

2013 Graduate Student Exit Survey Report

INTRODUCTION

The Graduate Student Exit Survey (GSES) collects data from master's and doctoral graduates at the end of each academic term. The Office of Institutional Assessment (OIA) has administered this survey since 1999. Survey respondents provide information related to enrollment, employment, academic program evaluation, student satisfaction, time to degree, and financial support.

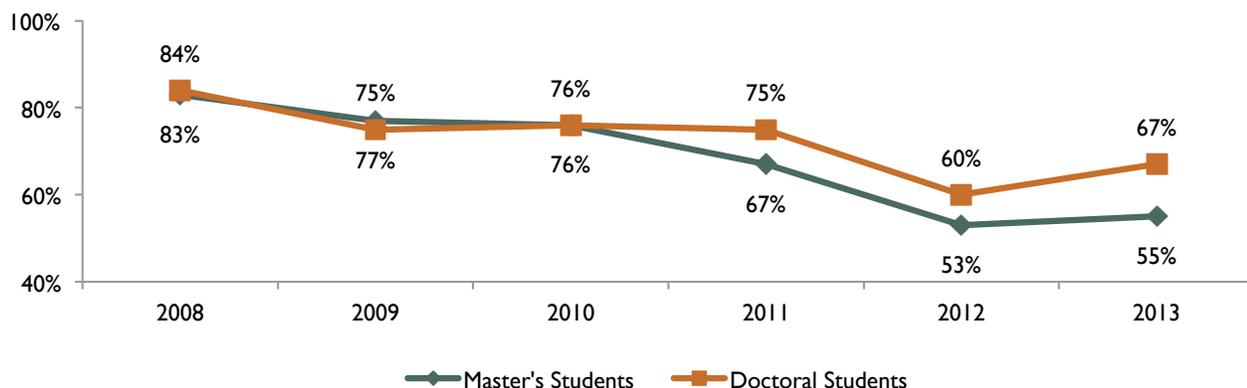
Important Notes

- Academic years are abbreviated to the year of the spring term. For example, the 2012-2013 academic year – covering summer and fall 2012 and spring 2013 graduates – is referred to as 2013.
- This *In Focus* primarily focuses on comparative data between 2008 and 2013 master's and doctoral respondents. In certain cases, multi-year data are presented.
- Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.
- Results by major from all administrations of the Graduate Student Exit Survey can be found at <https://assessment.gmu.edu>.

Response Rate

Master's and doctoral students who applied for graduation during the 2013 academic year were invited to complete the GSES online as part of the commencement application process. There were 2,970 students in the master's graduating class with 1,647 of them responding to the survey. Among doctoral students, there were 249 graduates and 167 who responded to the survey. The response rates for masters and doctoral graduates were 55% and 67%, respectively. The overall response rate for masters and doctoral graduates combined was 56%. Until 2013, the overall response rate had trended downward.

Figure I. Response Rates, 2008-2013



HIGHLIGHTS

This *In Focus* provides an overview of results from the 2013 GSES along with six-year comparative and trend data for certain survey items. All data are reported separately for master's and doctoral respondents. Following are highlights from the 2013 survey.

Master's Students

- A large proportion (81%) of 2013 master's level respondents reported working full-time in off-campus employment during most or every semester while in graduate school.
- Since 2008, about 40% of master's students have reported graduating with no educational debt.
- Consistently since 2011, master's respondents were most likely (94-96%) to be satisfied with the diversity of the student population.
- Nearly three-quarters of 2013 master's respondents reported that the time it took them to complete their academic programs was about the same as they expected, a rate similar to what 2008 respondents reported.

Doctoral Students

- Compared to 2008 doctoral respondents, a higher percentage of 2013 doctoral students reported that Mason was their first choice for graduate education.
- Significantly larger proportions of 2013 doctoral students compared to 2008 students reported favorable responses to five of the seven items evaluating program faculty. The greatest gain between years, at 14 percentage points, related to communication between faculty and students regarding needs, concerns, and suggestions.
- At a high of 98% in 2013, doctoral respondents were more likely to be satisfied with the diverse student population at Mason than their 2008 counterparts.
- Significantly higher percentages of 2013 doctoral students were satisfied with their overall Mason experience and would recommend their program to prospective students or start over in the same program again compared to 2008 respondents.

STUDENT COMMENTS

Survey respondents were asked to provide qualitative feedback on their Mason experience. Overall, nearly half commented on their experiences. Most comments concern student perceptions of the academic environment, followed by specific comments about courses and curricula. Faculty and staff may log into the comments section of the GSES online results to view a complete listing of student comments for their programs. Specific information on survey responses for each college, department and degree program can be found at <https://assessment.gmu.edu>

ENROLLMENT

Choice of Graduate School

Among 2013 master's respondents, 83% indicated that Mason was their first choice of graduate schools, a number consistent with 2008 master's respondents (see Table 1). At a rate of 79%, a noticeably higher percentage of 2013 doctoral respondents reported that Mason was their first choice compared to 72% of 2008 respondents.

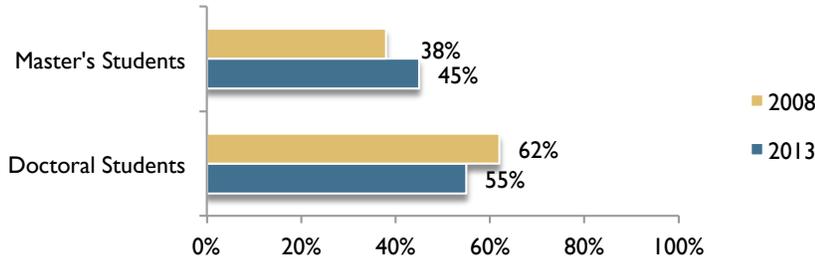
Table 1. Choice of Graduate School, 2008 vs. 2013

	Master's Students		Doctoral Students	
	2008	2013	2008	2013
First Choice	82%	83%	72%	79%
Second Choice	14%	13%	22%	16%
Third Choice	4%	4%	6%	6%

Enrollment Status

According to Figure 2, less than half of master’s respondents (45%) reported enrolling at Mason full-time during most of their graduate careers, a proportion that has increased by seven percentage points since 2008. On the other hand, the percentage of doctoral respondents who primarily enrolled at Mason on a full-time basis declined by seven percentage points.

Figure 2. Full-Time Enrollment Status, 2008 vs. 2013



EMPLOYMENT

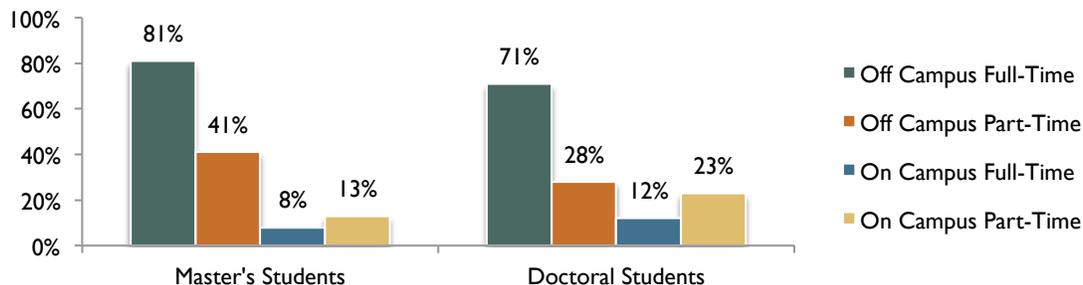
Master’s and doctoral respondents in 2008 reported working at rates of 95% and 87%, respectively (see Table 2). The 2008 respondents also reported working in a full-time job during most of their graduate education (master’s = 72%, doctoral = 41%). Among 2013 respondents, at least 81% of master’s and 71% of doctoral respondents reported working for pay every semester or most semesters (see Figure 3). Both master’s and doctoral respondents were more likely to report full-time employment in an off-campus job, followed by part-time employment off campus. Differences in the GSES employment item between 2008 and 2013 preclude any concrete comparisons being drawn about respondents. However, from both of these reporting years it can be concluded that most respondents worked for pay for much of the time they were enrolled at Mason.

Table 2. Respondents’ Employment Status During their Graduate Education, 2008

	Master’s Students	Doctoral Students
Full-time job	72%	41%
Part-time graduate assistantship	7%	31%
Other part-time job	10%	8%
Worked occasionally	5%	6%
Did not work	5%	13%

Note. Students were to select the option that best described their employment status during most of their graduate education.

Figure 3. Graduate Respondents Working Every Semester or Most Semesters, 2013



Note. On-campus part-time employment excludes assistantships, which is covered in a separate question.

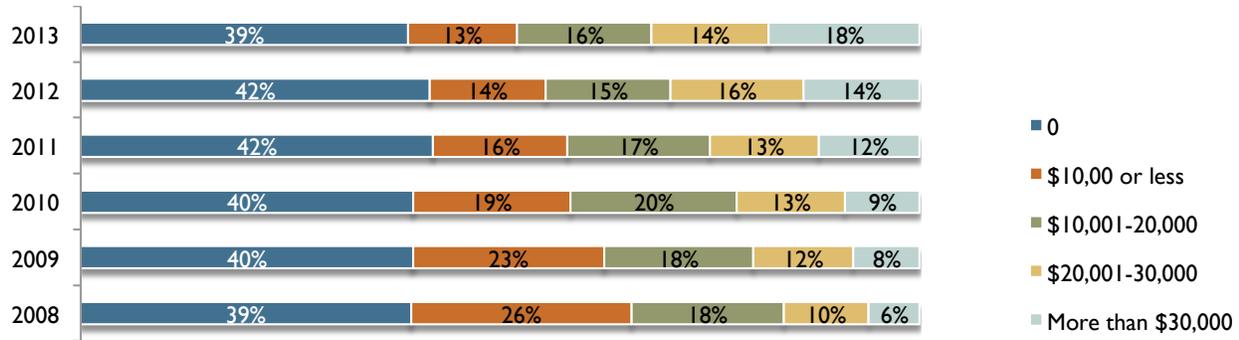
FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Educational Debt

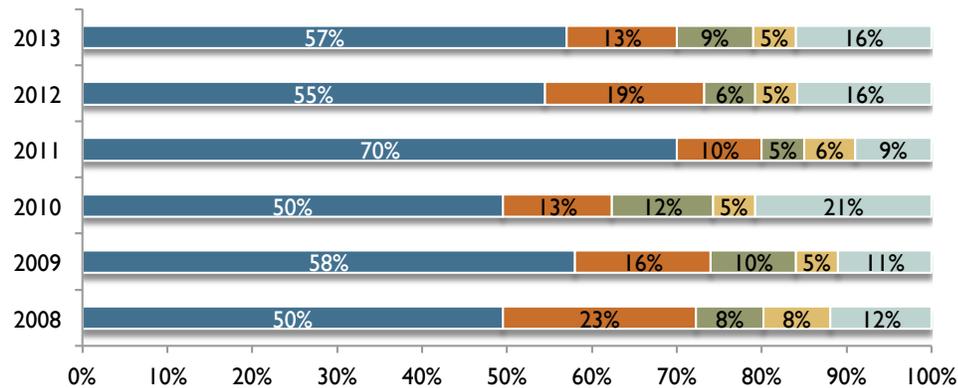
Consistently since 2008, master’s respondents reported having no educational debt at rates around 40% (see Figure 4). The proportion of doctoral respondents with no educational debt typically ranged from 50-60%, with the exception of a higher percentage of 2011 doctoral respondents. Approximately one-third of master’s students in 2013 reported owing at least \$20,000 in educational debt, a proportion double that of 2008. Meanwhile, about the same percentage of doctoral respondents reported owing at least \$20,000 in educational debt in both 2013 and 2008.

Figure 4. Educational Debt, 2008-2013

Master’s Students



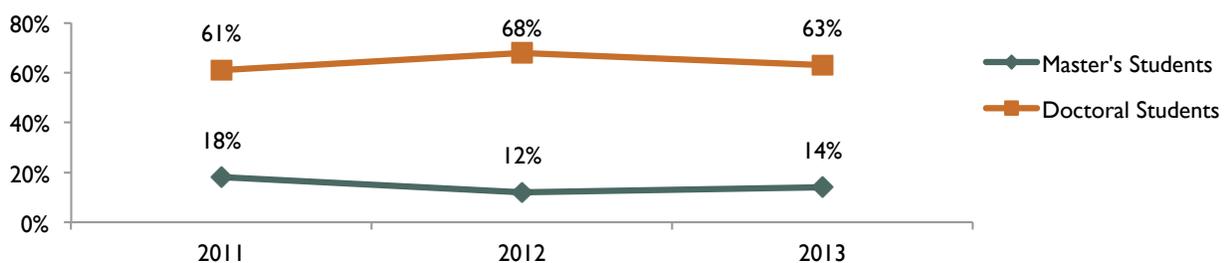
Doctoral Students



Financial Support from Mason

Starting in 2011, the GSES asked graduates if they received financial support (e.g., assistantship, fellowship, scholarship) from Mason while pursuing their graduate studies. Eighteen percent of master’s students reported receiving financial support from Mason in 2011; the percentage of respondents reporting support in 2013 declined by four percentage points (see Figure 5). Between 61-68% of doctoral respondents reported receiving financial support from Mason since 2011.

Figure 5. Respondents Receiving Financial Support from Mason, 2011-2013



ACADEMIC PROGRAM

Graduate respondents were asked to evaluate their academic programs by selecting the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements about faculty, student peers, and the academic experience.

Faculty

Items about faculty addressed three areas: teaching, communication, and mentoring/advising. Table 3 provides the percentages of 2013 respondents who strongly agreed or agreed with each statement related to faculty compared to 2008 respondents. Among master's student responses there were no significant differences between 2008 and 2013 respondents. However, master's respondents in 2013 were most likely to agree that *faculty were willing to meet with them to discuss their academic performance*. At the doctoral level, there were significantly more 2013 respondents reporting agreement with five of the seven statements. The greatest increase, 14 percentage points, was in communication, specifically that *there is good communication between faculty and students regarding student needs, concerns, and suggestions*.

Table 3. Evaluation of Program Faculty, 2008 vs. 2013

Teaching	Master's Students			Doctoral Students		
	2008	2013	Sig.	2008	2013	Sig.
The courses I took were well taught.	94%	93%		89%	98%	**
Faculty members were well qualified to teach their courses.	96%	95%		94%	98%	
<i>Communication</i>						
There is good communication between faculty and students regarding student needs, concerns, and suggestions.	88%	87%		79%	93%	**
There have been many opportunities outside the classroom for interaction between students and faculty.	71%	70%		77%	88%	**
<i>Mentoring/Advising</i>						
Faculty in my department are interested in the professional development of graduate students.	89%	89%		85%	91%	
My department was helpful and supportive in my search for professional employment.	80%	79%		77%	90%	**
Faculty were willing to meet with me to discuss my academic performance.	96%	96%		92%	98%	*

Note: Percentages are for "Strongly Agree" and "Agree" combined and exclude "N/A or Don't Know" responses.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, proportion test (two-tailed)

Academic Experiences and Peers

Respondents were asked to provide their level of agreement or disagreement about items related to their academic experiences and student peers in their programs (see Table 4). Academic experience items are concerned with issues such as academic standards, intellectual stimulation, and professional preparation; peer items are about the caliber of students and collaboration among students. Lower percentages of master's students in 2013 reported agreement with all academic experience items than 2008 respondents. Most notably, significantly fewer 2013 master's students reported that their *programs prepared them well for their professions* compared to 2008 respondents. At the doctoral level significantly higher percentages of respondents in 2013 reported that their *academic programs were intellectually challenging and stimulating* and that *the intellectual caliber of students in their programs was high*.

Table 4. Evaluation of Academic Experiences and Peers, 2008 vs. 2013

Academic Experience	Master's Students			Doctoral Students		
	2008	2013	Sig.	2008	2013	Sig.
My program has high academic standards.	92%	90%	*	92%	96%	
My program integrates current developments in my field.	94%	92%	*	94%	94%	
My program prepared me well for my profession.	91%	86%	***	90%	93%	
My program was intellectually challenging and stimulating.	92%	90%	*	95%	99%	*
<i>Peers</i>						
The intellectual caliber of students in the program is high.	89%	88%		88%	95%	*
My program encourages student collaboration and teamwork.	--	92%		--	90%	

Note: Percentages are for "Strongly Agree" and "Agree" combined and exclude "N/A" and "Don't Know" responses.

* $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$, proportion test (two-tailed)

SATISFACTION

The satisfaction of graduates was gauged through items addressing specific aspects of students' programs, the campus, and an overall measure of the Mason experience.

Support Services and Resources

Over the years the GSES survey has contained items related to student satisfaction with specific support services and resources; however, some items have only maintained consistent wording since 2011. Table 5 contains the results for these items. Master's and doctoral graduates were most likely to report satisfaction with the *diversity of the student population* (master's: 94-95%, doctoral: 93-98%) from 2011 to 2013. At the master's level, graduates during these years were also more likely to report satisfaction with *discipline specific software and equipment* and *social space on campus*. On the other hand, doctoral students were also likely to report satisfaction with *academic advising* and *mentoring*. Further, more doctoral graduates have increasingly reported satisfaction with *discipline specific software and equipment* since 2011.

Table 5. Satisfaction with Support Services and Resources, 2011-2013

	Master's Students			Doctoral Students		
	2011	2012	2013	2011	2012	2013
Academic advising (e.g., assistance with course planning and meeting degree requirements)	74%	77%	76%	88%	87%	90%
Career counseling (e.g., assistance with career planning, job search, etc.)	60%	62%	60%	64%	64%	75%
Mentoring (e.g., support of professional growth)	68%	72%	70%	88%	82%	87%
Financial support	59%	61%	60%	69%	74%	64%
Work/lab space on campus	79%	79%	83%	72%	77%	84%
Social space on campus	85%	81%	86%	80%	77%	86%
Discipline specific software and equipment	83%	84%	85%	73%	79%	88%
Diversity of student population	95%	96%	94%	93%	95%	98%

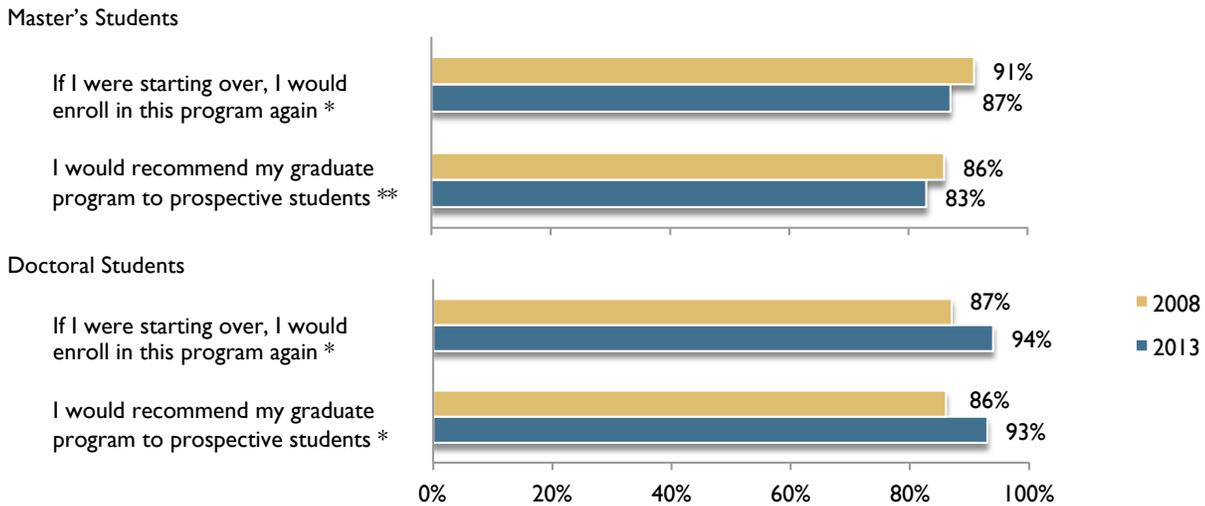
Note: Percentages are for "Very Satisfied" and "Satisfied" combined and exclude "N/A or Don't Know" responses.

Overall Academic Program

Respondents were also asked about their overall satisfaction with their academic programs. As seen in Figure 5, significantly lower percentages of 2013 master's respondents reported that they *would recommend their graduate program to prospective students or enroll in their program again*. However, significantly higher percentages of doctoral respondents were more

likely to recommend their program and start their program over again. Moreover, on all satisfaction questions, doctoral students in 2013 were more favorable toward these items compared to master’s students.

Figure 5. Academic Program Satisfaction, 2008 vs. 2013

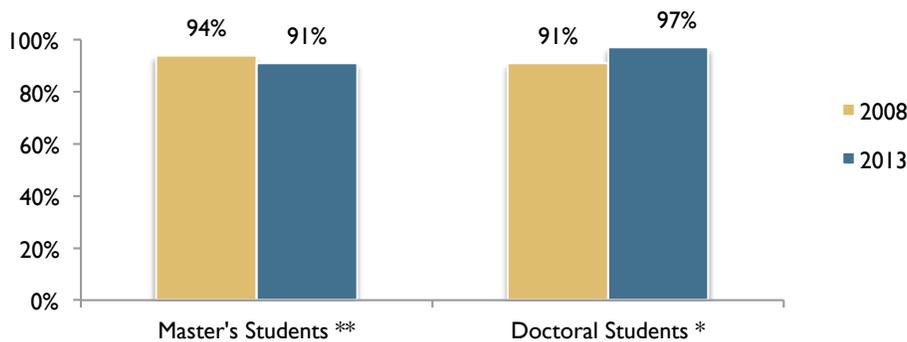


Note: Percentages are for “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” and exclude “N/A or Don’t Know” responses.
 * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, proportion test (two-tailed).

Overall Satisfaction

In addition to satisfaction with their individual academic programs, respondents were asked to provide their level of satisfaction with the Mason experience. As shown in Figure 6, 91% of 2013 master’s students reported being satisfied with their Mason experience, a significantly lower percentage from 2008 respondents. Doctoral students on the other hand reported satisfaction with the Mason experience at a significantly higher rate in 2013 compared to 2008.

Figure 6. Satisfaction with the Mason Experience, 2008 vs. 2013

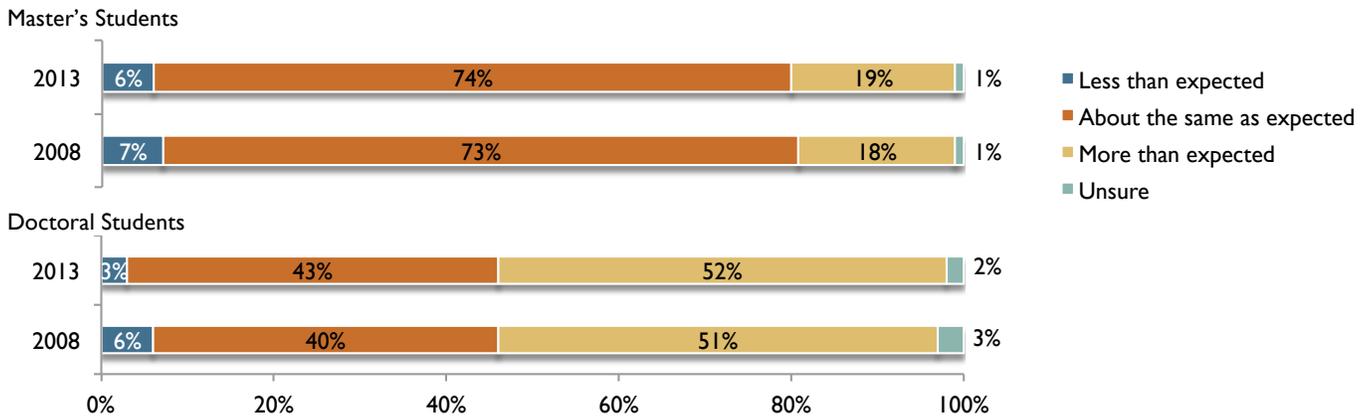


Note: Percentages are for “Very Satisfied” and “Satisfied” responses.
 * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, proportion test (two-tailed)

DEGREE COMPLETION

The survey asked respondents to report on the amount of time needed for them to graduate in relation to their expectations for degree completion. Response patterns at the master’s and doctoral levels regarding expected time-to-degree completion were similar in 2008 and 2013 (see Figure 7). Nearly three-quarters of master’s students reported that the time to complete their degree programs was *about the same as they expected*. About half of doctoral students (51-52%) reported that their degree programs *took longer than they expected*.

Figure 7. Expected Time to Degree, 2008 vs. 2013



Respondents who indicated that their degree programs took more time than expected were asked to report on the extent to which academic and personal/family reasons contributed to a delayed degree completion. Table 6 provides the percentage of respondents who selected each academic and personal reason hindering degree completion. Around one-quarter of master's graduates cited that the *demands of their employment* hindered a shorter time-to-degree. *Demands of employment* and *self/family responsibilities* stand out as contributors to delayed degree completion for some doctoral students, followed by *difficulty with their project, thesis, or dissertation research*.

Table 6. Reasons Delaying Degree Completion, 2013

Academic Reasons	Master's Students	Doctoral Students
Lack of course availability	18%	1%
Inadequate advising	13%	9%
Difficulty in completing comprehensive/qualifying exams	2%	4%
Difficulty in my project, thesis, or dissertation research	7%	20%
Difficulty in completing coursework	2%	2%
Difficulty in fulfilling other degree requirements	3%	4%
<i>Personal/Family Reasons</i>		
Finances	15%	15%
Demands of my employment	26%	34%
Military deployment	1%	1%
Self/family responsibilities (health, birth, child care, elderly care, etc.)	19%	33%
Lack of motivation	1%	1%
Other	11%	10%

Note: Percentages are for "A great deal" and are calculated based on respondents who said the amount of time needed to graduate was "More than originally expected."

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