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Improving Interaction with Doctoral Candidates' During the Dissertation Process

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Abstract: Doctoral attrition during the dissertation process is high. Factors that have been associated with high attrition rates have been academic, social, and emotional in nature. Thus, methods chosen to support doctoral students in the dissertation process, degree should take into account doctoral students needs on all three levels. This presentation will demonstrate how online doctoral program educators built a collaborative workspace using Microsoft Office SharePoint, and how specific features are being used to support distance doctoral candidates both socially and academically in the dissertation process. Suggestions on how open source technologies and content management systems can be used to support doctoral students in a similar manner will be discussed.

Literature Review

Research has consistently shown approximately 50% of traditional education doctoral students drop out of their programs (Berelson, 1960; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Lovitts, 2001; Smallwood, 2004). The distance education attrition rate is estimated to range from 10% to 50% higher than the traditional environment (Carr, 2000; Diaz, 2002; Frankola, 2001). These high attrition rates are of concern to doctoral students and university educators and administrators. For example, attrition results in losses in research and economic loss for the student and the university. Reasons for doctoral student attrition has been well documented. Doctoral candidates drop out of their programs due to feelings of isolation, miscommunication or problems with committee members, dissatisfaction with the program, personal and family issues, academic failure, and loss of motivation (Lovitts, 2001). Similarly, distance education student attrition is attributed to feelings of isolation, personal issues, and low levels of interaction with faculty and peers (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Golde, 2005; Hackman & Walker, 1990; Olgren, 2004; The New Media Consortium, 2006).

Since isolation and disconnectedness is significantly associated with graduate student attrition, especially in the distance education environment (Beqiri, Chase, & Bishka, 2010), and a sense of connectedness and community has been shown to reduce dropout rates (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Kraska, 2008), strategies and methods that promote a sense of community and connectedness during the dissertation process should be considered. The adoption of such strategies and methods may serve to reduce the high attrition rates among distance doctoral candidates. Microsoft Office SharePoint is an online collaboration workspace and content management server that is serving as an instructional technology to support doctoral students' work and increase their sense of connectedness in the dissertation process (Szapkiw, in progress).

Objectives

By the end of the session, participants will be able to:

- Identify features of Microsoft SharePoint that can be used to facilitate the dissertation process
- Use features of Microsoft SharePoint that can be used to facilitate the dissertation process
- Identify open source technologies that can be used to facilitate the dissertation process

Description

SharePoint has numerous features and capabilities; programmers may even program applications for special needs. However, these presenters will focus upon the basic features and capabilities of SharePoint that, through practice and experience, they have found useful and beneficial to facilitate the dissertation process. They will demonstrate how to set up the features and how to use the features. Similar open source options will be discussed and demonstrated. Presenters will also discuss the challenges of using SharePoint and guidelines for practice.

Discussion

SharePoint offers significant “out of the box” tools for collaborating in online spaces for the purpose of scholarly interaction and development. Teams of individuals use the toolset to not only interact with each other through web-based interface tools as the development occurs, but also interact through the actual product itself: the research outcome and manuscript construction. Features of SharePoint that prove useful for addressing issues of connectedness and engagement, while also providing sound means of managing manuscripts and research assets include work flow and task management, community-building interactivity, document security, and multi-site management for the administration. Student and faculty research collaboration in SharePoint occurs in essence as individually created sites. .

Clearly, a challenge of distance collaboration involves simple logistical coordination and communication associated with manuscript development and review. SharePoint offers a series of tools to address these very issues. Students and committee members can use task lists, calendars, status update lists, manuscript and artifact libraries, and discussion forums. SharePoint document versioning and management affords practical management of manuscript and research assets in a central repository. The capacity to return to a version from months prior offers effective flexibility in manuscript development. The SharePoint document-specific features (save, update, merge, compare) integrate with the Microsoft Office core applications, thus providing somewhat seamless document management experiences. SharePoint additionally incorporates the more traditional tools promoting interactivity in online environments, such as discussion board forums, surveys and wikis. These supply the team members with means of developing on-going conversations and discussions, in addition to the archiving and documenting of these discussions for later access. Emailed discussions and phone-based discussions provide very little in the way of addressing these needs. Finally, the SharePoint technology set allows for the management of granular permissions. Site administrators assign permissions at the site and the tools/ document level, and can also allow members to have very specific rights (view only, edit, create, etc). Concerns about access to protected data suddenly become less as the research data and manuscripts, often stored on a site that is backed up by university personnel, are protected behind a virtual door.

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