

**February 4 2009**

Dear Darlene Ray-Johnson,

This is a follow-up email about correspondence you have had with graduate students regarding the proposed continuous enrollment policy.

Many graduate students across many different departments have been corresponding about the new continuous enrollment policy. One issue that has come up is whether requiring continuous enrollment will increase degree completion. A student contacted you about this last semester to ask what evidence exists for this claim. Your response was twofold: first, you attached a document (re-attached below) by Professor Deborah Carter and Carmen McCullen that reviews literature on degree completion. Second, you referenced the question-and-answer section of the Rackham website under "What evidence supports the claim that continuous enrollment results in higher completion rates?" Thank you for your response last semester.

We now have a couple of sets of follow-up questions. The first set addresses the document authored by Carter and McCullen that you sent to us. Our reading of the document is that it does not appear to support the move to continuous enrollment. Indeed, a continuous enrollment policy is not even mentioned as one of the evidence-supported remedies to some of the problems graduate programs face. Regardless, we found the Carter and McCullen piece to be provocative. If anything, it appears (on our reading, at least) to undermine the case for continuous enrollment, suggesting that Rackham's attention might be better used elsewhere. Strategies recommended by Carter and McCullen include reducing cohort size, increasing financial aid, admitting students with higher GRE scores and prior Master's degrees, shaping faculty mentoring so that it is "culturally and ethnically aligned" with students' needs (pg. 2), encouraging students to publish early, increasing the availability of mental health services, and many others. Is there any evidence, then, that requiring continuous enrollment is a better strategy to pursue than these other strategies, or that continuous enrollment adds something over and above these strategies? If so, why does Professor Deborah Carter (along with Carmen McCallum), director of the graduate program in Higher Education at the University of Michigan, not mention such evidence, or indeed continuous enrollment at all, in the manuscript, which is entitled "Doctoral Degree Completion"?

Our second set of questions relates to the question and answer section on the Rackham website under "What evidence supports the claim that continuous enrollment results in higher completion rates?". The answer has three paragraphs.

The first paragraph references Nettles and Millet's *Three Magic Letters: Getting to Ph.D.* The authors find a correlation between continuous enrollment and "steady progress." We find this correlation unsurprising; after all, taking time off is often a sign that there are barriers to degree completion. However, as correlation does not imply causation, we are not yet convinced that this correlation means that a continuous enrollment *policy* will

enable more students to finish their degree. The question is: what makes people take time off in the first place? If they need a break, a more restrictive policy might have the opposite effect from what is intended. Indeed, Nettles and Millet find that household income, having children, and dissatisfaction with the doctoral program are the strongest predictors of taking time off (pgs. 170-171). Since a continuous enrollment policy can hardly be expected to erase these problems, is there any evidence above and beyond correlation that such a policy will enhance graduate students' progress?

The second paragraph references The National Center for Education Statistics' "The Path Through Graduate School," and claims that the NCES finds that "The table on page 60 compares the degree attainment rates for students who were continuously enrolled (67.9%) to those students who took off at least one semester (56.4%)." This claim appears to us to be misleading, as it includes Master's and first-professional (e.g., architecture, law, medicine) degrees. When examining doctoral degrees in isolation, one finds that only 5.3 percent of doctoral students who were continuously enrolled had completed their degrees by 2003, compared to 4.4 percent of doctoral students who were not continuously enrolled (the low percentages probably result from the short time span of the study). This 1.1 percentage point difference is perhaps substantively trivial; further, it does not appear to be statistically distinguishable from zero (see Table 17, pg. 65 of the 119 page pdf). Our interpretation, therefore, is that the NCES study does not provide evidence in support of the move to continuous enrollment; indeed, the NCES study itself never recommends a policy of continuous enrollment. Does Rackham interpret the NCES study differently?

The third paragraph of the Rackham question-and-answer website claims that "It isn't the [continuous enrollment] requirement itself that makes the difference, rather the requirement brings a greater likelihood that students will be connected to their programs, will be attended to by their faculty mentors, will have a structure that encourages their progress, and will have milestones and deadlines that provide a path to completion." On what data does Rackham base this claim? Is there more than anecdotal evidence from other comparable schools that continuous enrollment policies promote these mutually beneficial connections between students and programs?

One final question: are there any scholars who have argued specifically that a policy of continuous enrollment increases degree completion, or is otherwise beneficial to doctoral students in any way?

Thank you for your time, we look forward to hearing from you.

### **The Continuous Enrollment Working Group**

#### *Members:*

Elana Buch (Anthropology), Jesse Carr (American Culture), Meagan Elliott (Sociology), Joshua Friedman, Brett Levy (Higher Education), Patrick O'Mahen (Political Science), Spencer Piston (Political Science), Shaun McGirr (Political Science)