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Graduate School Motivation and Enhanced
Life Expectations Found Among Master's
of Education Students

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Abstract

Attending graduate school is a major undertaking that only certain types of people are willing and/or able to attempt. The reasons for such are varied according to the individual and where they are in life. However, there appear to be a few elements that are common among the general population of post-bachelor level students. The following study will attempt to understand the relevant motivations for those seeking to earn master's level degrees and the significance that is placed upon each.

Graduate School Motivation and Enhanced Life Expectations Found Among Master's of Education Students

Universities around the country are finding that the number of students applying to graduate programs is gradually decreasing from year to year. This can be partially attributed to a variety of explanations. Most notable of these would be the increased tuition expenses to be incurred, the raising of admission standards at many academic institutions, and the increasing complexity of life situations that confront students.

In an attempt to help reverse this process, universities are beginning to contact researchers to conduct studies to discover the underlying motivations of prospective graduate students. As this is completely virgin territory, there have been no such previous studies ever carried out. This researcher has found there to be a huge void of relevant information on this particular topic. Hence, the need for such knowledge has proven to be a valuable incentive to move forward with such a project.

It can be agreed upon by most, that the rewards for attaining a master's level degree are well worth the effort put forth. Otherwise, why would so many people attempt such an earnest feat if it were not for the obvious benefits? This study will try to identify the most significant reasons that students today attribute to their entering graduate school. It is the hope of this researcher, that not only can the relevant reasons be addressed, but also that the individual level of importance of each will be able to be ascertained.

With the information that is gained from this process, it is the goal of major universities that they will be able to better tailor their academic programs to the needs of those possibly considering going to graduate school. By understanding what is most important to students today, admissions officers are hoping to stop attendance decline.

Method

Setting and Participants

A large university in the southeastern United States was the host for this study. The school has a student population of over 20,000 and it is located in a rather affluent community. This institution has a college of education that is well-known in the area for providing highly trained and competent graduates from its program. The school does belong to a state system, as it was desired to not have an imbalance created due to an excessively high tuition rate that would be found at a private college.

One hundred graduate students in the college of education were randomly selected for this study. There was no particular preference given to gender or specific track of study within the college. There was no preference given to students based on their age or the number of credits that they were currently carrying. No emphasis was placed upon a student's progress thus far in their respective program. Meaning their grade point average and number of credits earned to date were not considered.

Instrument(s)

The researcher designed a five question survey to be used to collect information from students (see Appendix). Ideas for the questions were generated by spending an afternoon in the student union informally talking to students about their concerns. No one spoken to had any idea that they were contributing to the creation of this survey. Instead of using a number scale, terms signifying varying degrees of importance were devised. Respondents were to choose the most applicable selection. The survey was created so as to be completed within two minutes or less. The idea was to not have volunteers somehow consider this minor task as more intrusive than it really was.

Appendix

Graduate School Motivation Survey Questions

- Q1. How would you rate financial considerations as a reason for attending graduate school?
- Q2. How would you rate personal satisfaction/ self-esteem as a reason for attending graduate school?
- Q3. How would you rate attaining a specific position as a reason for attending graduate school?
- Q4. How would you rate lack of current opportunities as a reason for attending graduate school?
- Q5. How would you rate the likelihood of an increased quality of life as a reason for attending graduate school?
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Note: Students were given five choices from which to select their responses. They were:

HIGHLY SIGNIFICANT (HS)

MAJOR FACTOR (MF)

SOMEWHAT PERTINENT (SP)

INDIFFERENT (IND)

NOT RELEVANT (NR)

Data Collection Procedure

Graduate courses at most universities are offered predominately in the evenings. The premise being that most students hold full-time work positions and want to attend classes around their employment obligations. Classes are not held on Friday evenings. The researcher simply roamed throughout the college of education on various days and at non-specific times. Prospective participants were accosted in person and asked if they would be willing to take a minute and answer a few questions. There was no compensation offered and no identifying information gathered from the student.

Results

Individual qualitative analysis is needed to address the findings of each of the questions that were proposed on the student survey (see Table 1). Mathematical analysis is not necessary, as the admissions committees are seeking to better understand the reasoning and motivation of prospective students. The relevant significance needs to be determined in order to design new recruiting programs for major academic institutions.

Question 1: Financial Considerations

It is clearly obvious that money is a major consideration for prospective students, as 90% of respondents chose MF or HS. Those who did not list it as such are probably not concerned with money, as in they have plenty of it already. Of course, there is also that small contingency of individuals who are able to attend graduate school on a fellowship or some type of scholarship program at no expense. Included with the concept of being able to generate more earnings, after completion of such a program, is also the consideration of the expense to attend the college of education. It has been shown in previous studies, that those who attain a higher level of education are able to more than

double the amount of their lifetime earnings. So when one balances out the expense of a graduate program, say even \$50,000, it is a small amount to pay compared to the overall amount of income earned over the span of one's life.

Question 2: Personal Satisfaction

While each of us would desire to do what makes us feel good about ourselves, it is apparent from the results that this is not necessarily a strong enough incentive to enter graduate school. Only 11% of the students surveyed listed it as being MF or HS, which is in stark contrast to what was learned from question 1. It would be fair to say that with the amount of effort required and the significant expense that is incurred, that how people feel about themselves is not a strong enough factor for entering graduate school. Surely, people would attempt other means to raise their self-esteem, however they apparently require much less effort and expense. It should be noted that there was no overwhelming selection from the remaining three choices, with a fairly even dispersion displayed.

Question 3: Specific Position

Keeping in mind that most positions in the field of education require specific levels of varying background, it is to be noted that this was the one question that had the most even distribution of responses. Many teachers seeking a master's degree are simply keeping up with education requirements, while others are looking to move up into an administrative opening. However, there are many positions that require a specialized degree, such as guidance counselor, speech therapist, and reading coach. So the relevance of seeking a certain position is important in almost half the surveys completed, with 46% picking MF or HS. It may be discerned from the rest of the responses that working within the education field comes with it the obligation to increase one's learning.

Question 4: Current Opportunities

In today's economy, it is not hard to understand why many people wish to go back to school. Businesses are shutting down and many practices in industry are being consolidated. Although it is likely that most individuals enrolling in a master's level program within the college of education have had previous experience in the field, it cannot be automatically assumed. Many people are seeking to begin new careers, either out of a desire to do something different or simply due to poor job prospects within their current occupation. And, of course, many students go straight from a bachelor program.

It has to be agreed from the results of the survey that people are very concerned with the job market. Only 14% of those responding chose NR or IND for this question, with almost half (44%) considering it to be a major factor (MF). It can be assumed that it is common knowledge to most that the more qualified an applicant is, the more likely they are to be offered the position that they are applying for. Hence, the value of an education can never be underestimated in relation to job opportunities.

Question 5: Increased Quality

If there is one query on the survey that students were most certain about, it would have to be this one. A resounding 98% of the respondents chose this factor to be highly significant (HS) in their reasoning for deciding to earn a graduate degree. Not one single student chose any of the bottom three selections, with the other two saying it was a major factor (MF) for them. These results just go to show how each individual wishes to attain the best lifestyle possible and that they believe the training and knowledge that comes with a master's degree will possibly allow them to reach their goals. Along with this comes the notion that one will best be able to provide this lifestyle to one's family.

Table 1

Dispersion of Responses to Graduate School Motivation Survey

Main Consideration	NR*	IND	SP	MF	HS
Financial Considerations	2	3	5	10	80
Personal Satisfaction	32	23	34	9	2
Specific Position	24	12	18	26	20
Current Opportunities	8	6	24	44	18
Increased Quality	0	0	0	2	98

Note: N= 100

* Abbreviations Stand for as Follows:

NR= Not Relevant

IND= Indifferent

SP= Somewhat Pertinent

MF= Major Factor

HS= Highly Significant

Discussion

Limitations

It needs to be noted that the nature of this study was not particularly exacting or in-depth. There was no use of detailed field notes, audio or video recorders, or prolonged exposure to participants. The research was conducted by one individual with no member checking initiated. A minimal amount of resources was needed to complete the study. As data were collected with only one instrument, there was no triangulation possible. There was no collaboration with participants, as the general concepts for the questions came from students who were not directly involved with the study.

Delimitation

Results may be dissimilar for graduate students enrolled in other types of programs, such as law, medicine, or doctorate. There might have been a significant difference in the breakdown of responses, had gender, age, and work experience been considered. Also, the region of the country may have a measurable influence on the general attitudes of students.

Recommendations

As this was the first such study of its kind, it is easily advised that more follow-up research be conducted to better understand the reasoning of prospective graduate students. These findings indicate that some factors are extremely pertinent and weigh heavily upon the minds of students. More elaborate instruments need to be devised to elicit more detailed responses from participants. If it is possible, it is suggested that select, nationally-renowned institutions conduct their own information gathering to see if there are patterns to be found from within this limited subset of data.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to gather information about graduate student attitudes and motivation for attending a post-bachelor program of education. The findings indicate that financial considerations and a likelihood of an increased quality of life are, by far, the leading reasons for individuals increasing their level of education. With this information now in hand, admissions committees may now be better equipped to design recruitment programs that are better tailored to their prospective students.

More study is required to know for sure if these reasons are considered equally around the nation. A more detailed sampling of questions and participants will help to pinpoint more relevant and specific motivations. However, this simple survey was adequate to understand that there is a breakdown of factors for individuals, and that these reasons do come with varying levels of applicable relevance. Once universities are better able to tap into these motivations, student enrollment may not only stop declining, but also reverse itself in an upward manner. That trend would benefit both individuals, and society as a whole. Thus, the value of this study should not be simply understated.