

ONLINE DOCTORAL EDUCATION: STRATEGIES AND RESOURCES FOR FACULTY ADVISORS

Marilyn L. Grady

University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln, Nebraska

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this manuscript is to present strategies and resources for advisors of doctoral students in online programs. The strategies include an approach to creating a community of doctoral students, a video initiative to provide encouragement to students in the doctoral program, and assignments that enhance students' writing skills to support preparation of dissertation proposals and dissertations. Resources include recommended readings to enhance doctoral students' writing and research skills and recommended readings for doctoral faculty to support their work as doctoral advisors.

POSITION STATEMENT

Strategies and resources, based on experiences and a series of innovations designed to address students' needs in an online doctoral program, follow. The strategies emerged from years of work with doctoral students who were adept at completing online coursework, but who drifted when they finished the classes and faced preparation of a dissertation proposal and a dissertation. The clock ticked as students were becalmed in a sea of indecision about a possible subject for their research, how to begin, and how to use research methodologies.

The work with doctoral students in online classes began with the genesis of online courses in the college in 1996. I was able to design and pilot the first online course for graduate students in our program with a colleague.

The department had offered "distance" opportunities for students prior to the advent of the digital revolution. The "old" model served cohorts of students throughout a large Great Plains state. The cohorts met on a regular schedule. A faculty member drove to the site and met a cohort. Each cohort meeting typically required an evening class session and a full day session. The faculty member returned to campus. Roundtrips required significant mileage, often as much as 800 miles. The cohort activities, delivered by a Land Grant University, were "service to the state and its citizens." They met a need for doctoral education in rural and distant settings. In this manner, individuals who could not attend the courses offered from 7:00-10:00 p.m. on the university campus on Monday-Thursday had the opportunity to complete doctoral degrees (Grady & Hoffman, 1997).

With the leadership of faculty members in the Department of Educational Administration, initiatives to offer online classes emerged. Faculty members who previously had held key administrative roles in the university were "well positioned" to establish the program in conjunction with the collective efforts of department faculty.

In 2017, there are more 150 than doctoral students from throughout the United States enrolled in the Ed.D. and Ph.D doctoral programs offered online. Doctoral admission applications are in greater numbers than the number of students admitted to the programs due to faculty load limitations.

Although application numbers are high, there is a challenge with the programs. The challenge is the time to degree completion and the degree completion rates. Students are capable of completing the online courses, and do so in an expected time frame. The "stall," however, occurs at the dissertation-writing phase of the programs.

To address this issue with the students I advise, I implemented strategies to address the students' challenges. The measure of the strategies' success is the students' degree completion. The approach I implemented typically leads to degree completion in five years or less (Grady, 2008; Grady, 2016).

There are four aspects to the approach. The underlying intent of the approach is to build student-to- support and provide a stronger foundation for dissertation completion. An annual meeting of my doctoral advisees, past and present, occurs annually in October. Former doctoral advisees provide video clips that I use in my work with current doctoral students. Redesigned course assignments

build writing skills and lead to identification of researchable topics.

ANNUAL MEETING OF DOCTORAL ADVISEES-PAST AND PRESENT

A first strategy is to develop a student-to-student network. This could be termed a community of learners. Once a year, my doctoral advisees-past and present come to campus for a special meeting. This occurs on a Saturday in October. The goals of the meeting are to create a network for the doctoral students. They meet other students who are at various stages in their doctoral studies. They meet individuals who have completed the doctoral program.

The meeting format follows the guidelines provided by Carl Moore, author of *Group Techniques for Idea Building*. Each student, seated in the large circle with the group leader (convener), participates in the group introduction process that begins with the convener introducing herself. The individual to her right introduces the convener saying, "This is and I am" The next person follows and introduces the convener and the first individual and says "I am" The process involves all seated individuals. There may be as many as 30 individuals in the room. The process is challenging and, to an extent, entertaining. The students are quick to "help" each other. It becomes somewhat of a collaborative process. Individuals who have attended the meeting in previous years are ready to start when the group has assembled. They know from prior experience where to sit before the introductions begin. The result: the students have learned the names of all of the students in the group. The overall effect is to reduce the isolation online doctoral students may experience. Laughter is a key part of the activity.

The meeting provides a reminder to the students of the key aspects of progress toward the doctoral degree. Topics include requirements such as comprehensive examinations, dissertation proposal meetings and doctoral defenses. A clear timeline of expectations and benchmarks are provided for the doctoral students.

The individuals who have graduated describe their dissertations and the experiences they had in completing their studies. These stories are often very personal and helpful to the students in the program. They are a reminder that the graduates were "fully employed" and had families who depended on them daily. All the doctoral students are adults who have similar responsibilities, so these discussions are reassuring to them.

The graduates report, "what worked for them" that allowed them to complete the program. The graduates highlight the specific issues they encountered related to family

and work life in counterpoint to online classes. How to make time and take time for writing is a theme of these reports.

The students who are in the doctoral program describe their status in their doctoral journeys as well. All of the individuals in attendance are invited to describe the professional roles they have and other personal details that they are willing to share with the group.

Part of the meeting includes a visual presentation of different aspects of the campus and its prominent programs. By highlighting the details and historical aspects of the university, the students are encouraged to spend time exploring the campus during their time at the university.

The result of the annual meeting is that the students who attend are willing to return to campus throughout the year. The students also are willing to return to the annual meeting in the fall. The graduates report the contacts they have developed with the doctoral students through these meetings that persist years after graduation. Social media keeps them "in touch." They are quick to report on the status of other graduates and their successes.

VIDEOS OF DOCTORAL GRADUATES

In response to an invitation, graduates provided 2-3 minute videos. The videos feature the individual graduates who describe the strategies that assisted them in their completion of the doctoral degree. Each individual video is unique to the graduate's dissertation topic, professional work responsibilities and family/friends support. The graduates also note the graduate students they met in the program who continue to be part of their professional networks. The graduates provide their permission for the "showing" of the videos to the graduate students who attend the annual meeting as well as for selective presentation at other events. The student-to-student approach offers assurance to the students in the program. The graduates share their experiences willingly and are accessible to the students through social media, email, and attendance at the annual meeting.

ENHANCED WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Doctoral students have professional roles in a variety of educational organizations. Their roles are diverse. Students' ages are between 25-65 years old.

The students' professional roles may not include a regular writing component. Although students have completed other degrees prior to enrolling in the doctoral program, the writing of a dissertation is a new and unique experience. Students with limited research and writing experience may struggle to develop a dissertation proposal or

prospectus. Students who do not have academic writing experience may need writing support to be successful.

To address this need, I modified my course assignments to emphasize more short writing assignments to create writers who are more confident. The redesign emphasizes assignments focused on writing for research purposes.

One course for doctoral students titled Leadership in Educational Organizations. After several iterations of the course, the current format requires writing assignments that include one-page applications of articles accessed from the Chronicle of Higher Education or Education Week. Students must link the articles' content to their current career roles, anticipated next career steps or topics they intend to pursue for the dissertation. In a semester, they prepare a series of the short application papers. The assignments have improved the students' ability to write applications of the articles' content and have assisted students in identifying potential research topics.

Students also read a biography of an educational leader in the career role they hold or aspire to hold. A book report based on the book is required and shared with class members and the instructor. Students and the instructor respond to the book reviews via a discussion board link.

Students read selected articles from the Encyclopedia of Leadership. For each reading, students prepare a one-page application of the article based on their research interests or experiences in their workplace.

Students design and complete a final research project that includes the purpose of the study, interview questions derived from the readings, subjects interviewed, identification of organizational settings of the interviewees, transcripts of the interviews and a final report of the project that includes the findings linked to the literature sources that support or challenge the findings of the study.

The course assignments demand significant reading and constant written reports. The student feedback from the course indicates that the assignments have been successful based on the students' comments. The manuscripts submitted by the students are a strong reflection of the impact of these assignments.

The students' writing skills improve throughout the semester. The students' papers provide evidence of the growth of students' writing skills and depth of analysis. Although the "reader" role in the process has increased, the investment has been worth the effort.

As an advisor of students enrolled in the course, the benefits of the assignments are evident as students develop dissertation proposals. Their writing skills improve throughout the term and they are more confident in identification of a topic for their doctoral research

Readings on Doctoral Advising and Writing

To meet student needs, intensive reading on advising doctoral students and writing was essential. My research area is leadership and I am an active researcher as well. I was not prepared to teach writing to graduate students.

To address this need, I reviewed a series of books on writing. Based on my review, I require students to read the following texts. *The Elements of Style* is a recommendation for all the students I advise. *How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing* by Silvia is helpful, as well as entertaining, to doctoral students as well as professors. *Writing Up Qualitative Research* by Wolcott is useful to the students. *Professors as Writers: A Self-help Guide to Productive Writing* by Boice provides structure and a guide for doctoral students and professors. *Making the Implicit Explicit: Creating Performance Expectations for the Dissertation* by Lovitts is a detailed examination of the dissertation and its assessment as well as dissertations in the disciplines. It is very useful for professors who advise doctoral students.

A reading agenda for advising doctoral students includes the following books. *Advising & Mentoring Doctoral Students: A Handbook* by Gardner & Barnes is a useful primer on the subject of advising doctoral students. *Navigating the Dissertation: Strategies for New Doctoral Advising Faculty and Their Advisees* by Di Pierro is a comprehensive text on the topic of doctoral advising. *The Graduate Advisor Handbook: A Student-Centered Approach* by Shore provides discussion of critical issues on our work as advisors of graduate student.

The strategies for advising doctoral students continue to evolve and be tested with each new student I advise. Continued contact with the graduates of the process is essential to the revision and redesign. Doctoral advising is not a static process. The search for written resources on doctoral advising continues as well.

REFERENCES

- Boice, R. (1990). *Professors as writers: A self-help guide to productive writing*. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press.
- Di Pierro, M (2014). *Navigating the dissertation: Strategies for new doctoral advising faculty and their advisees*. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press.
- Gardner, S.K. & Barnes, B. J. (2014). *Advising and mentoring doctoral students: A handbook*. Authors.
- Goethals, G.R., Sorenson, G.J., & Burns, J.M. Eds. (2004) *Encyclopedia of Leadership*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

- Grady, M.L. (2016). Doctoral students in a distance program: Advising and degree completion strategies. *Journal of Academic Administration in Higher Education*. 12(2), 49-52.
- Grady, M.L. & Hoffman, S. (1997). Guiding the dissertation: 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: NCP-PEA Press.
- Grady, M.L. (2008). The finish Line: Doctoral students and the great race. *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*. 6(3), 65.
- Lovitts, B. E. (2007). *Making the implicit explicit: Creating performance expectations for the dissertation*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Moore, C.M. (1987). *Group techniques for idea building*. SAGE.
- Shore, B. M. (2014). *The graduate advisor handbook: A student-centered approach*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Singh, A. A. & Lukkarila, L. (2017). *Successful academic writing: A complete guide for social and behavioral scientists*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Strunk, W. Jr, & De A'Morelli (2017) *The elements of style: Classic edition*. San Luis Obispo, CA: Spectrum Ink USA.
- Wolcott, H.F. *Writing up qualitative research, 3rd Ed.* (2009). Los Angeles: SAGE.