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Strategic Onboarding of Online Doctoral Students: Creating a Pathway to Academic Persistence

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Abstract

An onboarding strategy can help online universities improve new doctoral student productivity, engagement, and retention. A prescribed plan is vital to ensure the onboarding process is aligned, and clear designed support is provided for students. Recent literature justifies strategic onboarding includes acquiring the necessary knowledge, skills and behaviors to become successful members of an organization (Beaver and Erdogan, 2011). Similarly, doctoral students may benefit from clearly designed rules, protocols, and practices exclusive to the online doctoral experience. This study presents the process of strategic onboarding strategies for that will provide a smart start for online doctoral students.

Keywords: Strategic onboarding, Collaboration, Doctoral persistence, Doctoral retention, Doctoral advising, Doctoral mentoring.

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1. Introduction

An Onboarding program for the doctoral student is a critical part of positioning for successful entry and matriculation into graduate studies. New doctoral scholars need a strategic introduction to the academic regimen of doctoral studies and to the organizational culture designed to support them. Strategic onboarding is a term used in business that encompasses a series of intentional actions aimed at preparing employees to be successful members of the team. Also known as organizational socialization, strategic onboarding includes acquiring the necessary knowledge, skills and behaviors to become successful members of the organization (Beaver and Erdogan, 2011). Similarly, doctoral students can benefit from clearly defined and intentional academic socialization to rules, protocols and practices that are unique to doctoral level study. Mullendore and Banahan (2005) summarized that an effective orientation program can be the defining moment in the transition to college for the student – a time in which fundamental academic habits may form that enhance the academic success and personal growth of students and marks the beginning of a new educational experience.

The Allen and Seaman (2011) reports that over 6.7 million students enrolled in at least one online course during the Fall 2011 term, representing an increase of 570,000 students over the previous year. With the explosion of online learning, institutions are working to develop onboarding processes that get students quickly connected and engaged with the organization despite no physical contact. [Source: 2012 - Changing Course: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the United States]. Consequently, building the virtual community of learning becomes more challenging.

Academic Impressions further asserts that approximately 25% of students begin college at a time other than fall term, yet, many institutions don't plan onboarding processes in any other semester. Recent research suggests that students starting in non-fall terms encounter substantially different challenges in campus orientation, socialization, and academic performance. These challenges pose a direct threat to both student retention and success (<https://www.academicimpressions.com/webcast/onboarding-spring-admits-future-success>].

2. Academic Socialization

Doctoral students who undertake professional education in a virtual environment may be particularly challenged to form educational relationships that are supportive and nurturing and may have difficulty navigating the institutional structures that support registration, financial aid, and academic supports. Virtual doctoral students need orientation that facilitates their academic socialization and helps them understand the essential elements necessary for success and provides strategies for communicating across institutional barriers while in a virtual environment. Walker (2008) advocates orientating new doctoral students to the series of academic socialization milestones on the way to accomplishing the Ph.D.: course taking, comprehensive exams, forming the dissertation advisory committee, approval of the dissertation prospectus, the research and writing of the dissertation, and the final oral defense. Doctoral students in a virtual program may need additional help in developing the nuances of effective communication, teamwork and collaboration in an online setting to accomplish these significant benchmarks. The virtual doctoral program in educational leadership usually attracts adult learners who are full-time professionals with demanding professional responsibilities and are not able to attend traditional academic programs. Virtual programs appeal to adult students because they are not time and place dependent. Many of these students have great anxiety about how the program works how it supports their doctoral-level learning. One new doctoral student wrote:

“Prior to the start of the Ph.D. Philosophy in Educational Management Cohort VII began to communicate regularly. Team building and cohort cohesiveness developed organically as we helped each other navigate the admissions process as program participants, the communication, and cohort cohesiveness was vital to the decision-making process in continuing after onboarding to the hybrid experience. The open lines of communication provided a support network both in the virtual world and in conversation. When faced with academic insecurities; the need for clarification regarding a particular assignment, Cohort VI members provided a safety net.”

A core value of the onboarding process is to get students immediately familiar with the organizational culture of the doctoral program. In this regard, members of the previous doctoral cohort serve as the welcoming team for the newly admitted students. Existing doctoral students are invaluable in helping newly admitted students to preview the road ahead and the expectations of the faculty. The importance of team building is critical to doctoral student persistence in a hybrid doctoral program (Holmes et al., 2014). Enrolled doctoral students are in the best position to share the student perspective of the program and develop the community of learning needed for academic success.

It is critical for newly admitted doctoral students to know that the program's academic experiences are designed to provide a culture and community of support for doctoral study. Because online learning can be an isolating experience, the academic socialization process is necessary to enable doctoral students to interact with their academic peers and develop nurturing peer relationships.

The core doctoral faculty supporting the development and delivery of the online doctoral program in educational leadership give careful deliberation to designing a doctoral level experience that students find beneficial in keeping them connected to their work. This program is moving into its fifth year of operation and has graduated sixteen students. During each summer residency, focus group sessions are conducted with students to obtain their reflections on the doctoral learning experience. The purpose is to uncover the perceptions and lived experiences of enrolled students while it was still fresh in their minds.

3. Virtual Collaboration

Collaboration is essential for success in doctoral studies; especially for students whose coursework is delivered in an online format. One of the most recognizable tools or applications that come to mind when a person thinks of collaboration in on-line learning is the discussion board. Most every online application offers some version of a forum for posting information and exchanging comments, questions, and ideas. But, collaboration through the online interface must quickly equate scholarship integration. The view of scholarship and academic integrity and worth in

online learning must be bolstered by illuminating the strength of flexibility and integration of perspective offers in the virtual environments as opposed to the traditional format. Furthermore, the online learning environment will be able to exhibit strengths that should encourage traditional face to face instruction to consider some level of hybrid interaction in the instructional process. Learning how to communicate in the online classroom may require new skills for doctoral students. A publication by [TeacherStream \(2009\)](#) in its resource guide, *Mastering Online Discussion Board Facilitation*, asserts that the ability to communicate asynchronously is one of the primary skills required in online learning.

Therefore, strategic onboarding programs can incorporate and introduce virtual communication skills to doctoral students. Virtual discussion boards represent a new paradigm of communication and students need to be oriented to the types of reflective responses and in-depth conversations needed to build community in the virtual classroom. In strategic onboarding orientation, doctoral students need to be made aware of responsible and substantive forum posting information and exchanging comments, questions, and ideas. Students need to be prepared for what is considered a substantive post and how to extend the online conversations with classroom peers. In strategic onboarding practices, there must be intentional actions on the part of the university to prepare students to acquire the collaborative communication skills needed to be responsible members of the virtual classroom and build rapport with their peers.

4. Four C's of Strategic Onboarding

[Bauer \(2010\)](#) describes the Four C's of onboarding which can be appropriately incorporated into the onboarding process for doctoral students:

Compliance – Basic legal and policy-related rules and regulations;

Clarification – Ensure employees understand organizational expectations;

Culture – Provide a sense of organizational norms, both formal and informal;

Connection – Establish the vital interpersonal relationships and information networks needed for success.

From the moment of acceptance into the doctoral program, onboarding activities should begin to help the new scholar understand the nature and scope of the anticipated academic experience. Some of the Four C's requirements for new doctoral students include:

Compliance: admission acceptance, academic deadlines, academic advising, grading practices, enrollment information and registration PINS, course schedules, technology requirements, and attendance

Clarification: academic progress regulations, discussion board participation, research and scholarship requirements; training in navigating the e-college platform

Culture: departmental procedures and practices, faculty research interests, academic socialization opportunities,

Connections: collaborative mentoring, social media uses, community of learners, academic mentoring, building relationships with peers and faculty; doctoral student networking.

Following the broad trend of increased participation in online learning, students in online doctoral programs can facilitate communications by becoming competent in social networking and social media sites as tools for collaboration. Current social media platforms are continually growing and provide useful tools that help students navigate the need for social interaction in the virtual environment for collaboration and scholarship. Additionally, social media applications contribute to the ability of instructors and students to stay connected and share information and resources.

5. Strategic Onboarding and the Smart Start

[Mullendore and Banahan \(2005\)](#) stresses the critical role that strategic onboarding plays in providing a smart start for students:

"The literature for the past thirty years has been clear that it is equally important to understand that it is the combination of academic and social integration that is critical to student success and retention, and a student's comfort level with a college is often established during orientation. Orientation provides multiple opportunities for your new students to meet and interact with others, thus beginning the social and academic integration processes."

Intentional retention starts with early conversations about realistic expectations about the rigors of doctoral study. Doctoral students in online programs are expected to meet the rigorous challenges of doctoral coursework with a can-do attitude and the ability to make an impact in the world through the education that they acquire. Strategic onboarding programs assist doctoral students in understanding that much will be required of them and that they are expected to gain the scholar's depth and breadth of academic inquiry. Doctoral degree holders are expected to become engaged and productive members of the academic learning community. The rights and responsibilities of doctoral degree holders promote the advancement of scholarship and research regardless of the particular field of study that a person embarks on. It is important to tell doctoral scholars at the beginning of the journey that they are expected to do great things and become organizational change agents.

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