In 1991 the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation launched the Graduate Education Initiative (GEI). The goal of this major new program was to achieve systematic improvements in the structure and organization of PhD programs in the humanities and the related social sciences that would in turn reduce unacceptably high rates of student attrition and reduce times-to-degree.

The most important and largest experiment in graduate education that has taken place in the United States, over a ten year period, the Foundation devoted almost $85 million to support the GEI in the form of payments to 51 “treatment” departments at 10 major universities to plan and then support their efforts at improving their programs, grants to help sustain the progress the departments had made during the GEI after the GEI ended, funds for the collection and management of longitudinal data from these departments and a set of “control” departments tracking the progress of all entrants to their programs, and funds for a retrospective survey of students who enrolled in programs at both types of departments.

Educating Scholars (Princeton University Press, 2010) reports what the authors learned from their analyses of these data about the effectiveness of the GEI in reducing attrition and times-to-degree and the specific changes that departments made that led to these improvements. It summarizes more generally what the authors learned about the factors that influence students’ success in doctoral study and their early career success. Finally, it summarizes the lessons the authors have learned about efforts to reform graduate education and the design and conduct of foundation led experiments to change behavior at academic institutions.

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