
Supporting Online Doctoral Students to Increase Persistence and Completion

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Abstract

The literature indicates that approximately 50% of those who seek a doctoral education complete the degree. Research indicates that persistence is one of the key issues that students struggle with and negatively impacts their ability to graduate. Other factors include the ability to maintain enrollment; topic selection; and ability to maintain a dissertation supervisor (Seagram, Gould, & Pike, 1998). The current paper discusses an organizational redesign to support students to increase persistence and completion rates among doctoral students in the online environment.

Focus on Engagement

Visionary leader, Dr. John Sperling, founded University of Phoenix in 1976 with one thought in mind: become the most trusted provider of "...career relevant higher education for working adults." (2018 University of Phoenix Academic Annual Report, n.d., p. 6). Since its inception over 40 years ago, the University has addressed the higher education needs of previously marginalized and underserved adult learners. Organizational renewal and restructuring in 2019 addressed the Mission and Vision of University of Phoenix by focusing brave and honest attention on the critically important and active engagement strategies between students and faculty.

The College of Doctoral Studies (CDS) at University of Phoenix currently serves over 2,000 doctoral students who are pursuing their doctoral degrees in content areas of Educational Leadership, Business Administration, Healthcare Administration, Management, and Management in Organizational Leadership. The mission of the College of Doctoral Studies is to "...support the development of leaders and aspiring leaders within our Scholar-Practitioner-Leader™ model (University of Phoenix Annual Report, 2018-2019). Doctoral programs are designed to enhance student capacity in skills of research and application of research to the daily work of those who seek leadership positions within their organizations. College of Doctoral Studies graduates learn how to apply their knowledge in order to influence policy and decision-making practices and by nurturing

organizational transformation internally and externally in diverse work environments and communities.

University of Phoenix rebranded by marketing the University and its commitment to students as being Brave. Honest. Focused. Brave meant that faculty acknowledged opportunities for improvements and sought help when necessary. Faculty were urged to find new ways to develop their own professional practices and to overcome any fears that they had in stating that they needed assistance. Faculty also were urged to hold one another accountable and to speak up for the mission and vision of the University and to support their peers and their students during meetings. Honest meant that faculty would go above and beyond traditionally held beliefs to do what was right for students. Honest communication during challenging experiences was key and faculty were asked to be open to feedback. Leaders were asked to take ownership for their programs and students and to build respect and trust in themselves and in others. Focused meant that faculty were able to achieve their individual goals by taking the initiative to create and to learn. Focused also meant that a solutions-focused approach to resolving challenging circumstances through increased visibility and support would positively enhance relationships with peers and with students.

Strategic goals for the College of Doctoral Studies (CDS) in support of the Mission Statement were developed in 2019 and were drivers for the CDS faculty's commitment to student and faculty engagement. Five strategic goals were implemented and resulted in faculty renewal and recommitment to the following ideas. First, CDS programs and how those programs would be delivered depended upon effective and disciplined execution of valued faculty responsibilities. Second, the College of Doctoral Studies would ensure that every doctoral program graduate, would have the skills and expertise to make them ready for careers in leadership. Third, CDS programs would be designed so that doctoral students could fit learning into their busy lives. Fourth, the faculty and programs within the College of Doctoral Studies would meet student demands for short-burst learning. Finally, doctoral faculty would be easy to work with and have stronger relationships with each of their students.

A complete restructuring of the College of Doctoral Studies was necessary to address the five strategic goals. The five tracks within the CDS were redesigned so that students could choose the doctoral program track that best fit their career needs. Associate Deans for Instruction were designated for Business Administration, Health Administration, Management, Management in Organizational Leadership, and Educational Leadership. Further, student interests in Educational Leadership could be realized in three specialty areas; Curriculum and Instruction, Educational Technology, and Higher Education.

Table 1 shows further role additions and restructuring as well as the responsibilities associated with new faculty responsibilities. Previous to this major structural change, all College of Doctoral Studies faculty were designated as Associate (Adjunct) Faculty and were compensated by set rates for the courses that they were offered and assigned to teach. A comprehensive review of faculty strengths and challenges was conducted and the numbers of Associate Faculty were significantly reduced. New roles and responsibilities were created for Full Time Lead Faculty Area Chair and for Part Time Lead Faculty Instructors. These roles were assigned annual salary compensation and all Associate Faculty had to apply for these positions if they were interested in fulfilling these new roles. In the area of Educational Leadership, for instance, over 450 Associate Faculty applied for 1 Full Time Lead Faculty Area Chair and 5 Part Time Lead Faculty Instructor positions so the interest in these positions was extremely high. Applicants were screened and interviews with Associate Deans took place. Each Associate Dean selected a Full Time Lead Faculty Area Chair and a team of Part Time Lead Faculty Instructors.

Table 1. *Roles and responsibilities in the College of Doctoral Studies 2019-2020*

Associate Dean
leadership

Governance of content areas;

Full Time Lead Faculty Area Chair	Overall instructional and academic excellence; supervision of faculty; assist in hiring; student monitoring; dissertation chair
Part Time Lead Faculty Instructor	Teach program courses and doctoral courses, dissertation chair and committee member
Associate Faculty	Teach content area classes

This restructuring initiative in the College of Doctoral Studies immediately enhanced faculty and student engagement. Faculty were assigned as dissertation Chairs and were required to contact their doctoral students within 24 hours of being assigned to them. All faculty were then required to post a warm welcome to students in all classes. Faculty participation in classes was enhanced and faculty became more visible and engaged with students in class discussions, “live” Face to Face meetings in Blackboard Ultra “Collaborate” and were required to answer student questions within 24 hours. All of these changes and a closer alignment of individual faculty with doctoral students resulted in positive faculty and student feedback in terms of consistency of communication, feeling connected to a cohort of learners, and increased rigor and relevancy in classroom instruction.

Successful Classroom Engagement Begins with Engaged Online Faculty

Although online faculty are not visually seen, faculty do have a presence in the online classroom environment through a variety of measures, including classroom announcements, individual messages sent to students via private email, and general classroom discussions (Pelletier, 2013). To be actively engaged in the online learning environment, online faculty must take the time to maintain open lines of communication (Johnson & McDaniel, n.d.). One such avenue is posting class announcements related to the course content. These announcements serve to inform the class as to upcoming assignments, due dates, clarification of specific assignments based on student questions, and general University announcements of which students must be aware.

Individual messages play a critical role in maintaining active communication between the online faculty member and the student. In many instances, students may not pay attention to the general classroom announcements; thus, missing vital information that may impact the completion of assignments and the level of engagement needed to contribute to the class discussion (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). Individual messages sent through the classroom message center which are linked to the student’s email are an opportunity for online faculty to make one-on-one contact with the student. As a general rule of thumb, faculty return students emails within 24 hours of their receipt. If an individual message was sent over the weekend, most faculty will return a response within 48 hours. Faculty serve as a conduit for a clear channel of communication. This includes setting ground rules for student engagement, discussions of class assignments and expectations of team-based assignments (NEA, 2003). Individual messages and communication with students is an opportunity for the students to share their observations of colleagues in a confidential manner.

Sending individual messages to students also serve to connect faculty with students on a personal level. Quite often students may be active in the classroom early in the course and then suddenly not appear in the class. The absence of engagement may translate to not participating in the discussion forum and assignments not being submitted. When this happens, online faculty reach out to students via individual messages to see how the student is doing. There are a number of reasons a student may no longer be active in the class including illness, keeping up with the work, embarrassed to reach out to faculty for help, or they are overwhelmed. Without this form of communication online faculty would never know what is really going on with their students. If online faculty reach out and appear approachable to students, there is a greater likelihood student will feel comfortable and confident in reaching out to the faculty when they have questions, concerns, or they just need someone to talk about talk to.

The weekly class discussion forum is another way that online faculty are visible in the classroom; when working with doctoral students, the role of faculty is to make sure classroom discussions do not stall. Instead, online faculty uses the discussion forum as a safe place for conversations where

students readily share experiences, both personal and professional. Online faculty have the opportunity to do this by asking Socratic questions, imparting current research, and sharing personal experiences with students to further the conversation. Once students are able to see that faculty are actively engaged in the discussion forum, students are more likely to participate, share opinions and observations, and delve deeper in research that is related to the discussion question.

Classroom conversations with students provide a conduit where faculty can share areas of research interest and ongoing research. Then students are able to see that their online faculty are actively engaged in research, either individually or in teams, and in areas in which students and faculty have similar interests, there is a greater probability that students will be engaged in the classroom. Online faculty also share their experiences in the research process; by sharing these commonalities students may have a greater appreciation of the research process. Besides communication as an active presence in the online classroom environment, faculty need to take the time to get to know their students. At the beginning of each class faculty members share a short biography. The faculty biography is written in the context of the class and shows a direct relationship to the subject matter students are studying. If students are able to see their online faculty as passionate about the topic that they are teaching, based on past and current professional activities, students are more likely to engage in the classroom and with their colleagues.

At the start of a class, online faculty post a welcome message and question thread to start the communication process. In the welcome message, online faculty encourage students to share information about themselves which may include their major areas of interest in academics and in school and outside of the classroom, and why they are pursuing their doctoral degree. By understanding the doctoral journey of their students, online faculty members may be more empathetic to the struggles their students have encountered. As online faculty, we know that doctoral students are hard workers, employed full-time, raising families, and taking care of elderly loved ones all while trying to balance their studies. Having a better understanding of where our students are coming from allows online faculty to have a unique perspective and level of engagement with the students. In many instances, online faculty are more patient and understanding of their students because they can recall being in a similar situation, trying to balance work, life, and academics in order to complete their own degree.

Engagement is Not One Dimensional

When online faculty are able successfully engage with their doctoral students in the classroom, students are more receptive of participating in scholarly practices. Assessing student learning is a form of engagement and a process that is beyond grading. This is an opportunity to have an interactive dialogue with students which can be written, collaborative through web-based platforms such as Blackboard Collaborate or phone calls. The dialogue with students is one that needs to be engaging, comfortable, productive, diplomatic, informative but overall must always be in the best interest of the students (NEA, 2003; O'Malley, 2017). Some students prefer to receive feedback and questions answered via messages. Other students are more engaged and want to communicate with online faculty in real time, face to face. One way to accommodate varying student requests is through a web-based platform such as Blackboard Collaborate. The platform allows for virtual office hours where students can drop in and ask questions they have of online faculty. Additionally, online faculty members have the opportunity to call class meetings to share additional information that is important and needs to be delivered in a format other than an email or a classroom announcement.

The responsibility of online faculty also includes encouraging dialogue with all members of the classroom community. This includes setting up virtual discussion sessions for students within the online classroom. In many cases, students will start the team conversations in their virtual classroom but will then decide to take that discussion to another platform that is more readily accessible to all members of the team. Online faculty who start the communication process and encourage online doctoral students to work collaboratively with their colleagues; the result, students see the overall

benefit of getting to know colleagues within the program (King & Alperstein, 2015; O'Malley, 2017).

Another form of engagement is sharing resources that are available to students which are provided by the University and others scholar-based websites which are readily available online. Resources that students can easily use to assist them with their APA citations and references, include but not limited to, reciteworks.com, and Purdue OWL. These tools are available to students at no cost, yet students are not aware of these resources until their online faculty member provides the information as to what is available to help them be successful in their doctoral program.

Going Beyond the Requirements

Online faculty who have engaging classrooms know how to integrate and share a variety resources that are beyond what is available to students from the University (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). Faculty are able to look at resources based on their experiences that will assist students in being successful in their doctoral studies. These resources can be web based, technology tools, journal articles, textbooks, and opportunities to attend conferences where similar types of research on the subject content matter is being presented.

One in the most valuable resources online faculty can share is their personal doctoral journey. Regardless of when the doctoral journey took place, online faculty can impart from a personal perspective what it was like to complete the dissertation, struggles encountered when conducting research, navigating team-based assignments, or how to approach writing roadblocks (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). Sharing personal experiences with students also puts a human face of an empathetic individual in front of the class. The student then has the opportunity to relate to the online faculty member, understand why specific information is required to help improve academic writing and the processes needed in order to successfully pass each step of the dissertation process.

Another resource that students may benefit from are the University based webinars on research methodology delivered by faculty experts. These webinars allow students to hear and learn first-hand from published doctoral faculty in the specific research methodology in which they are interested in pursuing (E. Johnston, personal communication, February 3, 2020). Additionally, the webinars allow students an opportunity to ask questions of the presenters about the research methodology and if the type of study they are interested in conducting lends itself to the research methodology described (E. Johnston, personal communication, February 3, 2020). Students also can put a face to a name which allows them to make a connection to an online faculty member in that specific area of research. Therefore, students feel more comfortable in approaching the faculty member with further questions.

Besides supporting students within the classroom, online faculty have other responsibilities that are more procedural in nature. Within the University there is an Early Alert system to make sure that students are completing assignments on time and acting professionally within the classroom. The Early Alert system provides online faculty an avenue to describe a specific situation that had occurred within the classroom and the week the event took place (L. Miller, personal communication, January 27, 2020). The event can focus on student individual assignments, participation, or teamwork. Online faculty have the opportunity to further expand upon the information included on the Early Alert form. Additionally, if online faculty wishes to be contacted by the academic counselor the faculty member can leave their email address. Once the form is completed and submitted, an academic counselor reviews the information, contacts faculty as to what is the next course of action and follows up with the faculty member with the outcome. The process occurs within 24 hours. If the academic counselor is not able to contact the student in question, a response is sent to the online faculty member. The role of the academic counselor is to continuously reach out to the student until a resolution occurs (L. Miller, personal communication, January 27, 2020). Once a resolution takes place, the online faculty member is contacted to close the communication loop.

Additionally, online faculty are engaged in the research communities in which they serve. Within the University, the Research Hub (<https://research.phoenix.edu/>) is a central location when online faculty, doctoral students, and alumni can connect via Research Centers to discover like-minded research interests. Each Research Center will announce a call for participation and fellows during the year at which time the teams will form and conduct research. For online faculty there are many opportunities to participate in local ground campus activities where they can meet and greet doctoral students, present on topics of student interest at doctoral workshops, and work side-by-side on community-based functions, such as Junior Achievement, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE), Susan B. Komen Breast Cancer Walk, and local park and beach clean-up events (C. Jackson, personal communication, January 21, 2020).

Measuring Success

Even though online faculty are engaged in how students are doing in the classroom, at the end of the day we as faculty want to make sure that our students are successful. The University and online faculty measure students' success by how students are progressing through the doctoral program. The doctoral program consists of general doctoral level classes where students obtain fundamental information necessary to be successful in their specific area of study. Besides these general doctoral courses, students take classes that are specific to research design methodologies in both qualitative and quantitative research. The series of classes students take during their doctoral program assist them in focusing on a specific area of individual research of personal interest and the research methodology that is best suited for that research study (Suniti Niskode', Lelinski, Kelsay, Cilente, & Smith, 2007).

Success can also be seen in the relationship and level of interaction between the doctoral student, chair and committee (King & Alperstein, 2015). This working relationship is extremely important to the doctoral student. Constant support helps sustain the student when taking classes and writing their dissertation. The chair and the committee members not only act as mentors who are supportive and nurturing. The committee understands the stressors the doctoral student may be experiencing and provides a shoulder for the student to lean on. Continuous encouragement is needed especially when the student may be thinking of giving up the doctoral journey.

Throughout the doctoral journey online faculty have a specific role in supporting the student to attain the completion of milestones in the doctoral journey which include Quality Review Methods (QRM), Quality Review Final (QRF), and the dissertation oral defense. Each completed milestone is an opportunity for online faculty and the doctoral student to celebrate. This is a time to remind the doctoral student of all the hard work that they have done, take a deep breath, and then get ready for the next leg of their journey. The support of doctoral students by online faculty does not end at the oral defense. Online faculty continue to encourage doctoral students to present at conferences. In many cases, the dissertation chair or an online faculty member who has worked closely with the doctoral student may act as co-presenters of the research (L. Johnston, personal communication, February 3, 2020). The online faculty member can guide the doctoral student to which conferences are most suitable for the student's research. Another avenue in which faculty are able to measure the success of their doctoral students is that of submitting articles for publication. At the University, a program was established to assist students in this endeavor called, Dissertation to Publication (D2P). After students have completed their oral defense, the dissertation chair encourages the participation in D2P, where the dissertation chair is a co-author on the journal article submission (S. Nunn, personal communication, January 24, 2020). Doctoral students, who are now research practitioners, have the opportunity to share their research with the broader community of scholars.

Alumni Observations of Online Doctoral Instruction

Online doctoral students excitedly embark on a professional journey of learning. The new student usually develops an area at home into a personal office space and haven for focused study. However, that space soon becomes like any other professional office during required work hours equivalent to

those of a full-time job because of the demanding work required in a doctoral program. The projects keep coming, the bar is high, and too few hours exist within a week to complete the work and maintain personal balance.

Required adjustments to life priorities result in equally high emotional demands, with constant shifts between feelings of personal satisfaction and insecurity. However, online students must find a way to carve their paths independently through such demands and challenges. The complex effort is navigated best with a sense of confidence and achievement. Online doctoral students have observed that effective online doctoral instructors acknowledge the layers of student experience and encourage a focus on rounded preparation for the various phases of the journey through experiential insights and personal connection.

The Online Dissertation Chair (ODC) embarks on a journey of learning paralleling that of the student, aware of subtext in communication while studying what honestly motivates the learner to experience satisfaction from the process. The task requires exploration of student needs that must be satisfied as a condition for full engagement, tenacity, and motivation toward completion of the doctoral journey. For example, the satisfaction of the learner's need for respect and acceptance creates a sense of personal security, resulting in a climate of achievement and self-esteem. These outcomes contribute to the development of a student's long-term motivation (Neagu, 2016).

Qualities observed as strong in instructor-mentors who accomplish such outcomes include an ability to stick with the student through obstacles and define them as individual moments to conquer. They provide examples through acknowledgment of ongoing micro-successes, assisting the learner in understanding how these small wins add up to big milestones and ongoing closure within a lengthy process. Other strengths include an understanding of a learner's unique learning style, responding with information and tools for closing skill gaps while maintaining focus on working strengths. This support contributes to the student's internalization of a productive paradigm and expectations of success.

I was very lucky to have experienced dissertation work under the mentorship of a very talented and effective ODC. Many doctoral students end up in the ranks of the ABD (all but dissertation). The learning cycle is turbulent, and momentary accomplishments fade in the shadow of new learning issues. One reason for the successful completion of my dissertation study was the ability of my ODC to address problems practically with neutrality and laser focus. Hard conversations were initiated promptly, conducted positively and productively, and concluded with acknowledgment of steps to navigate the process. The approach reduced my perspective of issues as potential walls to manageable speed bumps on the learning pathway.

One example was the need to pause for a deep, focused dive into the research of potential options for my previously determined design and methodology. Success-oriented dialogue motivated my practical recognition of this need, view of the task as manageable units of work, and motivation to accomplish them quickly. Outcomes included the discovery of unexpected viewpoints in the literature, additional scholarly developments, and frameworks inspiring new research approaches and professional goals.

Other important qualities observed in effective ODCs involve the development of collaborative relationships. The development of a mutual trust-respect loop between the student and instructor creates a power partnership, where tremendous satisfaction results from a professional rapport of shared interest and knowledge. Collaborative presentational and publishing opportunities can result in an evolution of the student/instructor relationship to that of professional colleagues following graduation. Such developments help inspire a graduate's continued connections to the alma-mater, academia, and ongoing work in the dissemination of the doctoral research.

The positive experience of a team-oriented dynamic also encouraged my participation in local workshops for University of Phoenix doctoral students, which I have continued to support as part of the alumni group. The workshop seminars provide additional opportunities for learning and inquiry regarding the stages of the dissertation process. Live conversations with peers and faculty always generate renewed excitement about the program and connections to the university. These workshop sessions also provide a training ground for alumni mentorship of other doctoral students and a chance to give back by sharing available tools and learned strategies. Graduates can also apply related skills through participation in university studies as a member of a research team in an area of specialty.

These experiences with effective mentorship contribute to my ongoing professional leadership work. In my current role as co-founder and dean of the College of Adaptive Arts, I apply learned skills to the development of innovative new processes and training tools for instruction and mentorship to motivate and inspire satisfaction in online learners with special needs. I look to the future with confidence that it will hold limitless opportunities to pay these lessons forward.

Conclusion

Goenner and Snaith (2004) conclude that both student and institutional factors are important to understand overall student success towards graduation. The present article details how one institution is working to increase student persistence and graduation at the doctoral level. However, it is just as important to focus on the student behaviors as a factor in overall persistence and completion.

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Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, XXIII, Number 4, Winter 2020
University of West Georgia, Distance Education Center
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