

# **Academic Integration of Doctoral Students: Applying Tinto's Model**

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Doctoral students comprise a unique population with special needs and concerns. While considerable research has investigated graduate student satisfaction and retention (Brandes, 2006; Golde, 1998; Tinto, 1987), much of the research views graduate students as extensions of undergraduates in terms of their motivations and needs.

## **Tinto's Academic Integration Theory**

Tinto's (1987) academic integration theory has been used by researchers as the platform by which to examine the relationship between student satisfaction and institutional integration. Originally intended to frame the undergraduate experience, Tinto measured student satisfaction across six transformative dimensions, ranging from growth and development to self-actualization. Other researchers (Elliot, 2003; Golde, 1998) support Tinto's model by stressing the relationship between student satisfaction and the extent to which an institution supports students during their educational tenure.

Graduate students, and doctoral students in particular, exhibit significantly different characteristics and needs compared with their undergraduate counterparts (Ladik, 2005; Polson, 2003). Applying Tinto's model to doctoral students allows for a new perspective on how this population can be better supported. Viewing the six dimensions through the lens of the doctoral student

experience suggests that institutions must utilize different strategies to enhance their educational experience.

The dimensions, modified for the doctoral student population, include:

Educational experience: The extent to which doctoral student expectations are met relative to course content, rigor, quality, and challenge; many doctoral students require a greater emphasis on the development of specialized research skills, and peer-to-peer learning in the classroom.

Development of skills & knowledge: The extent to which students are able to learn, to think critically, develop problem-solving skills, synthesize material and analyze information;

Faculty contact: The extent to which students are satisfied with academic advising, accessibility of faculty, and the quality of their interactions with faculty; doctoral students, in particular, are highly dependent on a close working relationship with faculty (Weidman & Stein, 2003).

Personal and social growth: The extent to which personal and/or social growth is experienced and developed by the student; doctoral students are not interested in the same types of social and personal programs that undergraduates seek. While support services may seem incidental to the graduate student experience, a thoughtful and intentional program may affect student satisfaction, persistence, and a greater sense of connectedness with the institution (Poock, 2004).

Sense of community: The extent to which students feel a sense of belonging and being welcomed by the institution, both broadly and

within their individual disciplines. In addition to personal relationships, students may form a relationship with the institution's organizational identity and culture (Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995); Caple (1995) and Lovitts (2001) suggest that the graduate student's need for community stems from the isolation of their educational experience, i.e. their specialization within an academic discipline and the solitude inherent in conducting dissertation research.

Overall commitment to and satisfaction with institution: The extent to which students feel they have selected the right institution for their aspirations, and the sense that they would select the institution again, given the chance; several researchers (Brandes, 2006; Golde, 1998; Lawson & Fuehrer, 2001) offer perspectives on the doctoral student's assimilation to their campus culture, highlighted by their peripheral role in the campus community. Strengthening their sense of belonging will likewise strengthen the doctoral student's commitment to their institution, thereby strengthening their overall satisfaction.

Researchers confirm that doctoral students become socialized differently than other graduate or undergraduate students and seek different levels of engagement with faculty, peers, and their institutions. Applying Tinto's (1987) model of integration further confirms the need to re-conceive the nature of student support services for doctoral students.

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