Time to Completion
PhD Student Survey

Based on *Final Report: Times to Completion PhD Student Survey 2012*

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Methodology

- Fall of 2012
- All actively enrolled PhD students
- 4 open-ended questions – qualitative study
- Emailed link to an online survey
Aim of the Survey

- Identify strategies to promote students in degree completion in a timely manner
- Identify challenges that impede progress to completing on time
Survey Participation

- Year of Study: 461 surveys submitted
  - 38% response rate

- 396 answered the remaining questions
  - 33% response rate
Survey Participation
Describe changes to your PhD program that would increase the likelihood of completing your degree on time.

Some student responses fit in more than one category.
Changes: Program Structure

- 33% of respondents indicated:
  - Clearer articulation of expectations
  - Clearer Timelines
  - Course requirements too extensive (breadth)
  - Unavailability of some courses
  - Lack of options in the summer months
Changes: Program Structure

- Reducing course requirements
  - If Masters is in same discipline as PhD

- Closer connection between courses and thesis research

- Comprehensive examinations too onerous
  - Should occur early in the program
  - Contribute to the development of the research proposal/plan to enable an earlier focus on research
Changes: Program Structure

- Programs should communicate expectations and timelines more effectively
- Identify milestones
- Support achievement or adherence to these timelines
Changes: Funding

- Funding would assist in timely completion (24%)
- Recommendations
  - better funding packages
  - more award money
  - lower costs of education
Changes: Funding

• Having a form of “performance bonus” for achieving milestones:
  • reduced tuition or tuition waivers without losing any funding

• More funding from supervisors

• More non-employment income
  • Acknowledged impact of teaching assistantships on slowing progress
Changes: Supervision

• Frustrations noted in many responses:
  – supervisors are unavailable for periods of time
  – slow turn-around time in responding to work
  – lack of engagement
Changes: Supervision

• Effective supervision is important in timely completion (21%)

• Recommendations
  • Effectual and frequent communication/meetings to discuss research
  • Set goals
  • Defined scope of research
  • Provide encouragement
  • Provide feedback to confirm that expectations of supervisor and student are aligned
Changes: Other Factors

• Need for resources and support at the departmental level and from central sources (5%)
  – To set milestones
  – To support supervisors
  – To improve lab space
Changes: Other Factors

• TAs/TFs Concerns (5%)
  – Teaching commitments considered excessive
  – Detracted from graduate research

• Recommendations
  – Limit the number of TA/TF appointments for a student
  – Should not be required to hold a TA/TF
Changes: Other Factors

- Thesis (5%)

- Greater supervision on the scope, form, quality, completeness of thesis
  - Closely related to supervision category and program structure
What would be a good incentive, financial or otherwise, that would be effective in encouraging you to complete your PhD program on time?

- **Funding, 23%**
- **Jobs, PostDoc, 18%**
- **Bonus/Award, 15%**
- **Tuition, 14%**
- **Supervision, 9%**
- **None, 15%**

Some student responses fit in more than one category.
Incentives: Funding

- 23% of respondents noted that funding packages during years 1-4 should be higher as this would shorten completion times.

- Nearly half of these respondents specified that the funding packages should primarily be composed of stipendiary and award money (i.e. not employment-related income).
Incentives: Jobs and Post-Docs

• 18% of respondents indicated that having a job to go to (including a post-doctoral position) would be an excellent incentive to complete their degree.

• Some added that post-doctoral positions could be guaranteed to those who complete within 4 years. Some who expressed this view also noted that this was not within the control of the university; however, assistance in the job search would be helpful.
Incentives: Financial

- Financial incentives could be useful (15%)
- Several different ideas were expressed, with the most common suggestion being “performance bonuses” associated with:
  - achieving certain milestones
  - publishing a paper or
  - meeting annual goals
Incentives: Financial

- Others suggested “completion bonuses”, for example:
  1. Prorated awards (e.g. a certain amount if one completes after 4 years and a lesser amount after 5 years)
  2. Lump sum upon completion within a defined timeframe
  3. Shared financial bonuses to the student upon completion and to the supervisor in support of another graduate student
Incentives: Tuition

- 14% of the respondents referenced tuition: 3 subgroups

1. 8% of respondents suggested that a **tuition rebate** (1-3 terms) upon completion within 4 years. A fixed rebate could be provided to those completing within 4 years and a lesser amount if within 5 years.

2. 4% indicated that **tuition reduction** once course work and comprehensives were complete would provide incentive

3. 2% stated that an **increase in tuition** after year 4 would encourage earlier completion
Incentives: Supervision

• Good supervision was important in motivating timely completion (9%)

• Good supervision
  – Provides encouragement
  – Helps set achievable goals and timelines
What are some challenges that may impede your ability to complete your PhD degree on time?

- Supervision, 28%
- Personal and Family, 19%
- Funding, 12%
- Program Structure, 11%
- Technical, 11%
- Work, 10%
- Other, 9%
- None, 4%

Some student responses fit in more than one category.
Challenges That Impede Progress

- Some overlap with responses in Section 1 though the relative frequency of occurrence differed.
- If a primary factor was not evident, the response was categorized under more than one heading.
- Unique themes also emerged in response to this particular question.
- 4% of respondents stated that there were no challenges.
Challenges: Supervision

- **Poor quality supervision (28%)**
  - Lack of accessibility and interaction
  - Lack of clarity about the research
  - Requirement to focus on work extraneous to the student’s research
  - Unreasonable/over ambitious scope
  - Inadequate resources to support the research
  - Lack of timelines and high pressure to publish
  - Concern that the supervisor decides when the thesis is ready for defense without the student having a clear understanding of the criteria
Challenges: Personal/Family Factors

- Personal and/or family factors (19%)
- Could prolong the time to completion by taking time away from their graduate studies
- Juggling multiple responsibilities and expectations
- Personal and/or family health
- Dealing with family matters
Challenges: Funding

- Inadequacy of funding packages (12%)
- Poor funding packages resulted in the need to take on part-time employment
- Contributed to stress
- Increased the likelihood of having to take time off
Challenges: Program Structure

- **Program Structure (11%)**
  - Too much course work, often unrelated to research
  - Inability to complete course requirements because courses weren’t offered annually
  - Mandatory requirements for fieldwork
  - Excessive lengths of time preparing for comprehensives

- The need for timelines and milestones was frequently noted
Challenges: Technical

• Technical challenges (11%)
  • Equipment breakdown/malfunction
  • Unanticipated problems with protocols
  • Limited availability of test materials/subjects
  • Unexpected findings resulting in the need for further experimentation.

• Respondents indicated that assistance in finding alternate approaches would be helpful
Challenges: Work

- **Work/TAs/TFs (10%)**
- Work took valuable time away from their studies
- The majority noted that TA/TF commitments were excessive and too demanding
- Some commented that fewer TAships at more opportune times in their program would be helpful
- A few respondents stated that the time spent in seeking employment or post-doctoral positions delayed their completion
Challenges: Other

- Ethics review process unduly lengthy
- Poor housing
- Under-prepared for graduate work
- Shortfalls in their own writing ability
- Poor time-management/distractions
- 4% noted that they encountered no challenges
What has helped you to stay on track and complete milestones to increase the likelihood that you complete your PhD degree on time?

- Supervision, 37%
- Self-Motivation, 19%
- Departmental Support, 13%
- Time Management, 12%
- Funding, 5%
- Desire to Move On, 5%

Some student responses fit in more than one category.
Supervision

- **Good relationship with their supervisor/advisor** kept them on track and progressing well (37%)
- Contributors to a productive relationship included
  - Good communication
  - Understanding of shared expectations and timelines
  - Constructive feedback
  - Direction and support in meeting objectives
  - Concrete goals
  - Supervisor’s flexibility and commitment
Self-Motivation

• **Self-motivation** to complete as a principal factor (19%)

  • Being committed to the process and the work required

  • Strong drive and a desire to succeed and produce quality research were what kept them on track.

  • Support from supervisors, the department, family and other was also helpful and reinforced their own motivation
Departmental Support

- **Departmental Support (13%)**
  - Setting clear timelines
  - Expectations and milestones
  - Providing resources
  - Work space
  - Promoting a sense of community among graduate students
  - Completing applications for scholarships
  - Attending conferences

- Some noted this was critical if their supervisor was less concerned about progression or providing a supportive environment
Time-Management

• Time Management (12%)
  • planning their work
  • setting short and longer terms goals
  • balancing commitments

• Supervisor ‘buy-in’ to their plans was helpful
Other Factors

• **Funding ( ~5%)**
  - Funding and the desire to move on post-graduation were expressed with equal frequency
  - Having adequate funding support through scholarships, awards and/or from their supervisor kept progress on track
  - Others felt that the motivation of moving on to a job or no longer being a student moves them forward toward completion.
Conclusion