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Understanding Individuals' Motivations to Enroll in Graduate and
Professional Degree Programs

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Why am I here? Why are any of us here? While these may sound like existential wonderings, they are actually the basis of an important research question. I am interested in why people choose to enroll in graduate and professional degree programs. What are the motivations behind this major choice to spend time, money and energy? This is the research question I will undertake. A few studies have been done researching the motivations behind certain groups or types of people enrolling in particular graduate and professional degree programs (Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Beitler, 1997; Stephens, 1994). Through my research, I will add to this body of literature. Moreover, my study will add to the existing literature in a novel way by asking whether the length of time between undergraduate degree completion and enrollment in a graduate/professional degree program has any bearing on motivations for enrollment in the graduate/professional degree program. In the next sections of this paper, I will introduce the topic to be studied and state its importance, describe the conceptual and theoretical framework supporting the topic, outline the methodology to be used in the study, address some limitations of the study, provide a review of the previous research literature on this topic, provide and analyze the results of a survey on this topic, discuss my findings and provide a conclusion.

This research question is important for a number of reasons. First, with an understanding of why people chose to enroll in a graduate/professional degree program, professors and educational administrators can better understand the motivations of their students. With this information, the curriculum might be more closely aligned with the students' goals. Additionally, with an understanding of why people chose to enroll in a graduate/professional degree program, the leaders of graduate/professional degree programs might better recruit students. Brochures, recruiting sessions and websites could be more closely tailored to the students' motivations and interests. Finally, "the best ideas are always those that have a high

degree of personal interest; ideas to guide empirical study must be motivating enough to sustain interest throughout the often long and arduous research process” (Wentzel, 2006, p. 316). This research question is extremely interesting to me. I am currently a first-year master's student in the Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education (HALE) Department in the College of Education at Michigan State University (MSU). Through EAD 868, the HALE Pro-Seminar, I was introduced to my fellow first-year HALE students. These individuals come from a wide-range of backgrounds, including multiple countries, racial and ethnic identities, states, and undergraduate degree institutions. One question I have asked myself in the nine months since meeting these colleagues is what drew such different people to the same place in time, a graduate degree program. It is important to mention at the onset that the topic for this study is motivations for enrolling in a graduate/professional degree program. For reasons I will explain in an upcoming section, my sample happens to be HALE MA students. I will be careful not to mix my topic and sample, but my interest in this topic has emerged from my enrollment in the HALE MA program.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

To begin, it is important to provide definitions of key concepts to be used in this study. The term graduate/professional degree program refers to a degree-granting program that can follow after a bachelors/undergraduate degree program. Graduate/professional degree programs can include masters and doctoral degrees in any field as well as specialized professional degrees in law, medicine, journalism, education, social work and more.

The unit of analysis in this study will be individuals. Previous studies have shown that some motivations that factor into an individual's decision to enroll in a graduate or professional degree program include aspiration for knowledge in the particular field, aspiration for doing

research in the particular field, aspiration to teach in the particular field, aspiration to help others, aspiration for career advancement, aspiration for a higher salary, aspiration for respect, aspiration to change careers, and lack of a better option (Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Beitler, 1997; Stephens, 1994).

The theoretical basis for this study is that many factors influence an individual's decision to enroll in a graduate or professional degree program, with a desire for knowledge in the field as one of the most important (Anderson & Swazey, 1998). While there is some theory in this area, it is not united across a broad set of individuals in different degree programs. For this reason, the current study will aim to be both exploratory and explanatory in nature. I will explore the possibility that there are other factors than those previously discovered that influence a person to enroll in a degree program.

This study will be grounded in the intellectual foundation of adult learner motivation theory. Malcolm Knowles, Elwood Holton and Richard Swanson, some of the pioneers and important thinkers in this field, characterized motivation to learn as one of six core adult learning principles (1998). Understanding adult learner motivation is necessary to understanding the best methods of educating adult learners (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998). I plan to execute this study with the knowledge that understanding adult learner motivation is helpful and can aid in improved educational processes.

Finally, in setting forth the conceptual and theoretical framework for this paper, it is important for me to acknowledge that I will be writing this paper in an interpretive style. Writing can be done as "reporting, interpreting, constituting, and praxis" (Graue, 2006, p. 517). "When writing is interpretation, an interpreter is implied. There is recognition of the interpreter's role in the field, in the construction of the narrative, but he or she is not the central character of

the story” (Graue, 2006, p. 520). In this paper, I will not be the central character, but I do play a role in constructing and interpreting the story. I will comment on this interpretation in upcoming sections.

Methods and Approach

To understand student motivations for enrolling in graduate or professional programs, it would be best to survey people enrolled in a wide-range of graduate and professional programs in a wide-range of colleges and universities in many different countries. To ensure against coverage error, it would also be important to survey people who have chosen not to enroll in graduate/professional degree programs (Dillman, 2007). This kind of study is not within the scope of this project, because of both time and financial limitations. My sample will consist of individuals enrolled in the HALE Master of Arts (MA) program at MSU. I have chosen this sample because I have access to this group as a currently enrolled HALE MA student. Additionally, because of the piecemeal nature of the existing literature on student motivations for enrolling in graduate/professional degree program, sampling this population will add to the literature. Finally, I must acknowledge my personal interest in this sample. I am a current HALE MA student and am curious to learn more about the motivations behind my classmates' decisions to enroll in the program. In this way, I am exhibiting some of the qualities of a “conceptual humanist” or “social humanist” (Bean, 2006, p. 356).

I chose to gather information on the motivations of individuals to enroll in graduate and professional programs through an online survey. The survey was hosted at www.surveymonkey.com and consisted of two questions: “For what reason or reasons did you decide to enroll in a graduate (Masters) program? Elaborate as much as you would like!” and “How many months or years passed between the completion of your undergraduate degree

program and your enrollment in the HALE MA program?". From here on, I will refer to the first question as Question 1 and the second question as Question 2.

I emailed the survey's weblink and a brief introduction of myself and my research project to forty-two current HALE MA students. Two days after I emailed the first request, I emailed a reminder. I identified this sample through the HALE Masters Program Information Site's Group Roster on ANGEL. In my email, I explained that I was researching student motivations for enrolling in graduate/professional degree programs for a class project. In order to encourage honest responses and establish trust, I explained that I would not track respondents and the information collected would be kept confidential (Dillman, 2007). I attempted to reduce perceived social cost for the participants by pointing out the brief nature of the survey and not asking for much personal information (Dillman, 2007). In order to encourage responses, I thanked the survey participants in advance (Dillman, 2007).

There is no way to ensure that the only people who completed the survey are actually HALE MA students. There is also no way to ensure that the participants truthfully answered the questions. These are two issues that could threaten the validity of the survey responses. This survey will not have sampling error, as it will be sent to all individuals in the survey population.

I did not provide possible answers for participants to select from so as to not influence their responses. I wanted respondents to conceptualize the question as it naturally came to them. Nonresponse error was not a major issue as the survey was completed by a significant percentage of the enrolled HALE MA students (fifteen out of a possible forty-two).

A web-based survey is a good method for collecting data in this particular study. A web-based survey takes less time to complete than an interview. In this way, I attempted to decrease a cost of completing the survey (Dillman, 2007). The reward for completing the survey will be

somewhat minimal, and its value will vary for each participant. The reward will be helping a fellow graduate student. An additional reward might be having curiosity satisfied if the results of the study can be released to the participants. I am interested in discussing the release of the results with the participants and the administrators of the HALE MA program with Professor Minor. I will need to think about the ethical implications and privacy issues. Another possible reward is the idea that this study could benefit the HALE MA program, strengthening the curriculum, the recruiting and the future cohorts.

Limitations

The scope of this study is admittedly small. The nature of the assignment that this study will be completed for is a short research paper of fifteen pages. Additionally, the time frame for the study, one month, is short. These limitations lead to the small scope of this study. While it would be interesting to survey students in a wide-range of master's, doctoral, and professional degree programs at a variety of institutions around the world to gather data on their motivations to enroll in graduate and professional degree programs, looking at differences in age, gender, racial/ethnic background, socioeconomic status, undergraduate and graduate degree program, etc., such a large-scale study is not within the time and financial resources of this assignment.

Additionally, this study will focus on the participants' personal motivations for enrolling in a masters program. It will not address why they chose a Masters of Arts, Higher, Adult and Lifelong Education or Michigan State University in particular. Those are interesting questions, but outside the scope of this study.

One of the complications of the limited time frame for this study is that I do not have time to conduct face-to-face follow-up interviews with the survey respondents. These face-to-face follow-up interviews would not only be helpful in clarifying respondent meaning in survey

responses but would also allow me to utilize an important piece of feminist research strategy-trustworthiness. Trustworthiness, the “validity, credibility, and believability of [...] research, could be better attained with follow-up interviews and presentation of my coding and interpretation of the participants’ responses (Harrison, MacGibbon & Morton, 2001, p. 324). Furthermore, true reciprocity with my research subjects can not be guaranteed without allowing them input on my interpretation of their responses and providing them with my findings (Harrison, MacGibbon & Morton, 2001).

Literature Review

The previous research on the topic of student motivation for pursuing graduate/professional degrees is relatively scant. Anderson and Swazey had a large sample of approximately fifteen hundred individuals at ninety-nine departments from research universities across the United States, but only surveyed doctoral students in chemistry, civil engineering, microbiology and sociology (Anderson & Swazey, 1998). They found the most important motivation for enrolling in the graduate/professional degree program was “desire for knowledge in this field” (Anderson & Swazey, 1998, p. 5). The second most important motivation was “desire to do research in this field” (Anderson & Swazey, 1998, p. 5). Fifty-six percent of respondents indicated that “desire to advance in my current employment” was “not very or not at all” important (Anderson & Swazey, 1998, p. 5).

Beitler conducted in-depth interview with master’s level students at one institution, doctoral level students at another institution, and graduates of programs at both institutions (Beitler, 1997). She found that there were three major motivations for individuals to enroll in graduate/professional degree programs: “learning for career advancement or training needs, learning for interpersonal effectiveness, and learning for the sake of learning” (Beitler, 1997, pp.

8-9). "The majority of [her] participants were motivated by their career goals" (Beitler, 1997, p. 9).

Stephens surveyed nearly four hundred African-American undergraduate journalism and communication students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Stephens, 1994). Stephens was interested in these students' motivations for enrolling in graduate/professional degree programs. The most important motivation Stephens identified was "self-actualization" (Stephens, 1997, p. 6). "Better pay" and "better career prospects" were the second and third most important motivators (Stephens, 1997, p. 6).

Overall, the results from these three studies do not point to a common most important motivation for enrolling in a graduate/professional degree program. One reason for this disparity in results is the differing nature of the survey populations: doctoral students mainly in engineering and the biological and physical sciences at American major research universities, master's and doctoral students at two smaller institutions, and African-American undergraduate journalism and communication majors at HBCUs. Interestingly, participants in Beitler's and Stephens' studies seemed to share common motivations. In both of those studies, career advancement was identified as one of the most important motivations for enrolling in a graduate/professional degree program.

Data Analysis

Overall, I received fifteen responses to my online survey, which have been included in Table 1. All respondents answered both questions. Only two responses to Question 2 were unclear with only a number listed and no clarification on whether the respondent meant months or years (see Table 1, Respondents 7 and 12). This was a case of measurement error (Dillman, 2007). In analyzing the responses to the survey questions, it became apparent that follow-up

interviews would have been helpful in clarifying the respondents' intended meaning. "There is no substitute for prolonged and focused conversations between trusted parties to discover what is important to the interviewees and how respondents understand key elements in their own lives" (Bean, 2006, p. 361). Follow-up interviews were not possible in this study because of time limitations. Without the very important follow-up interviews, I was left to decide the respondents' intended meaning myself. I began this process by coding the Question 1 responses, utilizing open and axial coding (Babbie, 2007). The Question 1 responses came in the form of phrases, sentences and paragraphs as seen in Table 1. Some survey respondents identified just one motivation, while others discussed multiple motivations. I disassembled the responses to identify key concepts. After breaking down the Question 1 survey responses into parts, thirty-three reasons were identified from the fifteen respondents. The three most prevalent motivations for enrolling in a graduate/professional degree program, as determined by my coding, were career advancement, professional growth and development, and personal growth and satisfaction. With my coding, eleven of the fifteen respondents identified career advancement as a motivation, six of the respondents identified professional growth and development as a motivation, and six of the respondents identified personal growth and satisfaction as a motivation. I included responses such as "career advancement" from Respondent 1, "it was a stated requirement when I got hired" from Respondent 2, "to move into a different career path" from Respondent 3, and "to be more competitive in the job market" from Respondent 6 in the category of career advancement. I included responses such as "professional development" from Respondent 1, "acquire more knowledge and skills to support work" from Respondent 7, and "professional growth" from Respondent 9 in the category of professional growth and development. I included responses such as "personal satisfaction" from Respondent 1, "to feel like I was making progress with my

life” from Respondent 3, and “personal growth” from Respondent 9 in the category of personal growth and satisfaction. When a response did not clearly fit into a category, I made a strategic decision not to force it into one. This left nine of the thirty-three responses to Question 1 uncategorized. These uncategorized responses included “investigate more of where I fit into the university” from Respondent 5, “experience another culture” from Respondent 6, and “understand my undergraduate experiences more critically” from Respondent 9.

Responses to Question 2 revealed that the respondents varied greatly in the length of time that had passed between the completion of their undergraduate degree program and start of their enrollment in the HALE MA program (see Table 1). As previously mentioned, only two responses to Question 2 were unclear with only a number listed and no clarification on whether the respondent meant months or years (see Table 1, Respondents 7 and 12). Of the thirteen clear responses to Question 2, five respondents indicated a gap of one year or less, two respondents indicated a gap of greater than one year and less than or equal to two years, three respondents indicated a gap of greater than two years and less than or equal to nine years, and three respondents indicated a gap of greater than nine years and less than or equal to eleven years.

Discussion

This section of the paper will consist of a reflection on my findings and a discussion of how my findings fit into the previous literature. As the topic I am focusing on is the motivations behind the decision to enroll in a graduate/professional degree program, Question 2 by itself is not important. Using Question 2 to further reflect on Question 1 is very important and provides a new way of looking at the question of motivations for graduate/professional degree programs. Namely, does period of time between completion of bachelors degree program and enrollment in a graduate/professional degree program have any

bearing on motivations for enrollment in graduate/professional degree programs? The small size of the sample, and the resultant small number of respondents, make grand declarations on this issue imprudent, but some important issues warrant discussion. Seven of the eight survey respondents who indicated a gap of more than one year between their undergraduate degree program and the start of their enrollment in the HALE MA program, responded that career advancement was a motivation for enrolling in a graduate/professional degree program. It appears that career advancement is a very significant motivating factor to enroll in a graduate/professional degree program for people who are a year or more removed from their undergraduate degree completion.

The most significant finding of my research is that career advancement was the most frequent response as a motivation for enrollment in a graduate/professional degree program. Career advancement was mentioned almost twice as frequently as the second and third most frequent motivations, professional growth/development and personal growth/satisfaction. This means that career advancement is the most significant motivation for HALE MA students. Career advancement seems to be a very reward driven motivator, and not as much of a learning driven motivator. When a higher degree is seen as necessary for career advancement, there may be implications for student learning. It is important to note that most of the respondents that indicated career advancement as a motivation for enrolling in a graduate/professional degree program also listed other motivations as well.

My finding of career advancement as the most significant motivation to enroll in a graduate/professional program most closely corresponds to Beitler's finding of career goals as the most important motivator (Beitler, 1997). My findings have some correspondence with Stephens, who found career motivations as second most important (Stephens, 1994). My

findings vary most significantly from Anderson & Swazey, who found career advancement to be not important to the majority of their respondents (Anderson & Swazey, 1998). These correspondences and differences might correlate to differences in disciplines sampled in each study or degree program type of respondents (undergraduate, master's, doctoral). There is not enough evidence to make a strong proclamation. Additional studies could help answer these questions and will be addressed more thoroughly in the conclusion.

Conclusion

In response to the question of why this research is important, I answer that it adds another small piece to the existing literature on student motivation for enrolling in graduate and professional degree programs. As previously mentioned, the research in this area published to date has been limited. The limitations in the published research include number of studies, type of students surveyed and number of students surveyed. While my analysis does not complete the picture, it adds to the existing body of literature in a small but important way.

Another limitation of the small and specific sample I used (HALE MA students at MSU) that was realized after the literature review and data analysis were completed is that student motivations for enrolling in graduate/professional degree programs might be somewhat specific to the discipline that is being studied. Because of the minimal number of studies that have addressed the research question of motivations for enrollment in graduate/professional degree programs, it is not possible to say that motivations are discipline specific, but it is a possibility. To answer this question, future research must be done.

This future research could come in at least two forms. One direction future research could take is more sampling done on different populations. This would help round out the very incomplete picture and may answer the question of whether motivations for enrolling in

graduate/professional degree programs are discipline specific. A second, and better, direction future research could take is to do a thorough and extensive study on motivations for enrolling in a graduate/professional degree program. Students from a variety of disciplines at a variety of institutions could be sampled, as well as individuals who have explicitly chosen to not enroll in graduate/professional degree programs. This would require extensive resources of time and funding.

In thinking about possible audiences of my research, which could include practitioners, policymakers, and other researchers, it is important to analyze what my findings might mean for each group (Floden, 2006). In the context of this research topic, practitioners could include those higher education administrators that are responsible for recruiting future graduate/professional students and professors in graduate/professional degree programs that design curriculum and teach. "Practitioners could be described as asking for answers to questions about what they should do *tomorrow* to solve a problem they are having with today in *a particular class*" (Floden, 2006, p. 25). In a small way, understanding their students' motivations for being in class could help professors that teach in graduate/professional degree programs in a very immediate sense. My research question and findings could be important for policymakers as they are concerned with "hot" issues (Floden, 2006, p.25). The topic of student motivations for enrollment in graduate/professional degree programs could be a hot issue for policymakers as they consider budgeting for higher education in difficult economic times. Policymakers that are considering cutting funding for higher education might be persuaded not to if they see that the motivations for enrollment in graduate/professional degree programs line up with the policymakers desires, such as a more educated workforce. Finally, this research topic and my findings could be important for other researchers. "What researchers says they want from

research is more varied, from trying to identify a *theoretical framework* for their own research, to looking for studies that inform-and perhaps support- their *own research*, to seeking a new set of *questions* to pursue (Floden, 2006, p. 25). In the previous paragraph I explained some steps a future researcher could take. A topic that a future researcher could explore specifically because of my work is whether the amount of time that passes between completion of undergraduate degree program and enrollment in a graduate/professional degree program is tied to different motivations to enroll in a graduate/professional degree program. I began to ask this question, but am unable to definitively answer it because of incomplete data and a small and specific sample set.

In this paper, I have applied lessons of and practiced educational inquiry. I began with an introduction of the topic to be studied and its importance. This was followed by the theoretical and conceptual framework that would guide and support the research. Next, I presented the methods and approach I would use in the study. At this juncture, I analyzed some of the limitations of this study. A review of the published literature on the topic and data analysis followed. Finally, I discussed the findings from the study and concluded with steps for future research. This research project has not only led to a few important findings and advancement of the research on this topic, but also helped me develop my skills in educational inquiry.

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Table 1
Survey Responses

Respondent	Question 1	Question 2
1	professional development, career advancement, personal satisfaction of completing advanced degree	9 months
2	It was a stated requirement when I got hired.	1 summer
3	To further my education. To move into a different career path. To feel like I was making progress in my life.	about 4 years
4	I wanted to work as an international student advisor/study abroad coordinator	4 years
5	To gain a professional understanding of leadership in higher education, investigate more of where I fit into the university, also to participate in research to find my discipline of expertise.	1 year
6	To be more competitive in the job market To learn more about my interested areas To experience another culture	2months
7	acquire more knowledge and skills to support work, get higher degree.	8
8	The reason I decided to enroll in graduate school is to get an advanced degree for more professional mobility and marketability in the work market	11 years
9	I entered the master's program for personal and professional growth. I wanted a lens to understand my undergraduate experiences more critically.	3 months (a summer)
10	I am an older student with a family and a second career in fundraising, so my educational goal is more personal--not career driven.	10 years
11	I would like to be skilled and educated enough to do the work that really interests me, rather than staying in my entry-level job. Also, my husband was interested in pursuing an advanced degree as well, and when he received a full scholarship at MSU, we decided that it would be a good time for us both to go back to school.	Seven years.
12	My primary motivation for enrolling was a change in career	6

direction. However, it was also connected with some dissatisfaction in my personal life and wanting to create some change, meet new people. I felt that I needed to move to a new city in order to do that, and it coincided with my professional goal of wanting a graduate degree related to education.

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| 13 | I needed the credential to further my career. I work in higher education so it seemed fitting to study it. I have been pleasantly surprised by how much I've enjoyed the program. | I graduated from college in 1996, I enrolled in HALE in FS07, so 11 years? |
| 14 | A master's degree represents an avenue for career advancement, while also providing opportunities to research ideas and issues that I deem relevant to developing a more progressive society. | 18 months |
| 15 | To further my career opportunities | two years |
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