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Intersecting Cultural Connections for Doctoral Persistence

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Abstract: This Roundtable Discussion addresses the barrier of informal peer support system (where its absence is one of the cited barriers to doctoral persistence) via the theoretical framework of shared case stories. These case stories explore the experiences of two women who entered a doctoral program as returning adults, and the ways in which their separate stories intersected and became interdependent, supporting their persistence towards degree. The presenters will provide a theater style format to share their stories in four scenes.

From 1970-71 to 2003-04, the number of doctor's degrees conferred by degree granting institutions rose 51% from 32,107 to 48,378 (Snyder, Tan, & Hoffman, 2006). For the same period, the number of doctor's degrees in education rose 17% to 7,088. A cursory review of the statistical data suggests a success story: more individuals are pursuing and achieving the dream of advanced degree attainment. But closer inspection reveals a startling reality: doctoral programs result in a 50% attrition rate nationwide, with what may be even higher rates for underrepresented groups (Lovitts, 2001). A business process resulting in 50% scrap would be critically scrutinized, and redesigned to reduce waste, or eliminated. An employee with only a 50% productivity level would be retrained or released.

Scene #1: Entering the doctoral program. Two individuals unknown to one another made the decision to enter the doctoral degree program at a Midwestern university. Their life experiences, motivation for education/doctoral program selection, and perceptions and expectations of the program, including a game plan for completion, were as different as day and night.

Ruby, the consummate planner, knew from an early age what she wanted to do, and how to achieve her goals. She “planned the work, and worked the plan,” and when life events changed her plans, from math teacher to information technology project manager and curriculum planner on the side. Before graduate school, Marje seldom planned anything. Instead, she reacted to whatever came along. During her master's work, Marje developed an appreciation for planning, because it supported her need for some control. So, when a professor put Ruby and Marje in contact with each other, suggesting they carpool from Fort Wayne to Muncie, Ruby was excited. Then she thought: “Marje...sounds like a White person's name. I wonder what she will do when she finds out I am Black? Will she try to get out of carpooling?” Marje recalled telling her husband that she “wondered if Ruby Cain was African-American.” When Marje went to Muncie for the graduate student orientation, she “saw two women close to my age. One was black, one was white. Ruby had the most beautiful smile!” Ruby described Marje as having “a magnetic personality. In an instant, I felt at ease and comfortable with her.”

Scene #2: Transitioning cultural difference to shared cultural bonds. Although stark contrasts could readily be identified in their stories, there were many cultural similarities, including age, gender, marital/familial status, and an insatiable thirst for learning.

Marje exhibited a more traditional style in her entre to the academic discourse. Her interactions with professors and students, although at times personal, primarily centered on academic topics. She made the effort to learn the infrastructure, to follow the rules, to “color

within the lines.” Even so, she was not above challenging those academic mores that did not seem fair or did not make sense.

Ruby’s style was more of a practitioner, and informal. Her interactions with professors and students, although at times academic, were more about personal, community, or professional topics. As a consultant and trainer for many years, she had the practical application that was addressed in the theoretical body of knowledge in the program. The direction taken in the journey was not as important as the destination. She started with where she wanted to go and the method to obtain it may or may not have been the traditional route. This did not mean blatantly ignoring the rules, but rather not being confined to them.

Marje was used to being in control, making the plans, directing the activities, often flying solo. Her request to car pool to one event elicited a response from Ruby of willingness to car pool for every class they shared throughout their program. Marje was not ready for that level of commitment. She wanted to take it slow. Ruby expressed flexibility and willingness to accommodate Marje’s schedule and preferences. Despite their different approaches, they negotiated their terms and carpooled through their entire program.

Scene #3: Creating Support Systems across and within culture. Transcending differences via a transformative breakthrough created a bond so strong they morphed into twins whose connection could not be broken by setbacks common in many doctoral program journeys. They supported, uplifted, and encouraged one another, and together met every challenge, overcame every barrier, and remained steadfast in their progress towards doctoral persistence.

Ruby and Marje see themselves as continuous, lifelong learners who thrive on engaging with new people, new experiences, and new growth. Both of them entered the doctoral program aware that they were pursuing a dream constructed many years before. In all of their shared courses, Ruby partnered with other students for group projects, leaving Marje to work with someone other than Ruby. Although Marje was disappointed at first, Ruby understood how important it was to “stretch and move outside of a comfort zone.” It got to be a source of amusement, and became very productive. It enriched both women’s learning experiences.

Scene #4: Graduation – where do we go from here? Marje is teaching part-time for two universities, developing her dissertation research more thoroughly, and learning with her undergraduate students. Intense job searches have been unproductive; with the contraction of the economy, and because of other personal circumstances and possibilities, she has decided to remain in Fort Wayne. She wants to stay close “to the people and programs that have become such a vital part of my experience and my life. I want to develop opportunities with Ruby to do consulting work. We make such a great team!”

Ruby plans to continue with her organizational consulting business, and possibly work as faculty for 9 – 10 months per year. She intends to transition to a part administrative (working with disenfranchised populations) and part faculty position. Her experience with the doctoral program “has afforded me the opportunity to inform my professional practice, to research and analyze community and social issues. I would like to do joint consulting projects with Marje. I think pairing up as co-facilitators would provide a powerful duo ready to take on the world. I know no matter where the future takes me Marje will always be a part of my life. We will stay connected in person or via technology.”

References

Lovitts, B. E. (2001). *Leaving the ivory tower: the causes and consequences of departure from doctoral study*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.