

# DOCTORAL STUDENTS IN A DISTANCE PROGRAM: ADVISING AND DEGREE COMPLETION STRATEGIES

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## POSITION STATEMENT

In 1996, with a colleague in the department of educational administration, we developed the first online graduate course for the students in the department. The department is graduate-only, offering masters and doctoral degrees.

The “pilot” we developed was a research methods course. The platform used was Lotus Notes. Our efforts were part of a college-wide initiative to develop online courses for students in a college of education. Each of the departments of the college was to develop one online course. A day of “training” was provided for the pilot project faculty.

The pilot class was offered in the spring semester 1996. I have memories of this new teaching format and my experiences at that time. One enduring memory is that at the end of a day on campus, I would leave my office and my computer. I typically felt “confident” that all was well with the students in the online course. However, when I returned to the office the next day, I was always stunned to read the “threads” the students had created in the time between my departure and my return. The number of threads was daunting. Lotus Notes was an excellent forum for students to become acquainted with each other; and, it also was an excellent forum for reporting on significant issues such as one of the class member’s cat’s gastric issues. The myriad of other personal issues and comments were mixed with requests for help from other students with the course assignments. Students were very generous in their responses to these requests. The number of threads of advice and information were impressive. This was an early example of the power of peer mentoring at the graduate level.

Unfortunately, the amount of “misinformation” provided, student-to-student, became a major challenge in the management of the course, the threads and the course content.

I am relieved that the university moved to Blackboard as the platform for online courses. However, in the spring semester 2016, I participated in the piloting of Canvas in

one of the courses I taught. The students were very pleased with Canvas. As an instructional platform, it was an excellent experience.

Canvas will be offered as a faculty option during the summer and fall 2016 terms as an “experimental” option as well. I believe a university decision on investing in Canvas as the university platform will be made soon. The evolution of these platforms for course delivery has made course management much easier.

In 2016, the graduate programs offered by our department are primarily online. The available degree options are the Ph.D., Ed.D., M.A., and M.Ed.

The program has experienced success based on the number of applications and the number of enrolled students. For instance, in spring semester 2016, the number of doctoral students in the educational leadership and higher education programs was 251. At the May 2016 commencement, eleven individuals from the program received the doctoral degree.

## PURPOSE

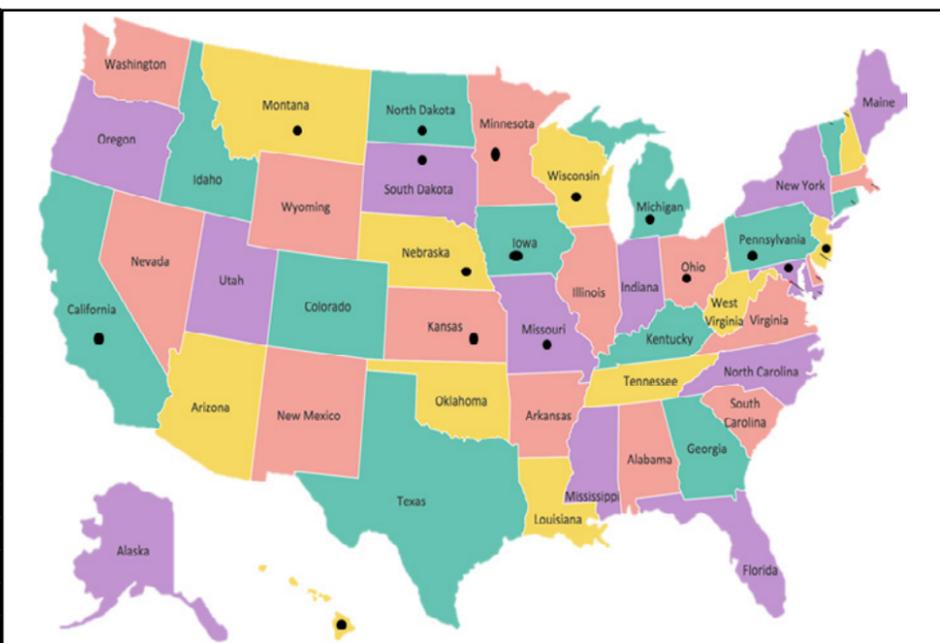
The purpose of this manuscript is to suggest strategies for advising doctoral students in an online doctoral program in educational leadership and higher education. The strategies are based on experiences with 33 doctoral students who completed their doctoral degrees 1992-2016.

These individuals were able to complete all of the course work online. Thirty-two of the students came to campus for advising and special events during their programs; however, one student did not come to campus until the final oral defense.

The strategies for doctoral advising offered in this manuscript are based on a long term commitment to helping students complete their doctoral programs. To advance this commitment, a doctoral advising approach was developed (Grady & Hoffman, 2007). This approach was designed to address the issue of attrition among doctoral students.

**TABLE 1**  
**HOME STATES OF THE**  
**33 INDIVIDUALS**

California	1
Hawaii	1
Iowa	2
Kansas	2
Maryland	1
Michigan	4
Minnesota	2
Missouri	4
Montana	2
Nebraska	7
New Jersey	1
North Dakota	1
Ohio	1
Pennsylvania	1
South Dakota	2
Wisconsin	1



A condensed version of this approach to guiding the dissertation process is presented as Figure 2.

The aspects of the guide reflect issues that a doctoral advisor may want to consider in structuring the advising plan used with students.

**CHALLENGES**

What special supports are needed by distance students?

The 32 students whose experiences are the basis for this report had one factor in common that contributed to their success in achieving the doctoral degree. Although the students were not required to come to campus, they all came to campus.

The strategy used to lure the students was an annual conference, the Women in Educational Leadership Conference offered in October of each year. The students were urged to come to the event. The conference begins on Sunday afternoon and ends by late Monday afternoon. I invite my doctoral advisees to come earlier if possible. The students arrive in time to attend a special meeting of my doctoral advisees on Sunday before the conference. Lunch is provided. All students introduce themselves. As the advisor, I provide an overview of the steps in completing their doctoral program that includes course completion, topic identification, proposal development and presentation to the doctoral committee, collection of data for the doctoral study and the details of the final oral defense. Additionally, the students are urged to remain on campus

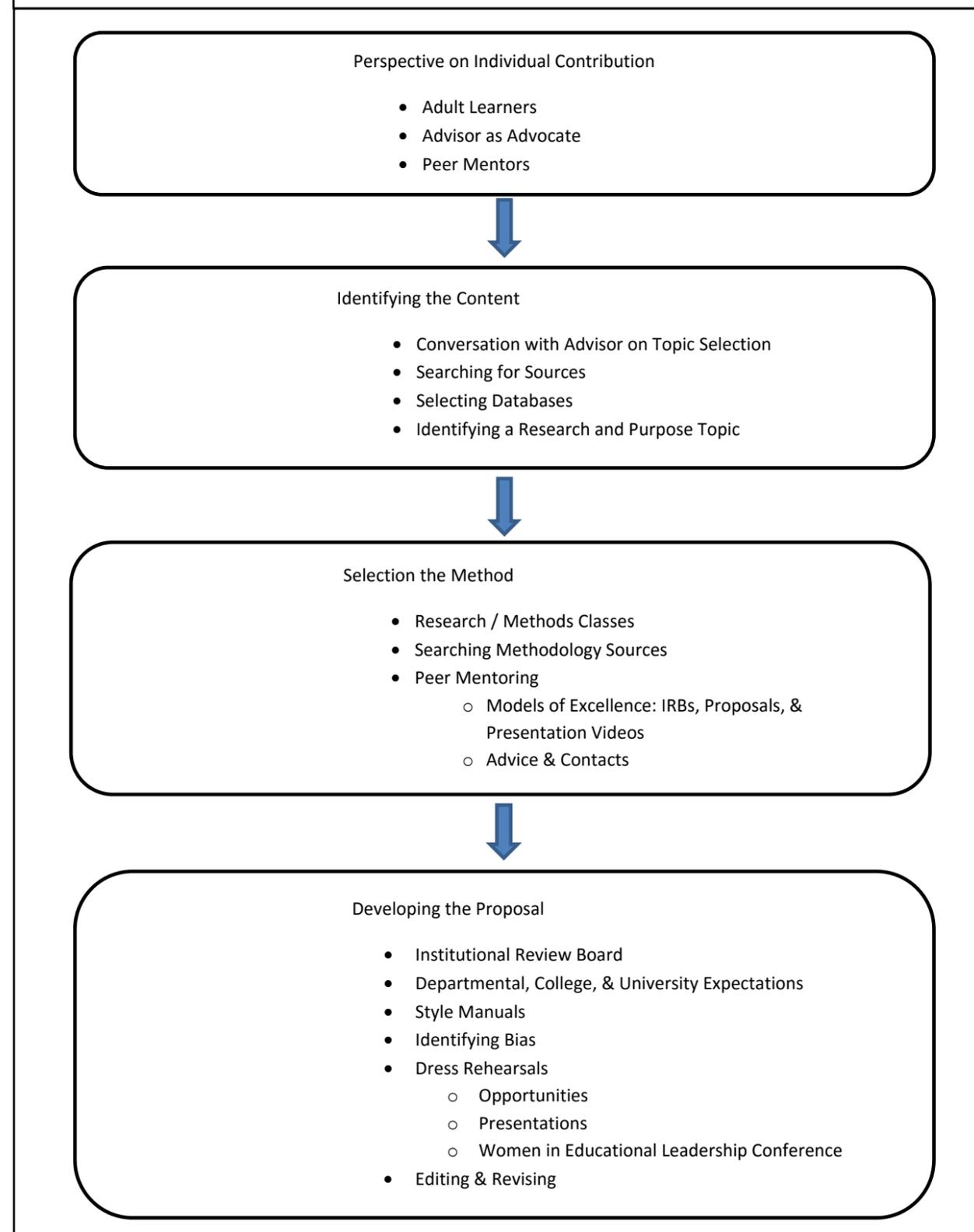
until noon on Tuesday. The event that encourages the students to remain on campus is an opportunity to attend the doctoral proposal meetings and final oral defenses for the students I advise. This opportunity is a chance to “SEE ONE.” With this experience, the students are able to observe what the process involves. It demystifies an event that can cause considerable anxiety for the students. Students are exposed to the array of topics and research completed by the students. The students observe the doctoral committee in action. After the faculty members have questioned and discussed the student’s presentation and paper, the students in attendance are invited to ask questions about the research topic and the methods.

This process has become an essential aspect of building a cohort or community for the distance students. The students leave the presentations with a group of students they can contact as they move through their doctoral experiences.

The enduring aspect of this process is evident as students who have completed their degrees return to campus when other members of this doctoral cohort return to campus for the proposal presentations and the doctoral defenses of these individuals.

The network of students reflects a special degree of “know how” in regards to the student’s needs as they move through the program. They are available to answer questions from the students’ point of view.

**FIGURE 2**  
**GUIDING THE DISSERTATION PROPOSAL**



Once students make the first trip to campus, they are typically convinced of the value of the experience in their quest to complete a doctoral program.

The students who approach the writing of the dissertation proposal will make the trip to campus in order to work on proposal development in an environment where they receive one-to-one guidance on the process. The students consistently verify that the time and money invested in these visits is worthwhile in their successful completion of the doctorate.

The students continue to return to campus as needed as they collect their research data and write the dissertation.

The students typically complete the doctoral degree in four years. However, some motivated individuals have completed the degree in fewer years.

What evidence exists that the approach is working? It is simply a matter of numbers. In an academic year, a minimum of four to seven students complete the doctoral degree by working according to this plan to complete their studies.

### **STUDENT INVESTMENTS**

The student must be willing to take a risk. Each step requires the student to invest in the process, but more importantly, in themselves. They must spend the time and money to come to campus. They must be willing to follow the plan that leads to the development of a proposal, data collection, analyses, reporting of the results, and creation of the dissertation as well as its successful defense.

A number of students who begin doctoral programs do not complete the doctoral program. The non-completion, attrition rates, are a concern. Students who languish in these programs are not the best reflection on the programs. Students who linger in doctoral programs for extended periods of time consume departmental, faculty and administrative resources. Programs experience enrollment caps. When students do not graduate or withdraw from the program, programs are blocked from admitting additional students.

### **PRESENTATIONS**

Another aspect that builds community within the student cohort is encouragement to make presentations at scholarly conferences. The doctoral students are encouraged to present their dissertation research at the annual Women in Educational Leadership Conference. They also are encouraged to attend and present at an array of state, regional and national conferences. These forums provide opportunities for the students to present their research, at

whatever stage it is at, to audiences of scholars who provide critique as well as recommendations to strengthen the research. For individuals in academic settings or those who seek faculty roles, these events provide a "line on a vita" for the students. The students are encouraged to attend the same conferences so that they can support each other's work and presentations. This, again, strengthens the community among the students.

These are students' investments in themselves. They carry a price tag in terms of time and money. However, these students are working toward doctoral degrees. The connections, exposure and experiences they have are career builders for them.

The doctoral experience should be more than a collection of classes. It includes performance/practice activities that strengthen the students' research skills, presentation skills, professional network, and broader engagement with the academic community.

### **ADVISOR INVESTMENTS**

A critical issue in these proposed strategies is the willingness of faculty advisors to invest the one-to-one time working with the students. How much effort will a faculty member be able to dedicate to this work?

The number of students who begin doctoral programs and do not complete the degree is an important consideration. For this reason, I have focused on developing a process for working with doctoral students. I have worked with the model as a guide for all of the subsequent years; but, I continue to modify it as I work with new students.

The points summarized in the paper are starting points for discussions of these issues. The number of graduate programs available to students demands that existing programs be attentive to their work with the doctoral students, their advising needs and their degree completion rates.

### **REFERENCE**

Grady, M.L., & Hoffman, S.C. (1997). Guiding the dissertation proposal: A student advocacy approach. In Mullen, C.A., Creighton, T.B., Dembrowski, F.L., & Harris, S.L. Eds. *The Handbook of Doctoral Programs in Educational Leadership: Issues and Challenges.* Rice University: NCPEA Press.