Exemplary Practices in Student Support

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Abstract

Faculty members in the School of Applied Leadership at City University of Seattle follow exemplary practices in student support for their doctoral program. Hiring a Doctoral Student Administrator (DSA) who is also doctorally-qualified is one practice. The DSA oversees the student support program that includes admissions, orientations, social media, and writing support. Having one faculty advisor overseeing all of the doctoral students helps the program build a community of scholarship that prevents some common issues with online learning. This paper will describe aspects of this exemplary practice, which will include examples supported by research.
Exemplary Practices in Student Support

Student support is a key practice to help students achieve long-term success in an academic program. Until recently, academic advising (typically the student support unit) has mostly focused on undergraduate students (Barnes, Williams, & Archer, 2010). Barnes et al. (2010) noted that in recent years there has been an increase in research on doctoral-level student support, typically given by a student’s faculty advisor or a dedicated doctoral student advisor. The need for doctoral support is indicated by attrition rates. Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) reported that studies over the last 40 years have shown an average doctoral attrition rate between 40% and 60%, and Rovai (2002) found that attrition is 10% to 20% higher in online programs. Thus, adding an additional 20% to the typically 60% attrition rate means that it is possible that attrition could be as high as 72% for an online doctoral program.

City University of Seattle’s faculty were concerned about the problem of attrition when they created the school’s first online doctoral program in 2011. It became evident early in the design of the doctoral program that the students would benefit from the hiring of a doctorally-qualified faculty member to support them throughout the program. The position of Doctoral Student Administrator (DSA) was created and filled in 2013 to meet this need. The DSA was specifically charged with providing exemplary student support to all doctoral students from admission to graduation.

The following chapter will present best practices in exemplary doctoral student support practices that have been used within the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) program in the School of Applied Leadership at City University of Seattle. First, a discussion of doctoral student support practices will reveal how best practices from current research are being applied in the doctoral program. This discussion will look at general practices, the student orientation, faculty mentorship, and writing support. Then there will be a discussion of tips and current best practices used by the DSA.

Doctoral Student Support Practices

Doctoral student support in the School of Applied Leadership is designed to support the student from admission to graduation. The connection the DSA makes with the students begins with admission. Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) found that managing students’ expectations about a program plays a significant role in student persistence. This includes ensuring students are matched to the right concentration and that they understand how to setup their student accounts and register for classes. Golde and Dore (2001) asserted that a lack of adequate information increases the likelihood that a student will withdraw from a program. The DSA processes all student admissions into the doctoral program and is responsible for sending out the letter of acceptance to the students once they are admitted. The admissions process is done in concert with the enrollment advisor who is in charge of processing students in the system and enrolling them in classes. The DSA and the enrollment advisor work closely together during the admissions process to offer multiple levels of support.

Student Orientation

The DSA also teaches a five-week orientation class for all incoming students. An orientation course that socializes the students to the online environment used at the university, while also educating them about the program, is considered a best practice to prevent early student attrition (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2005). The students are given information on school policies, academic writing, and APA. Exercises and assignments in the class allow the students to practice the skills they will need to be successful online while engaging in the written material. For example, the students will read the school’s policy manual and then complete an open book quiz. The quiz provides feedback on what they miss, and they are allowed to take it over again until they score 100%, indicating that they have interacted with the most important policies for them to know at the start of the program.

Faculty Mentorship

Barnes, Williams, and Archer (2010) found in their study of over 2,000 doctoral-level graduate students that students valued accessibility, helpfulness, professional socialization, and caring in their primary faculty advisor. Those values are part of the core job responsibility of the DSA.
By having such a strong student focus, the DSA is accessible to students whenever they may have a program question or need to feel more connected to the program.

The DSA sends out regular emails with writing tips, APA lessons, and opportunities for workshops, webinars, and conferences. The goal of this outreach program is to have at least six personal contacts with students each quarter. Further socialization is done through the school’s social media accounts. Together, this provides the students with a sense that they are part of a community of scholars instead of alone in the process. Social integration from faculty and peers is considered a best practice to prevent attrition in a doctoral program (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).

In addition to providing socialization into the academic community, the DSA also tracks students’ progress in the program and offers advice to keep students from running into delays in their studies. Martinsuo and Turkulainen (2011) found that delays in students’ academic progress that result in students staying in school for longer than four years decreases students’ motivation and can lead to student attrition. The DSA not only helps with planning but also uses his own experiences in graduate school to bolster students’ motivation when they encounter issues that delay their progress in the program.

**Tips for Success**

For a program to be successful in this type of support, it is important that a doctorally-qualified faculty advisor be assigned to cover all students in the program. Dividing students among faculty can lead to a more fragmented experience for students. This dedicated faculty advisor will use his or her personal experience with the doctoral process to mentor and advise students as they progress in the program. Through regular contact with students, this faculty advisor can offer tips and support when needed and be responsible for any form of community created for the students. In an online program, this most often takes the form of a social media group. Making sure students feel they have many options for connection to the program helps to manage different personality types and gives students choices for how and at what level they want to be connected.

The most essential tool used by the DSA is an Access database of student information. This database augments the information kept in the students’ records by the university. The DSA can keep track of students as they move through the program and in an instant see what classes

Caffarella and Barnett (2000) studied doctoral-level writing and concluded that feedback and critiques from both faculty and peers, while anxiety provoking for students, are the influential elements to allow doctoral students to understand and improve in the scholarly writing process. Students are supported by the DSA, their professor, and their peers during this first doctoral writing class. Students also have an option for ongoing writing support in the form of a one-credit writing support class that is offered in conjunction with whatever class students are taking. Students are allowed to turn in work on the due date and then work with the faculty member overseeing the writing support class to improve their writing and get it up to standard for the program. The paper is then resubmitted to the class and graded by the professor of that class who offers further feedback to the student on the subject matter. Together both faculty members help the students to hone their writing skills through direct feedback on their work. This technique has proven to be very successful in improving students’ writing over the course of a quarter. SAL’s support of writing is an exemplary practice that prepares students for the later challenge of writing their dissertation.

**Writing Support**

Students entering into the School of Applied Leadership’s Ed.D. in Leadership program are adult learners who are typically working full-time jobs in high-level positions. It often surprises them when they struggle with writing at the doctoral level. Typically, students are usually stuck in the third level of Bloom’s taxonomy, application, which Granello (2001) defined as being able to connect relevant research to a topic but unable to assess the quality of the information read. With the goal of moving students to the higher levels of analysis and synthesis, the faculty in the School of Applied Leadership designed a writing intensive class to start the program. This class allows students to engage with the topic of leadership while they write a series of papers. Students are required to turn in draft papers, which are evaluated by the faculty, and students are given detailed feedback on their work.
students have taken and which courses they still need. Notes are kept on
students’ preferences and needs, which allows for more personalized sup-
port when managing large numbers of students. Having direct control of
this database allows it to be customized to fit the needs of the program as
it grows. The database provides a snapshot of how students are doing at
any given moment, allowing the DSA to continuously aware of students’
experiences in the program.

Conclusion

Keeping involved in students’ lives is not easy in an online program.
Not only are the students remote, but often classes are taught by adjunct
faculty who are also not on site. Having a dedicated faculty member who
is responsible for advising and supporting students during their time in
the doctoral program allows for a closer relationship with students. The
DSA communicates not only with students directly but with the faculty
teaching each quarter to collect information on students’ academic pro-
gression. This information allows the DSA to tailor communications with
students that support them individually though webinars, mentorship,
socialization, and community building. Having a close connection to stu-
dents allows for exemplary student support and has led to increased per-
sistence in the student body and significantly lower than average attrition
rates in the program.

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