Iowa Research Online
The University of Iowa's Institutional Repository

Department of Political Science Publications

10-1-2003

The Role of Faculty in Creating a Positive Graduate Student Experience: Survey Results from the Midwest Region Part II

Vicki L. Hesli
University of Iowa

Evelyn C. Fink

Copyright 2003 American Political Science Association. Used by permission. http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayJournal?jid=PSC

PS: Political Science & Politics, 36:4 (2003) pp. 801-804. DOI: 10.1017.S1049096503003184

Hosted by Iowa Research Online. For more information please contact: lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

The Role of Faculty in Creating a Positive Graduate Student Experience: Survey Results from the Midwest Region, Part II

Vicki L. Hesli, *University of Iowa*
Evelyn C. Fink
Diane M. Duffy

The impetus for this work comes from data from the mid-1990s that revealed that women were entering political science graduate programs in proportions relatively equal to men. Yet, in looking at who actually completes doctoral degrees, the data show a greater disparity between men and women. As an example, for the political science[2] doctorates awarded in 1996, 32.9% were received by women. Thus, women are entering political science graduate programs in roughly equal proportions, but they either have not been staying in the department to complete their Ph.D. degrees at the same level as the men or they are taking a longer time for completion.

To determine ways to improve retention and success rates among graduate students, we undertook a survey of all currently active graduate students in Ph.D.-granting institutions in the Midwest region (funded by the Midwest Political Science Association). A random sample of the students was contacted and asked to complete a mailed questionnaire comprised of queries about current experiences and statuses in their graduate programs (see Appendix A).[3]

We asked respondents whether they had ever seriously considered leaving graduate school before completing their degree objective. We also asked, *via* an open-ended format, if the student should decide to quit graduate school, what would be the primary reason (Table 1). For men, the single most frequently cited reason is the lack of employment opportunities; for women, it is an unfriendly (unsupportive) work environment.

In Table 2, we present the set of factors that best predicts the probability of giving serious thought to quitting graduate school.[4] Good mentoring appears to be the most effective mechanism to work against attrition. Negative reports about the availability of faculty encouragement and consultation (Poor Mentoring) are significantly tied to a higher probability of serious consideration of leaving graduate school (see Appendix B for a listing of the items used in this and other scales). This finding confirms the previous research that has demonstrated that faculty mentoring and supportive advising are important elements of graduate student retention (Lewis 1996; Girves and Wemmerus 1988). While good mentoring works against attrition, the most important factor that contributes to the thought of leaving graduate school is knowledge of inappropriate conduct (either in terms of physical behavior or verbal communication) by a department member.

We also developed an index of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the graduate student experience using seven questionnaire items. The mean score on the dissatisfaction scale was significantly higher among those who considered leaving their graduate program (before achieving their degree objective), than among those who did not consider leaving. The index of dissatisfaction, therefore, was used as an indicator of who would successfully complete their degree objectives.

The best predictor of level of dissatisfaction with the graduate student experience is whether the graduate student receives sufficient encouragement, mentoring, and consultation from faculty. Thus, good mentoring by faculty was determined to be the best way to both improve satisfaction levels of graduate students and to reduce serious thoughts of leaving a program. Other work has unfortunately shown that mentoring relationships for women graduate students are less established and less likely to be with same-sex mentors (Heinrich 1991).

Our findings also demonstrated that perceptions of how department chairs and faculty respond to reports of discriminatory and other inappropriate practices are of critical importance in determining satisfaction with the graduate training experience. The second best predictor of dissatisfaction in graduate school is a scale that measures whether the respondent thinks that incidents of

---

Vicki L. Hesli *is professor of political science at the University of Iowa. She has authored and co-authored articles about voting behavior, women and politics, political party development, religion, seperatism, and regional autonomy. These studies generally have an area focus on Russia, Ukraine, and Lithuania. She has published in several journals including* Electoral Studies, Women and Politics, Comparative Political Studies, American Political Science Review, *and* Europe-Asia Studies. *She is also co-author or co-editor of five books; most recently:* The 1999–2000 Elections in Russia: Their Impact and Legacy *(Cambridge University Press, 2003) and* Governments and Politics in the Post-Soviet Region (forthcoming, Houghton Mifflin).

Evelyn C. Fink *resides in Lincoln, Nebraska. She has published several articles including "Institutional Change as a Sophisticated Strategy: The Bill of Rights as a Political Solution" in the* Journal of Theoretical Politics *and "Representation by Deliberation: Changes in the Rules of Deliberation in the U.S. House of Representatives, 1789–1844" in* The Journal of Politics.

Diane M. Duffy *is an independent scholar living in northern Wisconsin. She has written on different aspects of public policy in the United States and abroad. Her most recent publication is "Finding Power in a Hegemonic Environment: Lessons on Surviving and Thriving from Five Women's Organizations in Poland" in* Partial Truths and the Politics of Community, Feminist Approaches to Social Movements, community and power, *Volume Two (ed. by Mary Ann Tertreault and Robin L. Teske, Unversity of South Carolina Press, 2003).*

This is the second article reporting results from a survey of graduate students in political science doctoral programs. The survey results lead to suggestions for specific programs that departments can pursue to improve the retention rates of doctoral students.[1] The APSA Task Force on Mentoring thanks Vicki Hesli and her colleagues for their fine work, the Midwest Political Science Association and the University of Iowa for commissioning and funding this survey, and encourages graduate students to contact Linda Lopez (llopez@apsanet.org) or Kristen Monroe (krmonroe@uci.edu) to avail themselves of the APSA resources on mentoring.

Kristen Monroe

Table 1
Reasons One Might Quit Graduate School by Sex (1997 Survey of Graduate Students in Midwest Ph.D.-Granting Political Science Departments)

Primary Reasons Given	Males	Females
Problems with the Job Market (Within this category, the primary concern was with the lack of employment opportunities: 10.6% of males and 7.8% of females)	17.4%	12.0%
Prefer a Different Career (Within this category, a fair number registered dissatisfaction with academia: 3.8% of males and 4.7% of females)	9.3	12.0
Lack of Adequate Financial Resources (Economic Problems and Concerns about the Possible Termination of Funding)	10.0	10.9
Dissatisfied with the Field of Study (General Frustration and Specific Criticisms of the Field)	6.8	13.5
Problems with Relations within the Department (Within this category, the primary concern was with the unfriendly work environment: 1.9% of males and 8.9% of females)	5.5	11.5
Problems with the Length of the Program of Study or with the Dissertation	6.8	6.8
Other Reasons (Including family obligations, geographical location of school, and health problems)	4.2	5.2
Would Never Quit or No Answer	40.2	28.1
Total Percent	100%	100%
Number of Cases	311	192

sexual or racial harassment would be handled promptly and appropriately by the department. Our findings also show that the provision of an orientation program to incoming students does help to reduce the average level of dissatisfaction. The lack of an adequate orientation program hinders a woman's satisfaction more than a man's satisfaction.

Equally interesting were findings contrary to some of those in the existing literature: The receipt of an assistantship or fellowship was found in our survey of political science graduate students to have an insignificant impact on satisfaction levels. Girves and Wemmerus [1988] suggested that reliance on one's own financial resources contributes to both lengthening the time to completion of a degree as well as increasing the attrition rate.

Another important finding from our survey of graduate students in Ph.D.-granting departments in the Midwest region was that women and men do not differ significantly with regard to degree objectives. Seventy-eight percent of women and 82% of men planned to get a Ph.D. upon entering graduate school. Others had a goal of a Master's degree or some other advanced degree. Once the degree is completed, however, men do have somewhat higher career goals than women. Among those who plan to pursue an academic career, 48% of men but only 42% of women plan to work at a college or university with a graduate program. Others plan to work at a teaching college or a university that offers only undergraduate degrees. Career goals are related in a bivariate fashion to the thought of quitting graduate school. Among those who plan to work at a college or university with a graduate program, only 50% have seriously thought of leaving graduate school before completing their degree objective. While among those who plan to work at a four-year college or university, 62% have thought about quitting graduate school.

These degree objectives and career goals are to some degree outside the realm of the responsibility of the faculty of the degree-granting institutions. But issues of mentoring, responsiveness of the faculty to possible inappropriate behavior, and the decision to offer orientation programs are all very much within the realm of activities that can be undertaken to improve the graduate student experience. For the remainder of this article, therefore, we would like to discuss what departments can do to help improve the experiences of their graduate students.

We anticipated that many departments would have already initiated measures to help students and several questions were included in the questionnaire to assess this facet of the graduate student experience. A question asked whether a support group was available for women in the department. Follow-up questions asked about the degree of participation in the support group. In addition, an open-ended question asked whether the support group was helpful, and why or why not. Among those women who participated in a support group, the list of benefits included: help with future employment (5.7%), a chance to learn the perspectives of other women (3.6%), camaraderie or social interaction (3.1%), and the chance to share concerns with like-minded people (2.6%). Noteworthy is the fact that the most frequently cited benefits of a support group are instrumental rather than social or emotional.

We also asked whether the graduate student's department had any women faculty. Ninety-eight percent said yes. Ninety-one percent said that at least one of the females was tenured. Thus, women faculty are theoretically available as mentors to graduate students. We asked in an open-ended format whether the respondents could identify some ways in which women faculty had been helpful to them. Among those who responded to this query, a majority of both male and female graduate students said that female faculty were just the same as male faculty and provided the same services, such as professional mentoring, advising, providing feedback on work, serving as dissertation advisors or committee members, and encouraging research interests. Female graduate students were more likely than male graduate students to say that female professors provided help beyond what was provided by male faculty. The most frequently mentioned "extras" as provided by female faculty were service as a "role model" (4.7% of females), approachability—i.e. someone to talk to (3.6% of females), being more supportive (9.9% of females), and providing a unique understanding of problems faced by women (4.7%). A small portion of the total (1.6% of males and females combined)

Table 2
Logit Coefficients for Factors Affecting the Possibility of Leaving Graduate School before Completing the Degree*

Predictor variables	Estimated coefficients (standard errors)	Partial corr
Poor Mentoring: (The graduate student receives insufficient encouragement, mentoring, and consultation from faculty)	.150*** (.033)	.191
No Knowledge of Inappropriate Conduct: (No knowledge of a person in the department who has experienced inappropriate conduct either physically or verbally)	–.702** (.233)	–.116
Came directly to this graduate program from baccalaureate program	.676** (.257)	.096
Whether or not the department provided an orientation program for new graduate students (negative assessment)	.193* (.106)	.050
Number of children living with the graduate student	–.299* (.172)	–.045
Record of the department in placing Ph.D. graduates in sub-field of study (negative assessment)	.216* (.126)	.042
Constant	–1.309* (.671)	

*The question asked was: "Have you ever seriously considered leaving graduate school before completing your degree objective?" Fifty-six point seven percent overall responded in the affirmative.

Note: Number of cases included in the analysis: 382. Beginning log likelihood: 519.45697. Ending log likelihood: 447.381. Overall correct percentage: 69.37%. Significance: *: less than .1, **: less than .05, ***: less than .00l.

said that female professors were less helpful than male professors.

These findings, together with those presented in the April 2003 issue of *PS*, provide empirical support for a set of suggestions on how "ushering" students through graduate programs might be accomplished more fruitfully, allowing departmental chairs and leaders in our profession to take the necessary steps toward eliminating some of the obstacles that graduate students face. One of the clearest findings is that faculty mentoring and departmental orientation programs do contribute to a favorable experience for graduate students. We cannot say whether the orientation programs were a causal factor that resulted in an overall positive experience for graduate students, or if having a positive atmosphere causes the department to develop an orientation program as one intervention to help students. If the former is the case, it would appear that orientation programs serve as vehicles to "level the playing field" by letting all graduate students know departmental norms and expections, operating policies and procedures, and opportunities available. In either case, orientation programs provide important information about the department and how to proceed to achieve one's aspirations.

The question that arises is what else can be done to help women achieve higher levels of satisfaction, that is, levels more comparable to those of men? The findings suggest several places to start. Departments need to reassess the extent of sexual and racial harassment and whether measures to prevent and address harassment heretofore instituted are adequate. Within the questionnaire, students were asked: "Since entering graduate school have you ever been involved in an interaction with a department member which involved behavior you perceived as inappropriate either in terms of physical conduct or verbal communication?" A profound difference between the experiences of men and women emerges on this measure. Women were much more likely to report an experience with or personal knowledge of inappropriate behavior than were men. A majority of both sexes responded negatively to this query, yet women are significantly more likely to have experienced inappropriate behavior by a faculty member (28%) than have men (18%). Respondents were also asked whether they know of any other person in their department who has experienced such behavior. For this broader query about knowledge of inappropriate behavior, 50% of women and 36% of men said "yes." Questions were also asked about the response of the department to reports of such incidents. One question asked students to agree or disagree with the statement: "The department has a zero tolerance policy toward racial and sexual harassment." Significant gender differences occurred on this question, with women more likely to disagree.

It is the query about whether the respondent knows of any person in their department who has experienced such behavior that is included in the logistic regression model (Table 2). The regression model shows that personal knowledge of inappropriate behavior affects thoughts about leaving graduate school before completing the degree objective. This awareness of inappropriate conduct by a department member is much more widespread among graduate students than we would have guessed and it raises questions about the effect it has on students' lives and careers. Given the many years that universities have had operant harassment policies, the unequal power between faculty and students, and the data reported here, departments cannot be complacent in thinking that their policies are working. The data reported here assures departments that the failure to act on any single experience will affect not only the specific party but, through common knowledge, harm the experience for other women and men as well. Departments can do better by setting, promoting, and enforcing a zero tolerance policy towards harassment. They can also back up that policy when necessary through appropriate investigation and action. Departments can better train their faculty to avoid subtle classroom bias and faculty themselves can participate in other sensitivity exercises such as those suggested by Paludi (1998).[5]

On average, men and women differ in their reasons for considering leaving a program (e.g., lack of employment opportunities versus lack of a supportive environment). We need to entertain the idea that female students may have a different worldview than male students.

The institutionalization of support groups for female students is not, in itself, sufficient help. Burdened with their academic load and responsibilities, graduate students have limited time and, as seen in this study, the value of the support groups is often seen as instrumental rather than solely supportive.

We have already shown that departmental attention to faculty mentoring, regularized communication, orientation programs, and decisive action when incidents of discrimination and harassment occur can reduce thoughts of leaving a graduate program prematurely and can increase levels of satisfaction with the graduate experience. Departments can improve their faculty's response to graduate student concerns generally and can take responsibility to see that each student has a mentor. This would significantly improve satisfaction for both men and women. If left unaddressed, these issues create a reverberating wave of ramifications, with a portion of women and minorities failing at each level, leaving the profession deficient in their perspectives.

We emphasize again that economic capital (i.e., access to assistantships and fellowships) is not a major factor for explaining dissatisfaction or the serious consideration of leaving graduate school. This may mean that the distribution of financial awards is perceived as equitable, or that, simply, it is less salient *vis-à-vis* the dependent variables—in part because the majority of the graduate students surveyed are fully funded. Past and ongoing departmental attention to fairness in allocating awards, however, needs to be sustained.

In addition, undue weight should not be placed upon GRE scores in admissions decisions. Morrison and Morrison (1995), in a meta-analysis of 30 published studies, could not find a significant correlation between first-year graduate GPAs and GRE verbal and quantitative scores, a finding supporting others' works (Lipschutz 1993; Girves and Wemmerus 1988). In addition, researchers have found that these traditional admissions criteria are biased against minorities and women (Vaseleck 1994) and under-predict aptitude for older, non-traditional students (Brazziel 1992; Clark 1984; Swinton 1987).

Finally, we need more research. We need it to assess any cumulative effect there may be of differential experiences with advisors, in the classroom, or exposure to inappropriate behavior. We also need to investigate to what degree perceived differences are based on objective variations in treatment versus variations in subjective assessments. Beyond more data, however, departments may want to consider introducing faculty to extant research on biases in teaching styles that disadvantage females and minorities and differential perceptions of what constitutes harassment and its effects on human lives. With close attention and early intervention in these areas, academic departments can think and act prospectively in planning for their discipline's future human resources needs, while making the academic climate more supportive for all our students.

Notes

*This study was commissioned and funded by the Executive Council of the Midwest Political Science Association. Additional funding was provided by the Department of Political Science at the University of Iowa. This article could not have been written without the invaluable research assistance of Erik Gartzke, Kristen Holmes, Brian Kessel and Ha-Lyong Jung.

1. The first installation was presented in the July 2003 issue of *PS: Political Science and Politics*. Citations and appendices are available on the APSA web site: www.apsanet.org/PS/Oct03/Hesli.CFM.

2. Includes degrees granted in political science, government, public administration, public policy analysis, and international relations and affairs.

3. A copy of the questionnaire that was mailed to graduate students is available from the authors of this report. The questionnaire went through several revisions and was pilot tested among graduate students before being finalized. Standard procedures for such surveys were followed, including guarantees of anonymity and follow-up mailings to increase response rates.

4. Other factors that were tested but were not found to be significantly related (in a mulitvariate model) to the serious thought of leaving graduate school are: degree plan upon entering graduate school (MA, Ph.D. or other), criteria used in selecting the graduate program (such as reputation or cost), level and type of funding (graduate/teaching assistantship or a fellowship), the number of hours the student works for pay outside of any assistantship or fellowship, the student's career goals, what the student's highest academic degree was before entering the current program, undergraduate major, previous degree, most recent GPA, GRE scores, frequency of participation in social get-togethers, involvement in a personal relationship, whether minorities or women are on the faculty, assessment of methods and statistics coursework, year of birth, gender, and race.

5. See also Hall and Sandler (1982) and Sandler, Silverberg, and Hall (1996).