

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

Adult Education Research Conference

2015 Conference Proceedings (Manhattan, KS)

Distance Adult Learner Doctoral Students Creating a Nontraditional Doctoral Enclave

Royce Ann Collins
Kansas State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Collins, Royce Ann (2015). "Distance Adult Learner Doctoral Students Creating a Nontraditional Doctoral Enclave," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2015/papers/15>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Distance Adult Learner Doctoral Students: Creating a Nontraditional Doctoral Enclave

Royce Ann Collins
Kansas State University

Keywords: nontraditional doctoral student, enclave

Abstract: This paper explores a new model development for nontraditional adult learner doctoral enclaves. This specific enclave facilitates the movement from doctoral student to candidate to completion of the dissertation for adult learners who are employed fulltime and geographically located a distance away from the traditional support structures.

Having been a nontraditional doctoral student at one time and now as a major professor mentoring nontraditional doctoral students, the researcher began to hear from her students the words she had once spoken. “It is so hard to do this alone.” “I do not have anyone with whom I can discuss my research project. My spouse is wonderful but is not interested in my topic and doesn’t understand the issues.” “Meeting with you (major professor) energizes me and I go home ready to work and spend the time. However, after a another week of work, I lose momentum again.” The struggle to finish the dissertation was a reality. They commented about missing their classmates and just needing someone with whom to academically discuss their research. They understood they could not take all their major professor’s time one-on-one, but they needed more.

In this doctoral program, courses are offered at off-campus locations in a metropolitan area. Students only travel to the main campus, which is a few hours away, perhaps one or two times during the first few years of the program. This group of students has experienced the faculty driving to them to conduct the courses, so the expectation of the students is that the faculty will come to them. Without the on campus experience, the students are not bonded to the campus as in a more traditional doctoral program experience. Instead, they are bonded to each other and their professors.

Literature

The national average across all disciplines for doctoral student completion is approximately 56%. From 2004 to 2010, the Council of Graduate Schools studied doctoral completion rates across several institutions to encourage institutions to develop and model intervention projects in order to achieve optimal doctoral completion (Sowell, Bell & Kirby, 2010). Nettles and Millet (2006) stated that attrition rates for doctoral students in education were reported as high as 70%. There are numerous research studies documenting the difficulties students experience in completing the dissertation (King & Williams, 2014; Lindner, Dooley, & Murphy, 2001; Varney, 2010).

Traditionally, doctoral students have made their study and research a fulltime job or focus. In this traditional model, students interact daily or at least weekly with their major professor. They learn to understand research and scholarly writing by closely interacting with faculty. Sometimes these encounters were unplanned joint work sessions and entail long hours of contact between student and major professor. While working on their dissertations, they can

interact with fellow doctoral students and discuss their research ideas, questions, and review drafts (Winston & Fields, 2003). While this approach works for many degree programs, it does not address the need of working professionals who desire and need a doctoral degree, but cannot quit their fulltime employment and source of income.

The nontraditional doctoral student is a working professional who is willing to commit numerous hours toward their studies and research. They will drive long hours to participate in face-to-face courses and still work 40 or 50 hours a week. The structure of the courses promote the development of incredible time management skills and schedules their time. In addition, their journey to completion is often longer with a part-time class schedule. However, the unstructured time of the dissertation writing becomes a major hurdle in the degree completion marathon (Tweedie, Clark, Johnson, & Kay, 2013). They may sacrifice time with family and vacation days to research and write their dissertation. Instead of having long hours of joint work time with their major professors, they must schedule planned meetings through face-to-face, telephone conversations or video-conferencing sessions. In addition, often nontraditional doctoral students lose contact with their former classmates in the program, because they all live and work in different geographical locations.

There are several student related factors that contribute to the attrition of doctoral students including demographic variables, personal attributes, motivation, responsibilities, and coping skills (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Men are more likely to complete than women and married students are more likely to continue than unmarried. The individual approach to dissertation research is less likely to persist than the team approach to research. Motivation and coping skills are strongly correlated with doctoral completion. Hoskins and Goldberg's (2005) research suggested that doctoral candidates who were personally and professionally motivated to earn the degree were more likely to persist. Wasburn-Moses (2008) found that doctoral students across disciplines were the least satisfied with their ability to juggle work, family and doctoral studies. Smith et al (2006) found that the personal support systems, which included friendship and spirituality, assisted with the stress and coping skills.

Therefore, the elements that attribute to doctoral student persistence involve the student and the program (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Students must be prepared for the sacrifices and challenges. Students should be prepared for the time sacrifice with family, work and sleep. Doctoral completion will take more than a love of learning. The more they are professionally and personally motivated for the journey the higher their ability to succeed. Doctoral students need mental toughness to set achievable goals, refuse to stop and keep the pressure on themselves. They need a support group to discuss the emotional ups and downs of the journey as well as access to persons that possess skills that will assist them, such as with grammar or statistics. Doctoral persistence is also enhanced by programs with rigorous research and writing courses that prepare the students for the challenges of the dissertation.

Model Development

From the framework of self-efficacy, motivation, and social support, the model for a Nontraditional Adult Learner Doctoral Enclave began to unfold. In 2013, the researcher started a once a month doctoral student meeting. She invited the doctoral students whom she served in the role as major professor and were in the dissertation phase, to the first session at a new location in their geographical area. The sessions started at 5:30 p.m. and were scheduled for a couple of hours or until the students were ready to adjourn. Students were free to arrive as it fit their schedule. At the first meeting, three students attended. After the first session, the students began inviting other doctoral students they knew in the area, so the group expanded beyond the major professor's assignments. In the first six months it grew from three students to eight students. While it began with dissertation phase participants, it evolved over the two years to include any nontraditional adult learner doctoral student (even those in the coursework phase). The second year attendance ranged from five to twelve students monthly.

Methodology

Using a qualitative approach, each month the researcher monitored progress and attitude of each participant. Data were gathered from observations, student testimonies, goal documents, and student progress with dissertation writing. The data gathering continues as new students join the group and student mentors develop. The themes demonstrate the evolution of the students.

The Evolution of the Students

The group discussions in the first three to four months centered most of the time on the students' frustrations and feelings about their progress. They shared their feelings of being alone and missing their classmates. Several stated they "missed the intellectual stimulation and discussion." While most family members were very supportive, they had not participated in the class sessions and readings. They did not have the shared memories of courses. Family members many times did not want to hear much about their dissertation thoughts or frustrations. At first just being able to meet once a month seemed to spark a few to move forward on their writing projects. In addition to feelings and frustrations, the group discussed any questions about the dissertation process. However, overall the discussion was stuck in the sharing of feelings and frustrations.

To move the students to more engagement with the dissertation, the professor leader asked them to bring their research questions, surveys, or literature to share with the group. Over the next five months, this approach helped some refine their research studies. While these discussions were on going each month, the students still needed the emotional support issues discussed.

The group time became a safe place to further discuss interactions with family and friends. They shared about frustrations to negotiate physical space for their research as well as space in the family commitment schedule. They discussed while family and friends were supportive of their studies, they really did not want to listen to them about their research or discuss the topic. Some shared stories of negative or disinterested encounters with family and friends concerning their dissertation. The tone of the sessions changed slightly as they began encouraging each other with stories of how they handled a variety of encounters and negotiated time to write.

The question of how to stay motivated was addressed monthly. Then, the source of motivation moved to one student who began to accelerate the process. This one group member

voluntarily dedicated more time to the dissertation during the week. This student brought passion and enthusiasm for the dissertation to the group. This student shared each month about the strategies employed to manage family and work in order to focus on writing. On an individual basis, personal grit and mental toughness were displayed with such statements as “I am going to get finished. I have to get finished.” This student sparked others to begin to pick up the mantle of “completion attitude”.

Accountability was another theme of the group. Each meeting students were asked to report their progress over the last month. Behavior changes evolved on an individual basis. Another individual began blocking time during the week to write and work on the dissertation. The reporting time was joyous for those who completed their monthly goals while apologetic for those who were not able to make any progress. While the group had made strong connections, dissertation progress was still hit or miss for many of the participants. Therefore, to assist them in moving forward another element was added the next year.

In January of the second year, the professor leader asked the group members to purchase *The Dissertation Journey* written by Carol Roberts and asked them to read a set of chapters for the next few months. The chapters were devoted to getting organized, time management, academic style of writing, the literature review, and conceptual/theoretical framework. While many of these topics had been addressed in coursework, there was a need to keep discussing them. The book became a resource for the journey and the students shared this resource with other doctoral students who were not group participants.

Another change to the group process in the second year was goal writing vs. previous verbal exchanges of goals. Students were asked to write down their achievable goals for the next month on a piece of paper. The professor kept the original and gave the students back a copy. This technique again sparked more to make a higher commitment to their dissertation with time blocked in their schedule to focus on the document. Over the first few months the topics of motivation and goal setting were discussed.

During the second year, two students completed their dissertations and successfully defended them. Another student successfully defended the proposal and now was gathering data. Their success was a source of inspiration and encouragement. The other group members could see it was possible and more began to move closer to proposal defense.

Then, the tone of the group changed again; the students began to mentor each other. As doctoral students attended who were in the course work phase of the program, those at the dissertation-writing phase began to answer questions and give guidance and suggestions for setting up systems in preparation of the writing phase. The professor faded as much as possible to allow the student and graduate mentors to grow. This distinct group was growing into an enclave.

Even though the group meetings have become a priority for many of the participants, life schedules still interrupt continual attendance. Therefore, in addition to the group meetings, an online site was created for students to connect electronically. Other students who are not geographically in the area were also connected to this site. This allows them to link to resources, information, and fellow strugglers. Online discussions may provide some of the support they also need in their extremely isolated circumstances. While video-conferencing geographically distant students has not been successfully added at this time, this is an option for the future.

Nontraditional Adult Learner Enclave Implications

This emerging face-to-face doctoral group model has potential implications for major professors or programs that serve the nontraditional adult doctoral student. During the individual writing phase of a dissertation, nontraditional adult learners in a doctoral program struggle with motivation, confidence and social support. With group support and contact, the potential for higher completion rates grows. Doctoral programs can create such groups as students move through the course work to help alleviate some of the isolation of the dissertation writing. With the completion rate of educational doctoral programs as low as 30% (Nettles & Millet, 2006), enclaves might be a way for more programs to support their doctoral students (Varney, 2010) and increase their graduation rates.

While this face-to-face monthly meeting model is beneficial for those students in the geographical area, there are other doctoral students at further distances that inhibit attendance. They can be connected to electronic resources; however, that may not be enough to support them. The question still remains how do we also serve these students? How do we deal with a variety of time zones if videoconferencing technology is incorporated? How do we get them connected with other students who are moving along the dissertation trail?

Doctoral journey needs to consist of more than just the major professor and the student, with sporadic interaction with committee members. The journey needs to incorporate other adult learner doctoral students who are in this nontraditional doctoral mission. Motivation continues to be a key factor for doctoral completion (Pauley, Cunningham, & Toth, 1999; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Students continually need the support of other doctoral students, which helps them stay motivated (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). This enclave model has the potential to fill the motivation and peer support gap for nontraditional adult doctoral learners.

References

- Hoskins, C. & Goldberg, A. (2005). Doctoral student persistence in counselor education programs: Student-program match. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 44(3), 175-188.
- Jairam, D. & Kahl, D. (2012). Navigating the doctoral experience: The role of social support in successful degree completion. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 7, 311-329.
- King, S., & Williams, F. (2014). Barriers to completing the dissertation as perceived by education leadership doctoral students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 38(2-3), 275-279. doi: 10.1080/10668926.2014.851992.
- Lindner, J., Dooley, K. & Murphy, T. (2001). Differences in competencies between doctoral students on-campus and at a distance. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 15(2), 25-40. doi:10.1080/08923640109527082.
- Nettles, M.T. & Millet, C.M. (2006). *Three magic letters: Getting to Ph.D.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins university Press.
- Pauley, R., Cunningham, M. & Toth, P. (1999). Doctoral student attrition and retention: A study of a non-traditional Ed.D. program. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 1(3), 225-238.
- Smith, R., Maroney, K., Nelson, K, Abel, A., & Abel, H. (2006). Doctoral programs: Changing high rates of attrition. *Humanistic Counseling, Education, and Development*, 45, 17-31.
- Sowell, R., Bell, N., & Kirby, S. (2010). *Ph.D. completion and attrition: Policies and practices to promote student success*. Washington, D.C.: Council of Graduate Schools.
- Spaulding, L, & Rockinson-Szapkiw, A. (2012). Hearing their voices: Factors doctoral candidates attribute to their persistence. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 7, 199-219.

- Tweedie, M.G., Clark, S., Johnson, R., & Kay, D.W. (2013). The 'dissertation marathon' in doctoral distance education. *Distance Education, 34*(3) 379-390.
- Varney, J (2010). The role of dissertation self-efficacy in increasing dissertation completion: sources, effects and viability of a new self-efficacy construct. *College Student Journal, 44*(4), 932-947.
- Winston, B. & Fields, D. (2003). Developing dissertation skills of doctoral student sin an internet-based distance education curriculum: A case study. *American Journal of Distance Education, 17*(3), 161-172. doi: 10.1207/S15389286AFDE1703_3.