

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

Adult Education Research Conference

2019 Conference Proceedings (Buffalo, New York)

Four-dimensional Model for Doctoral Student Support

Simone C. Conceição

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, simonec@uwm.edu

Lilian H. Hill

University of Southern Mississippi

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

Conceição, Simone C. and Hill, Lilian H. (2019). "Four-dimensional Model for Doctoral Student Support," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2019/papers/7>

This Event 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.

Four-dimensional Model for Doctoral Student Support

Simone C. O. Conceição
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Lilian H. Hill
University of Southern Mississippi

Abstract: Doctoral education demands significant time, energy, financial, and emotional commitments. Depending on the characteristics of the doctoral student, barriers to completion and challenges with the doctoral process can require unique types of support. The purpose of this paper is to examine institutional and instructional support that lead to doctoral student progress and propose a model involving social, emotional, mental, and behavioral dimensions that derive strategies for doctoral student support.

Keywords: institutional support, instructional support, doctoral process, degree completion

A doctoral degree in adult education is an enormous undertaking that demands significant time, energy, financial, and emotional commitments. Adult students enter doctoral programs of study with hope, aspirations for the future, and complex lives (Kasworm, 2008). While they are students, most adults must maintain their personal responsibilities; therefore, they may struggle with multiple identities and resulting role conflict (Kovalcikiene & Buksnyte-Marmiene, 2015). In that sense, education may be a life changing, transformational journey. Students need to find their voice, establish a sense of self that is valued, and gain acceptance within the academic world (Kasworm, 2008).

Despite students' investments of time and energy, only between 30-50% of students complete a doctoral degree. The dissertation process has been described as a lonely journey (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Golde's (2005) research indicates that lack of academic integration, or isolation from meaningful participation with others, can contribute to students' attrition from a doctoral program. Gardner's (2013) study also showed that students had difficulties feeling they belonged in doctoral education and experienced the imposter syndrome – inability to internalize accomplishments and fear of being exposed as a fraud.

Doctoral education has grown since its establishment. Part of this growth has to do with changing demographics in student enrollment and graduation. The Council of Graduate Studies indicates that in 2016 more women than men were enrolled in doctoral education and completed doctoral degrees. Among U.S. citizens and permanent residents, 23.4% of first-time doctoral students were underrepresented minorities. International student enrollment was down slightly at 20.1%. Nearly 42% of doctoral students were enrolled part-time (Okhana & Zhou, 2017). Many part-time students tend to be mid- or senior-level professionals, middle-age or older and pursue doctoral education in conjunction with full-time jobs and families.

In 2010, about 32% of doctoral recipients were first-generation students (Gardner, 2013). First-generation students lack model parents who completed at least an undergraduate degree. This creates challenges regarding understanding the system of graduate education, managing financial demands, and having enough financial support to complete graduate studies in a timely fashion (Gardner, 2013). In addition, non-traditional doctoral students are restricted in their availability for full-time study, frequent interactions with faculty advisors, and acculturation to the academy (Gardner, 2013; Offerman, 2011).

Gardner (2009) describes the developmental experiences of doctoral students in three phases. Phase one is a time when students explore different programs, select their program of

choice, and gain admission. The second phase encompasses the time invested in coursework and represents integration in the academic community as relationships are formed with other students and faculty advisors and may include experience as a graduate or teaching assistant. As students move toward doctoral candidacy, they develop the competencies to become independent researchers and knowledge producers. Forming relationships with a dissertation chair and doctoral committee members are key decisions with lasting implications for a student's career. In the final phase of doctoral study, students conduct independent research for their dissertation and undertake a search for a professional position. Within different phases of the developmental experiences of doctoral students, challenges and opportunities become part of their journey. The first challenge occurs during the transition into the doctoral program. This can be intimidating if the student moves to a different city, leaves family behind, or interrupts a career to engage in full-time study.

The first courses require a different mindset to meet program expectations – critical analysis of readings, interpretation of findings, and mastering the scholarly writing format appropriate to the discipline. During coursework, challenges focus mainly in production of papers related to a given course. However, when students move into the preliminary or comprehensive exam and proposal defense phases, the challenges change to requiring an independent approach to accomplishing tasks. The opportunities of this phase vary. If programs offer a cohort format, students can potentially be at the same developmental phase and can work together or they can work closely with faculty. The best experience can involve close work with advisors or in research teams. Collaboration can help diminish frustration and isolation. Peers can support each other in the search for a topic, review each other's work, or give each other encouragement by sharing similar experiences.

Depending on the characteristics of the doctoral student, barriers to completion and challenges with the doctoral process can require unique types of support. The purpose of this paper is to examine institutional and instructional support that lead to doctoral student progress and propose a model involving social, emotional, mental, and behavioral dimensions that derive strategies for doctoral student support. Doctoral programs that have a support process in place can better serve their students and help them successfully complete the doctoral dissertation, graduate, and transition into a professional position.

Institutional and Instructional Support

Multiple factors contribute to students' resilience and ability to complete a doctoral degree. Few studies mention the importance of institutional support for doctoral students, and when they do, they describe program characteristics, involving coursework that prepares them for the rigor of dissertation research and the importance of supportive faculty (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Some of the unique factors that contribute to doctoral students' progress to degree completion include initial advisement; assigning mentors to doctoral students and fostering social integration (Williams, 2002); preparing students for interdisciplinary work and dissertation research (Boden, Borrega, & Newswander, 2011); and social support (Dieker, Wienke, Straub, & Finnegan, 2014).

Three factors have been the focus of instructional support: faculty-doctoral student relationship helping individuals transition from student to independent scholar (Baker & Pifer, 2011; Gardner, 2009), supervisory relationship between faculty and student as a guide through the complex process of conducting research (Lee, 2010; Watts, 2008), and shifting of power dynamics as the relationship between advisor and advisee evolves (Doloriert, Sambrook, &

Stewart, 2012). These factors evoke different forms of advising and mentoring and require different strategies for doctoral student support.

Four-dimensional Model for Doctoral Student Support

Advising doctoral students can be an intense and complex task for faculty. This task involves helping students develop as a professional while they balance the many responsibilities of an already busy life. We propose a model involving social, emotional, mental, and behavioral dimensions that are integral to doctoral student support. These dimensions provide points of awareness for faculty to become cognizant of the challenges students may encounter during their doctoral education process and strategies to overcome these challenges. These strategies can help faculty advisors operationalize the support needed by students based on their personal and contextual needs.

Social dimension. During the lonely process of the doctoral journey, fighting isolation can be a challenge as can the power relationship between the faculty advisor and the student. Facilitating social events encourages relationships among students and between faculty and the student. Socialization at conferences can help the student understand the professional etiquette of the field and connect with others. Professional associations may have social activities that assign mentors to walk with throughout the journey. The relationship between student and faculty advisor plays an important role in retention and graduation of doctoral students. Informing students of the ground rules (etiquette) for working together early on can set the tone for the social relationship. Dedication and perseverance run in tandem for faculty advisor and student.

Emotional dimension. While doctoral programs can be a time of growth and personal development, students face challenges in balancing the different program requirements with their other responsibilities. Supporting students' equanimity through emotional support can help students balance their work-life demands. Support strategies include peer support groups on campus and at professional organizations, and promoting communities of practice among students, meaning small groups of students who can meet regularly to pool their learning and expertise to solve mutually engaging problems (Schachman & Od-Cohen, 2009). Social relationships form among group members, as they enjoy working with others who share their perspectives and develop a common identity. Supportive mentoring can be a powerful source of psychological support that fosters students' personal and professional development (Hansman, 2016). Mentoring relationships provide a context in which individuals can realize their potential (Fletcher, 2007). Graduate students need to work with faculty who are both knowledgeable and caring. They need faculty to not only see them for who they are but also for who they can become. They need faculty who can mentor them and help them form reasonable, specific, and attainable visions of their future or possible self (Rossiter, 2007).

Mental dimension. Doctoral students are involved in intense intellectual learning that requires an advanced mindset to perform cognitive tasks. Dweck's (2007) work on the power of the mindset shows that a growth mindset can affect how a person thinks, feels, believes, and acts, which in turn can influence these processes. A student with a growth mindset accepts challenges, embarks in change, looks for opportunities, believes that anything is possible, appreciates feedback, enjoys exploring new things, views an error as a lesson, and considers learning a lifelong process. This mindset must be flexible. Mental flexibility is key to letting go of old ideas, being open to new ideas, accepting feedback from the faculty advisor and other committee members, and allowing the process to drive the final product. Encouraging a growth mindset

approach from the beginning of the relationship can create a positive attitude for dealing with issues and resolving them.

Behavioral dimension. Doctoral students are often overwhelmed with the doctoral education process due to the multifaceted aspects of the process. A common coping technique is to approach task completion as a checklist without appreciating the interconnections among the different aspects of the process. Each element of the dissertation needs to be in alignment for successful doctoral dissertation completion. Courses should expose students to multiple research methods. Encouragement from the faculty advisor to build skills to solve interdisciplinary complex problems can start from the first doctoral course and continue until dissertation completion. Taking a series of courses focusing on the dissertation following a specific sequence can help students understand the connections. Guidance on how to behave and what to do to accomplish the goals is an essential task for the advisor. One strategy is to partner the student with the faculty advisor on writing for publication. Other strategies include participation in a mock defense and dissertation *bootcamp*.

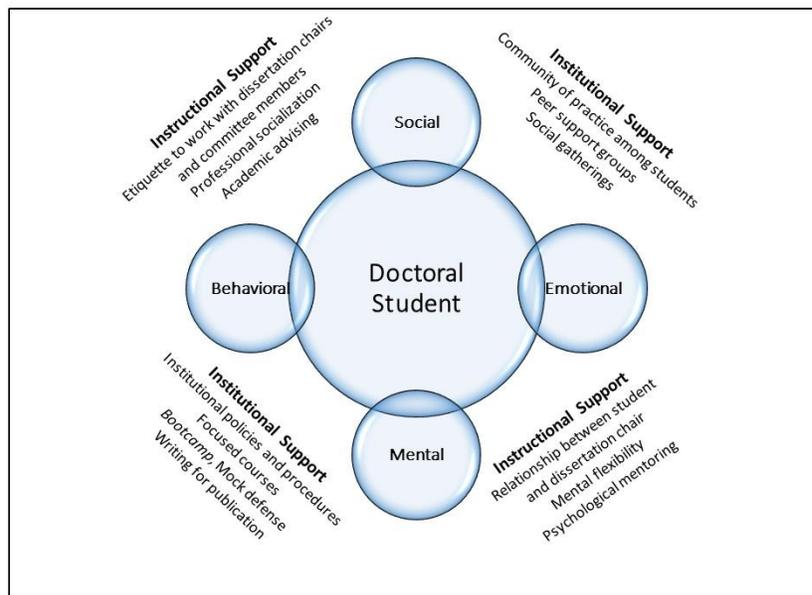


Figure 1 Four-dimensional Model for Doctoral Student Support

Figure 1 shows the Four-dimensional Model for Doctoral Student Support. Institutional support is located in two areas of the model: (1) the intersection between social and emotional dimensions and (2) the intersection between behavioral and mental dimensions. Institutional support involves the structured resources in place within a program that are provided by the institution to help doctoral students succeed. Policies and procedures centered on the students can support an effective and efficient process that allows students to complete the doctoral milestones in a timely fashion while achieving high standards. Program of studies with focus courses on the process can mentally and behaviorally prepare students to demonstrate competency on critical reasoning, research skills, and ultimately write the dissertation. Activities such as *bootcamp*, mock interviews, or minute thesis can provide an opportunity for practice outside the formal defense. The institution can also organize social gatherings, peer support groups, and communities of practice for students as a way to encourage them to be prepared emotionally and socially for the academic life.

Instructional support is located in the other two areas of the model: (1) the intersection of behavioral and social dimensions and (2) the intersection of the emotional and mental dimensions. Instructional support is the instructor's guidance, coaching, and mentoring (Conceição & Swaminathan, 2011). Behavioral and social support from the instructor begins when students receive guidance to complete the dissertation process and graduate and then continues as they become independent researchers and scholars in their field of practice. Behavioral support is the coaching provided by faculty to help students manage the steps and meet the milestones of the doctoral journey. In this case, the role of faculty is to prepare students to become scholars and ultimately join the professoriate. The relationship between faculty chair and student sets the tone for the process and continuous student development and growth. Social support entails guidance about the etiquette to work with committee members and dissertation chair and mentoring regarding professional socialization at conferences. Psychological mentoring can guide students in their maturation as researchers after the coursework phase is completed. Emotional support from the part of the faculty plays an important function in students' mindset development as they begin thinking of themselves as scholars and accomplish the complex tasks in the dissertation process. It can be challenging for students to move from a student to a scholar because it involves letting go of old behaviors, accepting committee members' advice, and self-regulating the accomplishment of tasks; this requires mental flexibility.

Relationship to Theories in Adult Education

Doctoral students face complexity in coping with multiple personal, social, and cultural expectations (Kegan, 1994). Adult development involves resolving the mismatch between these expectations and an individual's mental capacity, prompting "a qualitatively more complex form of consciousness" (p. 10). Returning to school can precipitate major developmental changes in the lives of adult students (Kegan, 1994). Daloz (2011) indicates that adults enter doctoral programs at a time in their lives when they are ready and able to make meaning of their experiences. The significance of returning to school as an adult may include the experiences of support, meaning being taken seriously as a self-governing adult, and challenge including being asked to make decisions to design their own program, negotiate new relationships, master a discipline, and contend with competing values (Kegan, 1994). Hansman's (2009) research indicates that mentoring can be a powerful source of psychological support that fosters students' personal and professional development through transformational and other types of learning. Mentoring may involve coaching, sponsorship, assigning challenging tasks, and protection. Skillful mentors are able to balance levels of challenge and support so that students are able to grow, integrate other sources of information such as other students and professionals, and to step back and give their blessings as students graduate and move on in their careers (Daloz, 2011).

Conclusions

The four-dimensional model illustrates practical support strategies for doctoral student support. Institutional support can help students to proceed through the program structure and curriculum (behavioral and cognitive dimensions) while instructional support can help students balance their life-roles and responsibilities (emotional and social dimensions) to stay grounded during the doctoral program journey. Faculty play a critical role in connecting students to support strategies that assist them to progress to graduation and transition to professional life.

References

- Boden, D., Borrega, M., & Newswander, L. K. (2011). Student socialization in interdisciplinary doctoral education. *Higher Education*, 62, 741-755.
- Conceição, S. C., & Swaminathan, R. (2011). It's all part of the process: Advising, coaching, and mentoring graduate students. *The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal*, 09. Available at <https://dus.psu.edu/mentor/2011/09/advising-graduate-students/>
- Daloz, L. A. P. (2011). Mentoring men for wisdom: Transforming the pillars of manhood. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, (131), 75–83.
- Dieker, L., Wienke, W., Straub, C., & Finnegan, L. (2014). Reflections on recruiting, supporting, retaining, graduating, and obtaining employment for doctoral students from diverse backgrounds. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 37(2), 147 -160.
- Doloriert, C., Sambrook, S., & Stewart, J. (2012). Power and emotion in doctoral supervision: Implications for HRD. *European Journal of Training & Development*, 36(7), 732–750.
- Dweck, C. S. (2016). *Mindset: The new psychology for success*. New York, NY: Ballentine.
- Gardner, S. K. (2009). The development of doctoral students: Phases of challenge and support. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 34(6), 1-14. doi:10.1002/aehe.3406
- Gardner, S. K. (2013). The Challenges of First-Generation Doctoral Students. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2013(163), 43-54.
- Golde, C. M. (2005). The role of the department and discipline in doctoral student attrition: Lessons from four departments. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 76(6), 670-700.
- Hansman, C. A. (2016). Mentoring and informal learning as continuing professional education. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, (151), 31–41.
- Kasworm, C. E. (2008). Emotional challenges of adult learners in higher education. In J. M. Dirxk (Ed.), *Adult learning and the emotional self* (pp. 27-34). *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, No. 120: San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kovalcikiene, K., & Buksnyte-Marmiene, (2015). Towards An understanding of doctoral students' professional identity complexity. *Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 191, 2693 – 2698.
- Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Offerman, M. (2011, Spring). Profile of the nontraditional doctoral degree student. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 129, 21-30. doi:10.1002/ace.397
- Okahana, H., & Zhou, E. (2017). *Graduate enrollment and degrees: 2006 to 2016*. Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools.
- Rossiter, M. (2007). Possible selves: An adult education perspective. In M. Rossiter (Ed.), *Possible selves and adult learning: Perspectives and potential* (pp. 5 – 15). *New Directions in Adult and Continuing Education*, No. 114. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Shacham, M., & Od-Cohen, Y. (2009). Rethinking PhD learning incorporating communities of practice. *Innovations in Education & Teaching International*, 46(3), 279–292.
- Spaulding, L. I., & Rockinson-Szapkiw, A. A. (2012). Hearing their voices: Factors doctoral candidates attribute to their persistence. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 7, 199-219.
- Williams, K. B. (2002). Minority and majority doctoral students' retrospective perceptions of social support in doctoral programs. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 95, 187 -196.