

Factors Of Graduate Students' Attrition And Retention In Occidental Mindoro State College Graduate School

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Abstract.

This case study was conducted to determine graduate students' attrition and retention factors and find ways to increase retention rates in the Occidental Mindoro State College (OMSC) Graduate School. A total of 31 purposively selected graduate students participated in the study. They were selected using the following inclusion criteria: they must be a graduate student of OMSC from AY 2015-2020, enrolled in any of the graduate school programs, has temporarily filed for a leave absence (for attrition participants), and has finished their master's program (for retention participants). A self-made interview guide was the main instrument used in gathering data for the study. The data collected were coded to find frequencies of the themes out of the raw qualitative data. The study was conducted from February to August 2020 at the OMSC Main Campus, Labangan, Occidental Mindoro. It was found that financial constraints, school-work conflict, and personal problems were the factors identified for graduate students' attrition. On the other hand, job promotion, personal growth, and motivation were the factors for retention. At the same time, institutional and faculty support was the suggested way to increase graduate students' retention rate. It can be concluded that financial constraints hinder graduate students from persisting and finishing their chosen degrees. Work-related factor promotes graduate student retention. Strategies employed by Higher Education Institutions play a vital role in increasing graduate students' retention rate.

Keywords: Attrition, Retention, Ways to increase retention, Graduate Students

I. INTRODUCTION

Student's success, persistence, and completion are of utmost importance for their long-term success and the longevity of educational institutions. Completing a degree is a great accomplishment for the students and the culmination of years of hard work. At the same time, it served as evidence of meeting the mission of educating and graduating students (Shaw, Burrus, & Fergusson, 2016). When a student enrolls in an academic program at a public postsecondary institution, both enter into a partnership intended to culminate with the student earning a degree awarded by the institution. In contrast, institutions must provide appropriate resources (instruction, evaluation, feedback, and so forth) to allow students to succeed. Public institutions have a vested interest in student success, as often it is used as a metric in determining the amount of financial support the school receives from the state (Gordon, 2016). However, attracting students to enroll and staying until they graduate from their chosen course or career is crucial for an academic institution to highlight and focus on. Attrition is generally experience and a challenging problem of any Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Therefore, high attrition and the pressure to attract and retain students in higher education is a priority concern. Online or higher education distance learning often experiences a high attrition rate similar to traditional, face-to-face classroom education (Azarcon, Gallardo, Anacin, & Velasco, 2014).

Even though master's degree is the fastest-growing segment of graduate education, key information is lacking regarding master's completion and attrition rates and factors contributing to student success. Although much has been studied and written about undergraduate persistence, very little has focused on retaining graduate students, master's students in particular (Billion, 2019). The study of attrition factors and retention rates among graduate students is critical for all institutions. It is of supreme importance to Higher Education Institutions, students, and employers because little is known about graduate student attrition. The task of accurately and succinctly defining attrition and retention factors remains daunting because retention and graduation rates in graduate school are inherently much harder to study. Given the high costs associated with graduate education, diminishing resources for higher education, and competition for these resources,

understanding attrition and examining the factors that affect student's ability to complete their degree promptly and considering the implications of these factors become crucial (Bain, Fedynich, & Knight, 2009). Occidental Mindoro State College, one of the HEIs in the province of Occidental Mindoro, offers post-graduate programs.

Like other HEIs, OMSC Graduate School also encountered pressing problems such as a steady decline in student entry and attrition rate. Conducting a study regarding factors of attrition and retention of graduate students may provide a basis for measuring the relevancy of the graduate programs being offered in OMSC. If a graduate program fails to provide a contemporary context for equipping students in an ever-changing world, it stands to reason students will not be committed long term. In addition, program accreditation ensures the courses will be taught to the highest academic and professional standards. This promotes an atmosphere of academic relevancy (Bain, Fedynich, & Knight, 2006). Furthermore, the study's findings may become a basis in the crafting of programs and activities that will help students hone their personal and professional skills to optimize and realize OMSC's mission. Second, identifying the factors of attrition, retention, and ways to increase retention rates of graduate students will heighten the students' awareness regarding the essential elements for successful completion of their graduate studies. Finally, the findings of these studies could provide additional literature for attrition and retention research since there are few studies on attrition and retention in Philippine universities (Azarcon, Gallardo, Anacin, & Velasco, 2016). Thus, it is in this context that this study was conducted.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This case study aimed to determine the factors of graduate student attrition and retention in Occidental Mindoro State College Graduate School. Specifically, it aimed to:

1. Determine the factors of attrition of the graduate students in OMSC.
2. Find out the factors of retention of the graduate students in OMSC.
3. Suggest ways on how to increase retention rates of OMSC graduate students.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was anchored on Tinto's Institutional Departure Model (1975) and Bean's Student Attrition Model (1980). The Institutional Departure Model of Tinto highlights that higher education institutions can improve student persistence through student academic and social integration (Ames, Bernan, & Casteel, 2018). Tinto (1975) argues that a student's decision to leave an institution must be grounded in one of two realms: academic or social. In the academic system, a student must have a certain level of commitment to personal goals (grades, graduation, etc.) to continue to be motivated and persist.

Conversely, a student must demonstrate a certain level of institutional commitment, typically evidenced through social networks and school pride. The combination of personal goals and institutional commitment ultimately leads to a student's decision to return to school (Burke, 2019). The Student Attrition Model of Bean includes many variables that impact a student's decision to persist; most are a function of the institutional structure and organization. Some of the confounding variables considered were university GPA, institutional satisfaction, the value of education, student life engagement opportunities, and organizational rules, all of which can lead to a student dropping out or deciding to transfer to a different institution (Burke, 2019).

IV. METHODOLOGY

A case study design was used to determine the factors of attrition and retention of the graduate students in OMSC. This study was conducted from June to September 2020 at OMSC Labangan, San Jose, Occidental Mindoro. A total of 31 graduate students chosen through purposive sampling participated in the study. They were selected using the following inclusion criteria: they must be a graduate student of OMSC from AY 2015-2020, enrolled in any of the graduate school programs, has temporarily filed for a leave absence (for attrition participants), and has finished their master's program (for retention participants). A self-made interview guide was the main instrument used in gathering data for the study. Due to Covid-19

pandemic, there is difficulty gathering data face-to-face. Thus, the letter and the interview questions were sent to the messenger and email of the participants. Follow-up calls and texting were also used to validate the responses that were not clear. The data collected were coded to find frequencies of the themes out of the raw qualitative data.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Factors of Graduate Students Attrition in OMSC Graduate School

Efforts to retain students until graduation day requires a greater understanding of why they attrite. Withdrawal from a university may result from voluntary or compulsory pressures. It is necessary to comprehend why withdrawals happen, as the specific causes of poor retention need to be linked to particular measures for overcoming the problem (Christo & Oyinlade, 2015). Attrition from graduate education carries economic, social, and emotional costs. However, only a few studies have examined the factors that influence student persistence to degree attainment in graduate education (Gordon, 2015). In the OMSC Graduate School context, financial constraints, school-work conflict, and personal problems were identified as factors of graduate students' attrition.

It can be noted from the responses given, financial constraints are the number one factor in the attrition of students in OMSC Graduate School. According to the participants, they have to leave for school temporarily and did not finish their master's degree because of financial constraints, as shown in the following interview excerpts: *I am the breadwinner in the family, and I also finance the education of my younger siblings. The income I received is not enough to support my studies; I have many financial obligations at home and with my family. I do not have any financial assistance or scholarship grants since I am a newly hired employee; pursuing a master's degree is costly, and my meager salary could not afford it at the moment.* Garwe and Maganga (2015) stated that the most potent socio-economic determinant forcing students to withdraw from university is financial difficulty. Due to the financial hardships, some students may prefer to continue working, thereby suspending or abandoning their studies.

School-work conflict ranks second among the factors identified with attrition. Work-to-school and school-to-work conflict refer to situations in which students experience work, reducing their ability, energy, and time to meet school demands (Andrade, 2018). Blending work and school is a demanding task for graduate students. Working students enrolled in graduate school programs report conflicts and experience stress from the competing demands related to profession and school role. It pushes them to temporarily leave school, as shown in the following interview excerpts: *Most of the time, I do not know what to prioritize, especially when there are deadlines at work, and there are also school requirements that I need to submit on time. I can't attend my weekend classes when work requires me to travel, to attend training and conferences. When I was assigned to another province, I have to file for a leave of absence in school because it is too difficult to travel. As much I wanted to pursue my studies, I really can't because of a work conflict.* The statements mentioned earlier by the participants are supported by Andrade (2018) that the professional workload felt by working students can create tensions and difficulties that can lead to work-to-school conflict. Moreover, since these programs run in the evenings, after a work-day or a work-week, there is also the chance that lack of time to detach work demands can make the integration of worker and student roles demanding and perhaps conflicting.

Personal problems like issues at home, health conditions, poor academic preparations, and not coping with the demands of the course rank last in the factors of attrition. Participants stated that: *I have to leave school because of my health condition. I had an accident, and I cannot cope up with the demands of my course. I am already in my thesis. I find it challenging to juggle my work, school, and my visit to the doctor. I did not pass in some of my subjects during our comprehensive exam. As a result, my thesis title was not approved.* The participants, as mentioned in their earlier statement, were supported by Zerna, Cruz, & Nuqui (2014) that numerous determinants are influencing a student's decision to stay or to drop out: economic factors, academic difficulties and dissatisfaction, low GPA, poor advising and teaching, family responsibilities, personal problems, enrollment at another school, and dissatisfaction with residence living.

Factors of Graduate Students' Retention in OMSC Graduate School

Student retention is a major concern for educational institutions around the world. It is not only a problem for universities but has a direct link to the social, economic, and political growth of a country, for which higher education provides strong foundations (Einolander & Vanharanta, 2015). Billion (2019) defines retention as the extent to which students remain in a higher education program of study through to graduation and degree attainment. In the OMSC Graduate School context, job promotion, professional growth, and motivation were identified as graduate students' retention.

The participants mentioned that they persist in continuing and finishing their chosen degree because they wanted to be promoted, as shown in the following interview excerpts: *I wanted to finish my degree to get the position I am aspiring for. Holder of advance/ higher degree is one of the criteria to be promoted in our organization. Having a master's degree aside from our professional license is a factor in being promoted and getting a permanent item. Though life in graduate school is hard and challenging, I need to finish my degree because having a master's degree is advantageous in seeking a promotion and permanent position. Once you are promoted, there is also a salary increase.*

Many students choose to pursue graduate education to further their careers. Students who are intrinsically motivated in their careers are more likely to enroll in a graduate program than those extrinsically motivated (Gordon, 2016). The second theme identified for retention is professional growth. According to the participants, they pursued their chosen degree due to the following reasons: to improve their skills and knowledge in their respective professions, to learn something which they are particularly interested in and which they do not know, to meet the requirements of their current job, and obtaining master's degree is a stepping stone for more advance education. As mentioned by the participants: *I am designated as the head of our school, so I need to study to gain additional skills and knowledge in managing our school. Being the head of an organization, I have to enroll in an advanced degree to learn things that I do not know to share with my colleagues and my rank and file. Therefore, a graduate degree is essential; my master's is essential for whatever I do next in my career path, and even in my current position as a Master teacher. Since I'm supervising people with master's degrees, I also need professional advancement.*

The motivation was also identified as a factor for graduate students' retention. As stated by the participants, their family, relatives, friends, and teachers are their sources of motivation to persist and finish their chosen degree. In times of difficulty and school-work conflict, they seek counsel from their family members and friends to motivate them in pursuing their degrees. They are motivated to finish their degree because of its value and utility in their current job or profession. *If I'm in doubt about whether to proceed or not, I have to think of my family because I am doing this for them. I wanted to give them a brighter future if I finish my degree. My family is my source of motivation; my persistence to earn my degree is for them. I have to finish my degree because this is important in my career and in earning a higher salary.* Einolander & Vanharata (2015) stated that intrinsic motivation, where the students show interest and inner acceptance of the value or utility of their studies and tasks, is essential because it enables high-quality learning and creativity. However, because there are many tasks that the students have to do to achieve their degree are not inherently interesting or enjoyable. Thus, understanding these different types of motivation and what fosters each is essential for universities to create a supportive and commitment enhancing the responsive environment. Furthermore, social factors like financial issues, attitude toward learning, attitude toward others, educational legacy, religious setting, cultural values, goal commitment, family and peer influence, and social routine are essential in increasing students' persistence (Zerna, Cruz, & Nuqui, 2014).

Ways on How to Increase Graduate Students' Retention Rates in OMSC Graduate School

When a student enrolls in an academic program, both enter into a partnership intended to culminate with the student earning a degree awarded by the institution (Gordon, 2016). Both have responsibilities in this partnership; students must put forth the effort to complete the intended program successfully, while institutions must provide appropriate resources (instruction, evaluation, feedback, and so forth) to allow students to succeed. The waning number of students returning to school usually results in more considerable financial loss and a lower graduation rate for the institution. In addition, it might affect the perception of the parents, students, stakeholders, legislators' vision of the institution(Zerna, Cruz, & Nuqui, 2014).Therefore,

Higher Education institutions should have an effective program for student retention, such as providing a meaningful learning environment. As a result, these students will become connected to the institution and eventually finish their chosen degree. Based on the interview conducted, institutional and social support were the two major themes identified to increase graduate students' retention rates in OMSC Graduate School.

Institutional support such as scholarship grants, study now pay later scheme, research grants, student services, program advertisement, and flexible delivery were the suggestions given by the participants. According to them: *The school must provide grants because not all can afford to pay tuition fees. In addition, the institution may consider improving student services such as the provision of e-library and internet connectivity, especially now that we have a pandemic. I am happy now that we have online classes because I was assigned to another province. So despite the distance, I can continue my program. As a temporary instructor of OMSC, the school allowed us to have a salary deduction; I am very thankful for that. Still, it would be better if there's a study now pay later scheme for their part-time and temporary employees who are enrolled in graduate school.*

On the other hand, the participants mentioned the social support identified by the participants as approachable faculty and staff, consultation, counseling, connectivity thru social media, interaction with faculty, officials, and other graduate students, and academic advising as additional suggestions to increase retention. *In my two years' stay at OMSC Graduate School, the first thing I noticed are the approachable faculty and staff; they made me feel at home. Faculty, officials, and staff are very approachable and interacting with them in any modality is easy. They easily respond to queries and students' concern by creating GC's, messenger, and Facebook account. In addition, my thesis adviser and frequent consultation helped me to persist and to finish my degree.*

The suggestions of the participants on how to increase graduate students' retention coincide with some of the institutional strategies employed by Australian universities, such as first, provision of financial support to students in the form of scholarships, emergency funds, containing non-tuition costs such as books, internet access, printing costs, library fines, and parking fees and fines. Second, efficient, conveniently accessed, and responsive administrative, IT, library, and student support systems, all working together to support the university's operation. The third is a use of a coherent, responsive, flexible, relevant, and transparent course design — a design that uses a variety of interactive, practice-oriented, and problem-based learning methods; the presence of a supportive peer group; and consistently accessible and responsive staff (Scott, Shah, Grebennikov, & Singh, 2008).

Furthermore, Hanover Research (2014) also states that academic support is vital to students as they strive to meet high expectations. Support is most effective when it directly aligns with daily learning in classes that the student is currently enrolled in rather than generic support tools. Social support can be equally important for students when difficulties arise in the university experience. Student mentors and faculty advisors can serve to provide a social and academic support network to struggling students.

VI. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings above of the study, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. Financial constraints hinder graduate students from persisting and finishing their chosen degrees.
2. Work-related factors promote graduate students' retention.
3. Strategies employed by Higher Education Institutions play a significant role in increasing graduate students' retention rate.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. OMSC may create interventions like providing financial assistance and scholarship grants to curb graduate student attrition rates in the OMSC Graduate School.
2. OMSC may consider providing strong institutional and faculty support to increase retention rates of graduate students.
3. Further study may be conducted to identify other factors of retention and attrition of graduate students, such as satisfaction and personal factors.

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