Strategies for Fostering Doctoral Student Persistence

Amanda J. Rockinson-Szapkiw, Liberty University
Lucinda S Spaulding, Liberty University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/amanda_rockinson_szapkiw/45/
Strategies for Fostering Doctoral Student Persistence

Amanda J. Rockinson-Szapkiw & Lucinda S. Spaulding, School of Education, Liberty University

Abstract: The purpose of this session is to present research-based strategies for improving doctoral candidate retention and completion rates. We will first discuss findings from a qualitative phenomenological study examining factors associated with doctoral persistence. Derived from these findings and a synthesis of the literature on doctoral attrition, we present 5 practical strategies for improving doctoral persistence. Throughout this discussion, we will model specific practices that are found to be effective on an individual, course, program, and institutional level for increasing social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. Session attendees will learn about technologies and practices they can implement to increase sense of community and, thus, persistence in their own doctoral programs. We conclude the session with a reflective discussion about how participants can modify current practices to encourage increased persistence in their doctoral programs.

Literature Review

Unfortunately, research demonstrates that doctoral students’ perceived level of community with their fellow students and faculty mentor in the doctoral journey is less than desirable; thus, resulting in high attrition (Terrell, Snyder, & Dringus, 2009). In the traditional setting, doctoral attrition rates range from 40% to 60% (Smallwood, 2004), with rates in online doctoral programs estimated to be 10% to 50% higher (Carr, 2000). Creating a sense of community, whether in a traditional or online environment, is essential and can improve students’ sense of satisfaction, learning, and ultimately, their persistence within their program of study (Rovai, 2002). Faculty and administration play an essential role in assisting students in providing opportunities to create community and are a primary reason doctoral candidates complete their degrees (Holsinger, 2008). Faculty and administration who desire to create a sense of community ensure three essential elements—social presence, cognitive presence, and teacher presence—are present in their courses and their programs (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Social presence is “the ability of participants in the Community of Inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as real people” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 89), and cognitive presence is “the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 89). Teaching presence is the design and the facilitation that guides the cognitive and social processes for the purpose of educationally meaningful learning outcomes (Garrison et al., 2000). Analogously, doctoral persistence research suggests that providing opportunities to develop relationships with faculty, encouraging peer relationships and connectedness, using the cohort model, giving opportunities for critical reflection and evaluation, and providing course opportunities with relevant content are key factors in doctoral candidates’ persistence and completion (Galbraith, 2003; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, under review; Seagram, Gould, & Pyke, 1998). When students feel a sense of community, they are more likely to be satisfied, learn better, and persist in their educational journey. A need exists to identify and implement practices to facilitate feelings of community; thus, increasing persistence and completion.

Goals and Objectives

As a result of this session, participants will be able to:
• Identify factors related to persistence in the doctoral process as identified in the research (Rockinson-Szapkiw, & Spaulding, under review),
• Identify specific practices on an individual, course, program, and institutional level that can increase social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence; thus, community and doctoral student persistence,
• Observe technologies and practices that increase doctoral students’ sense of community, and
• Reflect upon current practices based on what is learned and discuss needed revisions on an individual, course, program, and institutional level.

Strategies for Fostering Doctoral Student Persistence

Every individual with a terminal degree has a story to share about their personal doctoral journey. Their stories include reasons that they persisted unto completion. Each story is unique; however, they often have common themes. We qualitatively analyzed 76 interviews conducted with individuals who completed their doctoral degrees.
The results rendered four primary themes related to their persistence: (a) personal attributes, (b) social integration into the university, (c) program structure, and (d) program resources and services (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, under review). These themes, previous research on implications from doctoral persistence, and community research, provide strategies to administrators and educators on ways to increase community (e.g. social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence) and, thus, persistence in their own doctoral programs:

**Social Presence**
1. Leverage technology for social and interdisciplinary interaction with a focused purpose; thus, increasing students’ sense of connectedness with each other (Brandes, 2006). Web 2.0 and social networking technologies (e.g., wikis, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Ning) can be used to create forums for doctoral students to interact with peers and faculty both socially and academically will be demonstrated.
2. Adopt a cohort model. Cohorts have been shown to support community and assist with developing safe environments for critical reflection (Norris & Barnett, 1994).

**Teaching Presence**
3. Communicate on a regular basis and provide timely feedback that is personable and challenges doctoral students academically. When faculty communicate concern for doctoral candidates and challenge them with their feedback, candidates are likely to feel satisfied and persist (Lee, 2010). E-conferencing systems and audio feedback can be used to complete quick check ins and review manuscripts.

**Cognitive Presence**
4. Model critical thinking and reflective processes needed for scholarship. Construct frameworks (e.g., templates), encourage organization and summation techniques, and assist doctoral candidates in setting goals and developing timelines.
5. Identify and select learning activities for doctoral courses that are relevant and practical in nature. Adult learners are also more motivated to learn when information is relevant and of immediate value (Knowles, 1980). When course activities are planned, the following questions should be asked: (a) How is this related to preparing students for the comprehensive exam? (b) How does this activity develop the research, writing, and analytic skills necessary for conducting a dissertation?

**Conclusion**
Fostering community in a doctoral program through practices is likely to lead to persistence. This presentation will assist faculty and administrators in identifying how they can encourage doctoral persistence and completion through practices that increase community.

**References**