

Improving Social Belonging to Increase Success in an Online Doctorate Program

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ABSTRACT

Institutions of higher education have long been plagued with difficulty in overcoming the high rates of incompleteness of candidates who enroll in doctoral programs. As we continue to move through the post-pandemic era, online course delivery in doctoral programs continues to rise which brings an added layer of difficulty for EdD students to persist beyond their required coursework in the online environment (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2019). As a result, it is incumbent upon online EdD program directors and faculty to not only identify barriers to online doctoral student success, but to also find solutions. In summer of 2020, a regional state university in the southeast accepted its inaugural class of doctoral students into a new higher education concentration of their existing on-ground K-12 EdD program. During the past few years between the program's original design and inception, faculty have been examining factors related to doctoral student belongingness, from initial coursework through dissertation completion. Moreover, in 2021, the institution was fortunate to be admitted into the Carnegie Program on the Education Doctorate (CPED) consortium and as a result, has worked to adopt the CPED framework for EdD program design and application. It is through this new lens that the faculty at this institution have identified some lessons to share in pursuit of high rates of success while maintaining a demand of excellence in their work. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to use the newly designed Higher Education EdD program as a baseline case study towards improved online program student success.

KEYWORDS

online EdD programs, student success, belongingness, imposter syndrome

Over the course of the past decade, we have seen a steady growth in doctoral program participation, and to a large degree, success in producing doctorates in education. For example, between 2009 and 2019 the total number of conferred doctoral degrees increased by 18 percent (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2022). This is, in part, driven by the rise of online programs which provides a more attractive access point, but also creates another layer of difficulty for degree completion (Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2010). As a result, in online learning environments, candidate completion has widely been noted as being significantly lower, as much as 20 percent lower, than their traditional classroom counterparts (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2019). Moreover, based on previous research done in this area, this is especially true at the dissertation phase where students are even less likely to persist (Provident et al., 2015; Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2010; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2019). As the number of online doctoral programs continue to rise, it is imperative that institutions, departments, and programs shift the traditional paradigm to meet the unique needs of these students (Provident et al., 2015).

In the spirit of Shulman et al. (2006), "these challenges can be met only by courageous new designs, experimentation, and evaluation" (p. 30). Therefore, the challenge for online EdD program directors and faculty is to assess and evaluate the unique needs of online learners as an impetus to develop a better understanding of the barriers for online doctoral student success. As such, the overall premise of this article is that if we, as online EdD faculty and program coordinators, are to meet the challenge of program evolution set forth by Shulman et al. (2006), then we must begin with courageous new ideas and designs that will continually shift the paradigm of online EdD programs towards an improved student experience (Holt, 2020) and student success. Based on this premise, the authors sought to examine potential barriers as well as conduits to online doctoral student success through the constructs of student belongingness and imposter syndrome, and the personal, social, and programmatic factors that contribute to them.



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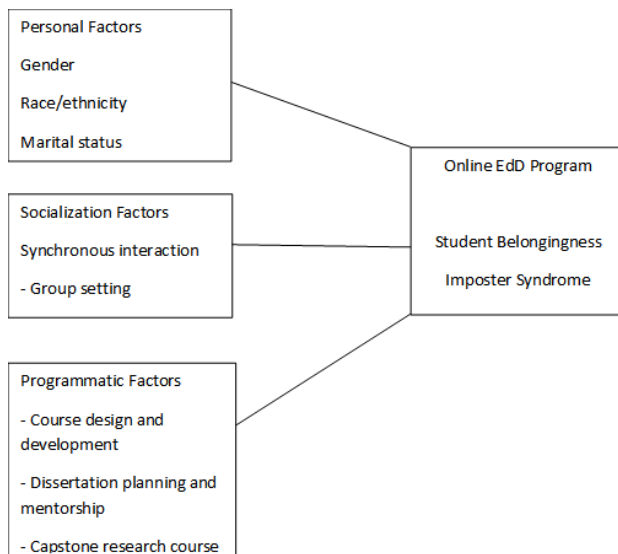
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ONLINE DOCTORAL STUDENT BELONGINGNESS

As illustrated in Figure 1, the authors chose to investigate the outcomes for online doctoral student success through the construct of student belonging as a positive outcome and imposter syndrome as a potential negative outcome. According to Glass and Westmont (2014) student belongingness is categorized as “students’ sense of connection with their college, degree of social support, and experience of both academic challenge and support” (p. 108). Studies have shown positive associations between feelings of a strong sense of belongingness and connectedness with peers and increased engagement, academic success, and the overall learning experience among graduate students (Chung & McKenzie, 2020; Dolan et al., 2017; Stallman, 2010). As related to online doctoral students in particular, creating this sense of connection is arguably the most difficult aspect of the classroom environment for online educators (Johnson, 2015). Chung and McKenzie (2020) contend that although the creation of a fully equivalent academic experience has been at the forefront of modern online course offerings, we cannot say the same for the other factors related to the broad and socially available experience of the traditional classroom. Therefore, it is recommended that online educators examine and maximize the factors related to an online environment that promote student-to-student and student-to-faculty interaction to facilitate a sense of connectedness and belongingness in an otherwise disconnected platform (Bianchini, 2022).

Figure 1. Factors Associated with Student Belongingness



ONLINE DOCTORAL STUDENT IMPOSTER SYNDROME

As online programs offer courses in an exclusively asynchronous delivery system, oftentimes students may feel a lack of connectedness, support, and identity while matriculating through what they perceive as a difficult intellectual and academic endeavor. One could argue that this lack of belongingness could further manifest itself into a feeling of imposter syndrome where students may feel so isolated or unsupported, they perceive that they are not worthy and don't belong at this level of education altogether.

Imposter syndrome has been defined in the literature as “describing high-achieving individuals who, despite their objective successes, fail to internalize their accomplishments and have persistent self-doubt and fear of being exposed as a fraud or imposter” (Brevata et al., 2020, p. 1252). Given the academic dedication required for pursuing a terminal degree, it is easy to hypothesize that a relationship exists between doctoral students and the high achievers, mentioned in the definition above, who may have little difficulty completing their coursework, but perceive the dissertation as an insurmountable task. This may be particularly more likely if these high-achievers are left in isolation, or even have the perception of not being supported. This perception could easily progress into self-doubt and/or negative self-efficacy towards completing a daunting task such as a doctoral dissertation (Feenstra et al., 2020). Societal factors such as gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic background have also been shown to put certain students at even a higher risk of negative self-efficacy towards successful program completion (Cokley et al., 2017). Students in these specific demographics have a higher probability for self-doubt and imposter syndrome due to the socialization and programmatic limitations an exclusively online doctoral program (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2019). Further, these limitations are a by-product of an individualistic approach that is inherent to an asynchronous learning environment (Provident et al., 2015).

PERSONAL FACTORS

As the literature suggests that the probability of imposter syndrome increases as student belongingness decreases, the authors sought to examine personal factors that may have a negative effect on student sense of belongingness. As such, several personal factors have been shown to exacerbate feelings of isolation in the online environment as related to gender, marital status, and race/ethnicity (Spaulding et al., 2012). These factors, or barriers, have been shown to be noteworthy contributors of student attrition in online doctoral programs. This is perhaps unsurprising in light of the fact that, as online students, it may be difficult to actually feel that sense of belonging.

Gender, Race, and Ethnicity

Gender has been found to be a contributing factor to whether or not students perceive a feeling of belongingness in their doctoral program. Moreover, there also appears to be an interaction or intersection among student gender and race and ethnicity. Results of several studies in this area which suggest that students of color are more likely to feel a sense of isolation or not fitting in than their White peers (Castello et al., 2017; Gay, 2004; González, 2006; Rovai, 2003). Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2019) found in their study of doctoral student belongingness that White male students reported significantly higher integration or belongingness scores than their female or underrepresented peer groups. They also go on to add “while women may be the majority in online programs, women and racial and ethnic minorities may experience difficulty integrating into the male-dominant and White social structures that dominate the online higher education environment” (p. 323). More specifically related to gender in an online environment, researchers have also determined that female students continue to feel a diminished sense of a belonging on average than their male counterparts (Gardener, 2013; Sallee, 2011; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). Based on the results of these studies, EdD faculty and program directors may need to consider the intersection of gender and race and ethnicity as relevant

and important factors when considering doctoral student socialization and program effectiveness.

Marital Status

Marital status among doctoral students has also been shown to be a significant factor in doctoral student socialization and belongingness. According to the findings of Van de Shoot et al. (2013), marital status, particularly among female doctoral students, and married students with children under the age of 18, are more likely to be delayed in completing their program than those who were not and were more likely to feel a sense of isolation from their non-married peers. On the other hand, Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2014) found that spouses, children, and other family members could also serve as positive motivation for doctoral student program completion. However, Cochran et al. (2013) found that while positive motivation was provided by family members, many doctoral students who served in the role of parent or primary caregiver found it more difficult to manage the time demands associated with family obligations and their scholarly pursuits. As the authors have ascertained that the majority of students in the online EdD program discussed in this article are considered adult learners (above the age of 25), working professionals, and parents, this demographic is of particular import in the pursuit of continuous improvement.

SOCIALIZATION FACTORS

Unlike in a traditional classroom environment, students may find it challenging to connect with peers in asynchronous online programs. This type of delivery also makes the interaction and the mentoring of doctoral students more difficult for faculty. According to Bagaka's et al. (2015), the doctoral student/faculty mentorship dynamic is an essential component to the doctoral program experience in and of itself. For example, as many EdD programs are designed to develop the practitioner in action research and advance their professional goals, many graduates of these programs will remain or return to higher education to be active in research, instruction, and innovation as future leaders in the higher education community. As such, experienced faculty mentorship for these individuals is essential to their development as future faculty (Cho et al., 2011). For the purpose of this article, EdD faculty-student mentorship can be defined as a method of socialization used within doctoral programs which involves teaching, coaching, and giving professional guidance (Dobie et al., 2010).

The primary factor that is difficult to address or replicate in an online asynchronous environment is the age-old tradition of doctoral residency. Results of a study conducted by Kennedy et al. (2015) found that in a limited or non-existent residency program, students were less likely to feel involved, supported, or prepared to successfully complete or persist in their doctoral program. These results are consistent with Brevata et al. (2020), who found that student perceptions of isolation or exclusion from faculty and peers was the primary antecedent towards imposter syndrome. As the results of these studies indicate, the faculty-student connection can be an important factor in determining a student's sense of belonging in their program of study. Therefore, the development of program structure and course design should take into consideration what has been lost with regards to the faculty-student connection in the electronic-education age.

PROGRAMMATIC INNOVATION AND EXPERIMENTATION

In summer of 2020, a regional state institution in the southeast accepted its inaugural class of doctoral students into a new higher education concentration of their existing EdD program. This new concentration shares the same research and methodology courses as the traditional face-to-face K-12 program in existence for over 10 years, but all courses are offered and taught exclusively online in the higher education concentration. This new concentration was created at the behest of the university president to provide an online option for higher education professionals. During the past few years between the online program's original design and inception, faculty have been seeking to answer the questions related to online doctoral student attrition, especially at the dissertation or ABD phase based on the current data (NCES, 2022) and previous research done in this area (Provident et al., 2015; Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2010; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2019). Moreover, in 2021 the institution was fortunate to be admitted into the CPED consortium and as a result, has worked to adopt the CPED framework for EdD program design and application. It is through this new lens that faculty have identified some lessons to share in pursuit of high rates of success while maintaining a demand of excellence in their work. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to use the newly designed Higher Education EdD program as a baseline case study to examine improved online program student success under the following constructs: synchronous interaction, dissertation planning and mentorship, and the capstone research course.

Synchronous Interaction

As attrition rates for online doctoral students continue to increase, the EdD faculty purposefully examined the components of several traditional, hybrid, and online EdD programs prior to, and during, the development of the program. As a result, the online program utilizes the following three-pronged dissertation preparation approach: 1) monthly Zoom meetings focused on relevant issues, including foci on problems of practice in contexts, 2) coursework tasks and projects being explicitly encouraged to steer towards emerging dissertation topic(s), and 3) integration of research seminars tailored to meet the needs of these students – Research Seminar I (Overview of Dissertation), Research Seminar II (Action Research, Problems of Practice), Research Seminar III (Literature as Foundation of the Dissertation), all preceding the Capstone (Putting the pieces together and refining them). Moreover, as the last and often most challenging hurdle of the doctoral program is completing the dissertation (Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2010), the faculty specifically zeroed in on the dissertation preparation process.

As a byproduct of this investigation, the team identified three strong socialization factors that may be improved through programmatic and instructional strategies intended to promote more robust synchronous student and faculty interaction in an otherwise asynchronous world. The first of these focused on course design and development. Specifically, this included the purposeful designing of learning experiences that promote group interaction and collegiality. In order to accomplish this, faculty worked with instructional technology design team members to create a uniform template to utilize in online coursework so that socialization was integrated into the fabric of each course in the program. This meant carefully designing both discussion and project work which not only



encourages, but demands student socialization to facilitate successful completion of learning outcomes.

The second strategy involves direct individualized faculty-to-student mentoring where students receive immediate and relevant feedback to course objectives as well as a sandwich approach to task mastery and correction. The third strategy involves monthly synchronous Zoom program meetings where students, faculty, advisors, and others could connect consistently, provide important just-in-time updates, provide a connection to university support services, and opportunity to engage with one another on the journey towards success. Some examples of talking points and presentations in these meetings include: overall program philosophy, student goals and expectations, general advising and matriculation information, equity, inclusion, and diversity initiatives, shared experiences from students in the research capstone or dissertation phase of the program, and informational presentations by the university research librarian, director of the writing center, graduate studies analysts, and mental health counselors. In addition, faculty conduct one-on-one Zoom dissertation mentoring sessions for students in the topic development phase all the way through to the capstone phase. These real-time opportunities to interact informally also provide meaningful chances to display what they learn and what they are thinking about through talking with their faculty and one another.

Dissertation Planning and Mentorship

The online EdD program was designed with the limitations of the online environment in mind. Therefore, for the online concentration in particular, dissertation planning and mentorship is directly embedded into each of the required doctoral courses, and not only utilizes the socialization strategies mentioned previously, but also requires students to practice dissertation fundamentals such as annotated bibliographies, baseline methodological analyses, and extensive research-based and supported critical analysis as foundational components in each required doctoral course. As the higher education doctorate is directed to professionals in the field of higher education, these dissertation preparation strategies are primarily focused on action research topics congruent with not only prior coursework, but current problems faced by professionals in the field. This not only allows the program to accomplish its mission towards action research, but also provides graduates practical applied research to not only further knowledge in the field, but their career aspirations as well.

Capstone Research Course

The crown-jewel to this approach is the capstone research course which is taken as the final course in the program prior to enrolling in dissertation hours. These courses are offered with emphases in either quantitative or qualitative design and is required for all EdD students as the final course of their program and leads directly to the dissertation proposal. The higher education faculty developed and designed these courses specifically for the online concentration to not only encapsulate all of the material learned in previous courses, but specifically to provide students with clear and concise instructions on how to successfully complete each section of their dissertation proposal. Furthermore, students are given individual attention and feedback by the instructor each week starting with their creation of the problem statement and research questions, all the way through proposing their methodology and data collection by the end of the course.

The advanced quantitative research course is comprised of Unit assignments, where for example, the student must turn in their problem statement and statement of purpose for Unit 2 in week two of the course. Not only are students specifically guided through the proper way to execute the task through lecture and text instruction, but also receive specific feedback and revision comments the day after their submission is received in the online platform. Students must also complete two mini projects in Units 11 and 12 where they will turn in a cumulative rough draft of dissertation chapters 1 and 2, and chapter 3 respectively. While they matriculate through the course, students take the revised work and coordinate with their chair through one-on-one Zoom dissertation meetings, thus providing one full semester of multi-layered, structured, and iterative feedback on their dissertation that can help them anticipate future questions about their work. The course culminates in the Unit 13 final project where a final, proposal-ready draft, is submitted for final revision and evaluation. Therefore, upon successful completion of the capstone course, not only are these students prepared to successfully propose their dissertation, but they also have developed a positive cognitive appraisal that they are going to make it as they have already passed the mid-way point of successfully completing the first three chapters of their dissertation!

DISCUSSION

Helping shift online graduate students towards a sense of belonging is something that can make a notable difference in their experience and in their ultimate success. The online EdD higher education concentration at this regional state institution has had early successes as of this writing with the first graduates in Fall 2021 and Summer 2022, six additional successful dissertation proposals in 2022, with eight of the first eight students successfully completing the quantitative capstone course, for a small-sample size success rate of 100% thus far. This format has also allowed faculty to successfully navigate challenges with one of our early students who needed extensive formative feedback and an extended opportunity to complete his proposal. As the EdD faculty continue on this journey, they will continue to assess means through which the integration and inculcation of personal, social, and programmatic actions that will improve the experience for everyone. In this regard, the faculty are consistently seeking to improve in its efforts to guide students towards success and will be exploring self-efficacy of students within the program while simultaneously engaging in collective building of shared knowledge about our students, our program, and our desire to become the most effective learning program we can.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future opportunities for empirical research in this area abound as mentioned by Bagaka's et al. (2015), Dobie et al. (2010), and Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2019), where an integration of socialization and programmatic factors may be further examined as significant antecedents for online EdD student success or attrition and specifically, how faculty can continue to foster an online environment towards student connectedness and belongingness. As of this writing, the authors are embarking on an extensive research project where we will examine the question: What effect does successfully completing the dissertation capstone course have on student self-efficacy towards successful dissertation completion? The purpose of this study is to investigate the efficacy of the new

application of a capstone model of doctoral-level advanced research courses on the self-efficacy towards dissertation completion among students in the newly designed Higher Education online EdD program. The potential benefits to future online doctoral program design and online EdD student success that may result from this study include: a) identifying cognitive-behavioral traits towards doctoral-level academic rigor, b) evaluation of a novel approach to dissertation preparation, and c) if this novel approach significantly improves doctoral student self-efficacy towards dissertation completion. It is our hope that this study will be the first of many. As per others in the CPED community, we are always striving for continuous improvement to support student success. Moreover, the results of these studies will provide empirical evidence of how personal, socialization, and programmatic factors influence student belongingness and success, and these factors can be modified to increase student perception of belongingness and reduce the probability of becoming imposters.

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