When you have ultimate faculty support, you are very successful.”

The Doctoral experience is viewed as positive by graduates and current doctoral students. The doctoral program creates opportunities for professional growth, development, and provides deep understanding of skills and strategies that can improve their hiring potential. The program promotes professional relationships with peers, professors and other national and international scholars. Connecting

with peers supports the generation of research projects that can contribute to the discipline. Developing strong leadership and presentation skills is an expectation of the program. Professional experiences provided in the doctoral program are essential for graduates advancing into higher positions.

Additional comments by graduates in the focus group provided “rich points” that included the following insights:

The focus group was asked “How does the doctoral program influence your role in the community? What's your role in the community? What do think or how do you define your role in the community and how does the doctoral program influence it to make your life better or worst?”

One student replied, “Let me tell you, it's huge, and I think we found that out when we graduated, you know, how huge it was... I didn't expect for it to be... to have the entire spotlight on us. We were interviewed for the newspaper. A couple of times I was quoted. We were getting emails to fill out a survey, you do it online, and I filled it out. The next thing I know, I was reading the newspaper about graduation and commencement, and my parents happened to be in my house that day, and I sound like, “Oh my God, Mother! The paper quoted me!” I didn't expect that, and then our graduation, one morning I'm getting dressed for work and another [doctoral] student sends me an email picture, and I am like “Holy smokes!” There we are pictured in the newspaper again, in the Education section! A whole article!

A whole article about us! And then of course, the school district---they put us on the District's website! I drove to work the Monday, after I graduated, and did my usual walk into the building and I look at the marquee as I'm coming in, and it says, “Congratulations Dr. Lopez”, and I was like: Wow! I didn't know my principal was going to do that, so, Oh my God! just things like that. The students too, because I work with elementary kids and the younger kids told me, “Ma'am, I can't call you Miss Lopez anymore, because now you are Doctor Lopez, right? Miss Dr. Lopez?”

Another recent graduate in the focus group shared about the impact of earning a doctorate:

“Yes, same thing with me, I finished in the summer, so I got to experience all of the celebration first, but it is very humbling. I know that, at least for myself, I come from a very humble home, you know, where my mom went to school to 6th grade, my dad up to 10th grade, so, I think I am a role model for students in our school now. I think that students see us as, “It's possible...I know that is what happened to me when I was in school, I had a principal that was “Dr. Rodriguez”, so I always heard “Dr. Rodriguez”, and I'm “Hey! It's got a ring to it!” But I never thought I could do it, I never thought that was possible, and I think that we are very lucky that we decided to continue our journey, and that *it is possible*. I tell the students now, and when I have meetings with parents, I express that their students can do it, too. I grew up, maybe, ten streets down from where the school is at today. I am from the neighborhood, you know, and I want to see that their kids are successful as well.”

Findings

Student support of faculty is consistent across the cohorts and across all sections of the survey. The experiences are described as opening doors to opportunity, moving students to the next level, being provided with tools to improve, and describing the benefits of the cohort model. The faculty are defined as available, supportive, and committed to helping students succeed.

Suggestions for improvement center on faculty being more encouraging, open-minded, understanding of commitments, provide for more student independence, more online courses and improving communication overall. Financial assistance is an issue in the forefront of student concerns.

- Students' active participation in fulfilling course requirements, as part of the doctoral classes, demonstrates their understanding of the curriculum. They share the application of what they have learned in terms of instructional and research techniques.
- Students in the program perceive faculty support as an essential factor for successful degree completion. Comments centered on professors being readily available.
- Students' input indicates that the program is well understood. Comments about expectations on students' academic performance, and to fulfill requirements in order to complete the doctoral degree reflect that expectations are clear.
- As expressed in multiple ways by respondents, the Rio Grande Valley is built on a strong sense of community. The cohort model supports belonging as it creates a system of inclusion that is needed to succeed. The cohort model is purposefully designed and incorporated into the doctoral program.
- The Doctoral experience is viewed as positive by graduates and current doctoral students. The doctoral program creates opportunities for professional growth, development, and provides deep understanding of skills and strategies that can improve their hiring potential.
- Our findings agree with Easley, Bianco, and Leech (2012), the strongest motivation (*ganas*: Spanish term for expressing "want to do" or "desire to do" willingly or enthusiastically and also related to attitudes for changes or improvement) issues center on acknowledgment of parental struggle and sacrifice, strong value of family and family history, parental admiration and respect, a desire to repay and pay forward as well as resilience and willingness to persevere.

Recommendations for Future Study

As an outcome of our study we found that the following topics would benefit from further exploration:

- The formation of dissertation committees, timelines, and clear definition of the process
- Review of online course effectiveness in doctoral level programs
- Motivation of Hispanic doctoral students

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