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Varieties of research experience: Doctoral student perceptions of preparedness for future success



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ABSTRACT

Scholarly research is important for the future career success of doctoral students. Additionally, today's doctoral students will drive the direction of tomorrow's management research. Therefore, it is vital to assess the factors that contribute to producing doctoral program graduates who are prepared to conduct research. This study surveyed Ph.D. students in management and related programs regarding research experiences in graduate school, and program emphasis on scientific rigor versus practical relevance. Although results varied by sub-discipline, findings showed relationships between these factors and current research productivity and perceptions of preparedness for future research-oriented job activities. Among the experience factors contributing to these outcomes were conducting research as part of a team, generating one's own research ideas, and being involved in externally funded research. Overall findings also suggested that Ph.D. programs emphasize theory over practice. Opportunities for improving management doctoral education and closing the relevance vs. rigor gap are discussed.

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For Ph.D. students and faculty members alike, research productivity is arguably one of the most important criteria in evaluating success (Bowling & Burns, 2010; Brush, Duhaime, Gartner, Stewart, et al., 2003; Gist, 1996; Mitchell, 2007). A wide variety of academic career opportunities and rewards are contingent upon one's scholarly research record (Mitchell, 2007). Training Ph.D. students in an environment offering them the tools and experiences to be productive researchers is therefore an important aim of any doctoral program. In turn, today's Ph.D. graduates will train tomorrow's undergraduate, MBA, and doctoral students, as well as shape the direction of management theory, practice, and research. Thus, doctoral education is critical to the future of the field of management. However, in comparison to other degree programs in colleges of business, Ph.D. program effectiveness remains under-investigated (Mitchell, 2007).

Ph.D. programs, unlike undergraduate, MBA, and executive education programs, are rarely profitable for universities (Wimbrush, 2008). For example, it is typical in the United States and Canada that in return for teaching classes or assisting faculty, doctoral students receive compensation packages in the form of tuition waivers, health benefits, office space, and a monthly stipend that, in total, reaches the tens of thousands per year, per student. However, what distinguishes doctoral

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programs from other programs is the production of scholarly research by students and faculty members. Given the important role doctoral students play in current research, the substantial role they will play in future research and education, and the considerable cost of training and maintaining them, it is prudent for doctoral programs to take a closer look at the effectiveness of training practices for producing prepared and successful graduates. It may be taken for granted that the experiences doctoral students receive in graduate school are preparing them for the academic job requirement of conducting quality research, when in fact, some have suggested there may be a mismatch between the content of doctoral programs and the demands of academia (Mitchell, 2007). Furthermore, Ph.D. students may take any number of paths after graduation, not only academic careers. They may pursue public or private-sector jobs, engage in consulting along with academia, or change career paths at some point. Therefore, a better understanding of the experiences Ph.D. students have in graduate school and how these experiences contribute to their career preparedness is needed.

Although research has examined management Ph.D. student experiences by surveying professors (Mitchell, 2007), few studies have considered the perspective of students. Smith, Williams, Yasin, and Pitchford (2014) examined Ph.D. student perceptions of their entrepreneurial and business skills while Lean (2012) surveyed student perceptions of enterprise skills for their future careers. However, the specific skill of conducting research remains under-examined. Therefore, the present study sought to directly examine doctoral student perceptions regarding research-related experiences in graduate school and to investigate relationships between these experiences and current research productivity and perceptions of preparedness to perform research-related activities in the future whether in academia or another employment environment. Additionally, the present research sought to examine students' perceptions of the emphasis placed on scientific rigor versus practical relevance in their training and the effect of this emphasis on current productivity and preparedness.

1. Doctoral student experiences

Management journals specializing in education place considerable emphasis on topics such as teaching techniques at the Bachelor's and Master's level (e.g., effective use of case studies, Christensen & Carlile, 2009), while doctoral training is less often considered. In light of several studies suggesting that Master's programs in management departments may inadequately train graduates in the most important competencies for on-the-job success (Navarro, 2008; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009), a similar investigation with respect to Ph.D. programs is warranted. Mitchell (2007) noted several areas in which management doctoral students may be undertrained for academic positions including preparation for obtaining funding and experience with the process of producing research (i.e. publications). Moreover, Lean (2012) uncovered areas where Ph.D. students may not be adequately prepared to handle the business side of academia such as budgeting, managing others, negotiation, etc. Clearly, additional research in this area is necessary.

Doctoral programs vary widely in the opportunities available to students, and this undoubtedly affects what students are able to accomplish, how prepared they feel to enter the workforce, and what types of activities they feel most/least prepared to do. For example, one study found that internal financial support, professionally active faculty, and opportunities to engage in research predicted doctoral student research productivity (Brewer, Douglas, Facer, & O'Toole, 1999). Others have found that the type and amount of supervision (faculty mentorship) provided to doctoral students can affect key outcomes such as dissertation completion (Gatfield, 2005). These studies suggest that a host of Ph.D. program elements influence the production of prepared, successful graduates, and the overall success of departments and management research as a whole. In short, what doctoral students are exposed to in their training has an effect on the degree-granting school's reputation, the student's ability to function as a researcher, and on the advancement of the management discipline.

Thus, the primary goal of the current study was to examine characteristics of the research experiences doctoral students are exposed to throughout their training. Rather than inferring student experience from course offerings (Mitchell, 2007), student perceptions of the content and depth of their research experiences were directly assessed. Relationships between research experiences in graduate school and two important outcomes: current research productivity and perceptions of preparedness to successfully conduct research in the future were also examined.

Current research productivity is important because programs are typically evaluated on the research outputs of their graduate students as well as their faculty. Publication records in graduate school have been shown to affect career-long publication success and prestige of first job placement (Judge, Kammeyer-Mueller, & Bretz, 2004). Subsequently, prestige of first job affects future career mobility (Bedeian, Cavazos, Hunt, & Jauch, 2010). Furthermore, it has been found that doctoral student research assistance is vital to the success of ongoing research, particularly high-quality research (Valle & Schultz, 2011), and to the overall production of knowledge (Hobson Jones, & Deane, 2005).

Student self-perceptions of preparedness to perform post-graduation, research-related job activities was also assessed. Here the focus was on those activities that are most indicative of successful scholarly productivity in an initial academic position (e.g., attempting to obtain funding, conducting research, publishing studies). Although being a productive and successful faculty member encompasses activities beyond those considered here (e.g., teaching, service), and Ph.D. students may not all select academic careers after finishing, the specific focus of this study is on preparedness to conduct and publish research. As mentioned previously, scholarly research activity is vital to success in academic positions, especially to newly graduating doctoral students and early-career faculty members. Thus, this study sought to determine which graduate school research experiences are related to perceived preparedness to perform future research activities.

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