

Improving Doctoral Student Retention

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Abstract

Retention and degree completion at the doctoral level are ongoing challenges for program and university stakeholders. In this chapter the topic of retention practices at the doctoral level is addressed. Three student engagement mechanisms specifically targeted toward online doctoral students and aimed at increasing engagement, program retention, and degree completion rates are presented. A literature review is provided in addition to detailed information relating to each student engagement mechanism. Finally, recommendations are proposed for the successful integration of the student engagement mechanisms into all academic programs where they might provide valuable results to the university and students.

Overview

University administrators, program faculty, and other stakeholders are routinely confronted with questions surrounding the topics of retention and degree completion (ACT, 2015; Hart, 2012; Law, 2014; Mendoza, Villarreal, & Gunderson, 2014; O’Keeffe, 2013; Rankin, 2015; Sowell, 2008; Tobin, 2014). While retention and degree completion at the baccalaureate and master’s level is one of concern, the doctoral level has also proved challenging (ACT, 2015; Barnes, Williams, & Archer, 2010; Grasso, Barry, & Valentine, 2007; Mendoza et al., 2014; Rankin, 2015; Sowell, 2008; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012), especially in the online environment (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Di Pierro, 2012; Hart, 2012).

Students enter a doctoral program with personal and professional needs, expectations, and desires influencing retention and degree completion rates. The ability of university leaders to understand and provide what is most useful to students increases a program’s value to the student; therefore, supporting higher retention and completion rates. Providing terminal education to working professionals who may also have children and are completing a program online presents additional risks to attrition and graduation rates (Angelino et al., 2007; Di Pierro, 2012; Hart, 2012; Law, 2014; Mendoza et al., 2014; Rankin, 2015; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).

This chapter addresses the topic of retention practices at the doctoral level for online students and provides three suggested practices specifically aimed at increasing engagement, and in turn, program retention and degree completion rates. A review of literature is provided to deliver background and context on the topic. Three specific research-supported engagement mechanisms are recommended for integration into the student experience to support student success: increased career and academic advisement, assignment submission liberty, and research and teaching assistantships and fellowships. Additionally, four recommendations are made for the successful integration of each engagement mechanism. Finally, it is suggested the mechanisms proposed in this chapter be extended into lower-level academic programs should they provide valuable results to the university and students.

Review of the Literature

Sowell (2008) found a 56 percent completion rate of PhDs in the social sciences comprising many of the programs offered at schools such as

City University of Seattle, National University, Amherst College, and many other private universities with a significant liberal arts influence.

PhDs in social sciences comprise 21 percent of all PhDs completed (Sowell, 2008). According to a report by ACT (2015), on a macro level PhD retention rates at private universities, such as those mentioned, are encouragingly high at 81.7 percent, outperforming the public universities at 78.6 percent. The graduation rate for PhD programs at private universities also outpaces the public universities rate by 13 percent with rates of 62.5 percent and 49.5 percent, respectively (ACT, 2015). Taken together, retention at the doctoral level among all universities nationally indicates that two out of every ten students will not persist, and approximately 5.5 out of every ten students will graduate. Every student who does not persist or graduate carries associated costs.

Costs of Attrition

Three primary costs are associated with attrition (Grasso et al., 2007). The first cost is borne by society of not receiving the benefits the graduate may produce in the way of practice, research, or teaching. The second cost is to the individual student who will most likely be required to pay for the education received without the benefits of the degree. The third cost is to the university in having an additional student not complete after the faculty invested time and resources in the pursuit of the student’s educational goal. Grasso and colleagues (2007) promoted four conditions for optimal doctoral completion: the right people apply, the right people are admitted, students and faculty foster productive working relationships, and students experience social support from other students. Doing more to increase retention and graduation rates creates global economic benefits as well.

Global Economic Implications

China and Europe are global competitors to the United States in terms of doctoral graduates (Di Pierro, 2012). This carries with it the economic consequence of the United States being less competitive in the global marketplace for highly skilled, well-paying jobs and a reduced internal talent base for educating future doctoral students (Di Pierro, 2012). Di

Pierro (2012) also recommended that universities adopt a just-in-time orientation to provide a welcoming and supportive initial doctoral student experience. This practice has already been adopted in the two doctoral programs available at CityU, the Doctor of Business Administration and Doctor of Education in Leadership programs.

Case Example: City University of Seattle

City University of Seattle has proactively taken steps to ensure the strongest retention and completions rates are attained. After creating its first online doctoral program in 2011, City University of Seattle decided to create a new position, the doctoral student administrator (DSA), to provide the support needed to ensure the greatest levels of doctoral student retention and completion (Rankin, 2015). This action demonstrates leadership and genuine concern for student success by CityU.

Career and Academic Advisement

Creating a stronger connection between career and academic advisement has proven successful at increasing retention and graduation rates (Law, 2014). Some students may enter a doctoral program still unsure of their specific career path. Delivering concentrated advisement on the relationship between career trajectory and academic achievement are in line with the findings of Barnes and colleagues (2010) who found helpfulness, caring, and professional socialization among the most valued attributes of a primary faculty advisor. These findings are also in clear alignment with Hart (2012) who identified satisfaction, relevance, self-efficacy, personal growth, and social connectedness as factors associated with student persistence in online programs.

Assignment Method Liberty

According to Collins and Halverson (2010), technological advances have caused roles to change within the workplace where individuals are routinely charged with finding and using information from a variety of

technological formats, which has in turn forced educational entities to adapt. In the current age of technology a person can learn via free college courses through massive online open courses (MOOCs), YouTube videos, blogs, vlogs, and a host of other knowledge-sharing platforms (Collins & Halverson, 2010). Tobin (2014) suggested academic institutions provide greater assignment submission liberty, relying less on structured academic writing and tests and instead letting students use formats more relevant to their professional requirements. The practice proposed by Tobin (2014), and supported by Collins and Halverson (2010) and Hart (2012), provides increased creative freedom, allowing students the ability to take greater control of how their assignments are completed, adding to the relevance and personalization of their educational experience.

Research and Teaching Assistantships and Fellowships

Mendoza and colleagues (2014) examined the within-year retention rates of doctoral students finding the use of research and teaching assistantships and fellowships to have significantly positive correlations with retention. In part, the use of such programs according to Hart (2012) and O’Keeffe (2013) builds stronger social connectivity between students and the university, thus creating a sense of belonging found to be positively correlated with student persistence (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Moreover, the creation of social bonds in online programs has proven challenging (Angelino et al., 2007), further suggesting the potential benefits of teaching and research assistantships and fellowships in online doctoral programs.

Integration into the Student Experience

Three practices can be integrated into the student experience of doctoral students in traditional, online, and hybrid programs that will enhance their learning. First, increase integration between career and academic advising to help students better align educational and career goals (Di Pierro, 2012; Hart, 2012; Law, 2014; O’Keeffe, 2013). Second, provide increased flexibility in assignment submission, allowing students to enhance

work-related skills in the program (Tobin, 2014). Third, as Mendoza and colleagues (2014) have suggested: include teaching and research assistantships and fellowships to provide significant and positive effects on retention at the doctoral level.

Increased Integration of Career and Academic Advisement

The first mechanism allows doctoral students to further explore how their degree and career align beyond program completion. It may be argued that students entering doctoral programs do not require as much in terms of career and academic advising. Some students enter doctoral programs with several years in a specific field and have a clear career path. Other students, however, enter doctoral programs with diverse work experiences ranging in different industries, functions, and organizational sizes and, therefore, do not have a clear career path (Law, 2014). Law (2014) explained that focusing on students with unsure or unclear career paths over several advising sessions produces significantly positive results for student motivation and retention.

Students at all levels need a strong connection between the time and cost of educational attainment and career prospects. Factors outside of a university leader's reach, such as changing economic conditions, or a lack of advisor knowledge of certain industries, geographical areas, or demand expectations may cause some to err on the side of caution by not advising too deeply into career advisement. These factors encourage academic advisors to be more informed so as to create greater value for students. It may also be argued that a doctoral student most likely has sufficient ability to research the factors in question and will then be capable of making an independently informed decision. The interactions between the advisor and student foster social connection (O'Keefe, 2013), a sense of belonging, satisfaction, and relevance between the university faculty and the student (Hart, 2012).

Assignment Submission Liberty

The second mechanism allows students to incorporate skills that may be required on the job. Examples of this may include the use of certain

technologies or public speaking in the form of presentations or videos (Collins & Halverson, 2010). Technological issues such as files being submitted in an inaccessible way to a professor due to a student's choice of program will occur. Modern work and educational institutions increasingly leverage technology to communicate, collaborate, and learn. Students and professors in online programs already work through technological issues. Additional technological issues will be reduced through effective guidelines set by the university.

Students in doctoral programs have a variety of experiences and expertise, therefore opening the door to unique and creative ideas. Granting students liberty to determine the method and medium of completing assignments based on instructor-designated objectives allows students to lead their own learning, use methods they are more familiar with, and express creativity (Tobin, 2014). Some may argue the use of traditionally preferred, formal methods such as essays and tests require greater academic skill compared to less formal means. With the development and accessibility of technology today, students can address assignment criteria thoroughly and effectively by creating podcasts, videos, websites, mock interviews, or video slide shows (Collins & Halverson, 2010; Tobin, 2014). These factors support increased program relevance (Hart, 2012) and personalization of students' educational experience, factors with a significantly positive correlation with increased retention and graduation rates.

Research and Teaching Assistantships and Fellowships

The benefits of this mechanism to the university outweigh the drawbacks. The university benefits from a larger talent pool that is more affordable than faculty members. However, research and teaching programs may not be viewed as strategically or financially valuable to the university. This mechanism supports existing retention and graduation efforts by developing stronger working relationships between online students and faculty, given the lack of face-to-face interaction available on traditional campuses (Rankin, 2015). Providing merit-based teaching and research opportunities has significantly positive effects on retention while elevating the students' status, responsibility, and experience (Mendoza et al., 2014), therefore reducing attrition costs.

This mechanism allows students to reinforce learned content through teaching and research. Research assistantships and fellowships enhance program satisfaction, self-efficacy, personal growth, and social connectedness (Hart, 2012; O’Keeffe, 2013) by giving students opportunities to gain recognition as published authors and raise the university’s status. Logistically, some may argue this mechanism would be difficult to implement and effectively manage online. It is in the university’s interest to work through the logistical challenges as this mechanism encourages student persistence and graduation by giving online doctoral students experience teaching and participating in academic research, and offers an additional source of financial assistance.

Research fellowships and teaching assistantships gives online doctoral students benefits associated with traditional campuses. Some students participate in doctoral programs strictly online due to their life situation, personal preference, or because a program is only available online, such as the Doctor of Business Administration and Doctor of Education in Leadership programs. Tanner and Allen (2006) cited a prevalence of teaching assistantship practices within graduate science programs, while other programs require internships to gain experience; these two practices are associated with on-campus programs. Online students should not be denied opportunities available at traditional universities such as student teaching and assisting with research simply because they study online. Extending these programs to online graduate students makes them more fluent in the process of research and publication (Mendoza et al., 2014).

Lessons Learned, Tips for Success, and Recommendations

There are four recommendations for the successful implementation of the mechanisms described in this chapter. First, it is recommended that integration of career and academic advisement is a team effort comprising members of the career center, student services, and faculty and that advising should occur throughout the duration of the program. Second, with respect to increasing student submission liberty, it is recommended that doctoral faculty with the advisement of their respective deans be responsible for deciding what criteria to use and what assignments to allow for submission liberty. Third, it is recommended that school deans and

university administration work together to identify funding availability, program details, and competitive criteria for assistantships and fellowships. Finally, it is recommended that analytics related to each mechanism’s interest, adoption, and impact on retention and completion rates should be measured to inform each mechanism’s value and potential expansion to baccalaureate and master’s level programs.

Twenty-first-century doctoral students need flexibility and support that meet the demands of the modern economy. Still, many of the same support mechanisms offered at traditional campuses like integrated career and academic advisement, assistantships, and fellowships are also desired, as they are a highly valuable part of the learning experience. Research supports the role of the three proposed mechanisms for increasing engagement, retention, and online doctoral program completion rates.

Conclusion

Retention and degree completion at the doctoral level are continuous challenges for program and university stakeholders. This chapter addressed the topic of retention practices at the doctoral level for online students by suggesting three specific practices specifically aimed at increasing engagement, and in turn, program retention and degree completion rates. A literature review was provided in addition to detailed information relating to each student engagement mechanism. Finally, recommendations were proposed for the successful integration of the student engagement mechanisms into all academic programs where they can provide valuable results to the university and students.

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