

Work In Progress: Perceptions of Scholars in the UT System LSAMP Bridge to the Doctorate Project

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Abstract - The National Science Foundation Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation program is currently funding the fourth national cohort of Bridge to the Doctorate scholars. Since 2003, the University of Texas System has hosted three groups of scholars at two Hispanic-majority institutions. Fellows in this project report that their perceptions of graduate school and the professoriate have evolved, thus affecting the percentage of them who pursue doctoral degrees. This study focuses on the key elements of an assessment survey administered to these fellows. The survey probes into their research experience, academic experience, support network, and the effect that financial support has had on their success. Specifically, the questions assess initial expectations, quality and value of activities, and loyalty to the project. Survey results and preliminary conclusions will be evaluated. The discussion will focus on how the results can be used to improve undergraduate and graduate components at the University level.

Index terms – graduate student, Bridge to the Doctorate, doctoral degree, graduate survey.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Using the preliminary survey created by McAfee and Ferguson [1] as a template, a specific survey was created for the Bridge to the Doctorate (BD) fellows at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). The survey consisted of 50 questions that identify the perceptions of the BD fellows regarding certain aspects of their graduate school experience at UTEP. The survey was administered during the 2007 spring semester with all BD fellows participating in the survey at the same time.

RESULTS

A total of twelve BD fellows completed the survey. All students were members of under-represented groups in STEM disciplines. Four participants were female and eight were male. Seven students reported graduate majors in engineering disciplines and five reported majors in science disciplines. All students remained in the same discipline in which they received their baccalaureate degree. Ten students received

their baccalaureate degree from UTEP and 100% participated in undergraduate research. Nine students are in their second year of graduate school, two are in their third, and one is in the fourth. Ten students indicated that their highest intended degree is a Ph.D. and two indicated that it is an MD/Ph.D.

In terms of their experience, three students (25%), all male, reported that they have considered leaving their graduate program. Reasons for potential drop-out included suitability of graduate programs and continuity of funding. For the questions regarding selection of advisors, all the females indicated that their academic departments were flexible in allowing them to choose their research advisor. Half of the males surveyed believed that their department was too ‘hands-off’ during the advisor selection process. Seven students (58%) reported that they chose their mentor based on faculty research interests similar to their own and five students (33%) reported that they chose their mentor based on personality. More than half of the students surveyed reported that they felt they had to prove themselves to their research advisor. Additionally, all the females reported that they felt very comfortable asking their research advisor for help while half of the males reported that they were only somewhat comfortable. All the females reported that their advisor was very helpful in helping them deal with academic issues while only half of the males reported this.

All students were satisfied with the funding they received from the BD project. In total, each student received over \$41,000 per year for living expenses and tuition and fees. The expectation for this funding was that each student would use the funds to prepare themselves for their doctoral experiences. Most students purchased text books that would be helpful to them during their pursuit of the Ph.D. Others purchased computer equipment that they could take with them when they moved on. One student reported that he would fund his Ph.D. with the money saved from the BD fellowship. The rest of the students reported that they would obtain funding through teaching assistantships, stipends, or financial aid.

When asked if faculty members at UTEP care about them, nine students (75%) reported that they either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed. Half of the students surveyed indicated that their career goals have changed while in graduate school. Some of these changes include wanting to do more research on the topic they are currently pursuing, getting involved in a government job, and pursuing the business track of

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engineering. All students indicated that the funds they received from the BD project encouraged them to continue their education by allowing them to focus on research and by facilitating a smooth transition from the M.S. to the Ph.D. Most students indicated a desire to teach as a faculty member, work as a researcher (non-teaching), or to work in industry. Only five of the students (42%) reported that they would take a faculty appointment at UTEP if they were offered one.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is clear that more students must be identified to participate in the survey, including a control group. Once the results are analyzed, they will be shared with interested parties on campus (deans, chairs, faculty, program directors, coordinators, and administrative staff) along with a set of

recommendations that can lead to better services and student satisfaction. The ultimate goal is to refine this survey and administer it every year to each UT System BD cohort to gain a better understanding of the factors that impact graduate student success. We also expect that this survey will assist us in assessing the correlation of these factors and student progression into the Ph.D.

REFERENCES

- [1] McAfee, R, Ferguson, D, "Status and Experiences of Minority Doctoral Students in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Disciplines", *36th ASEE/IEEE Frontiers in Education Conference, October 28-31, 2006, San Diego, CA.*