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A Virtual Community of Practice to Reduce Isolation Among Online Doctoral Students: A Mixed Methods Action Research Study

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Abstract

To address feelings of isolation among online doctoral students an action research paradigm explored a virtual community of practice with computer-mediated communication tools integrated in the mixed methods study.

Keywords: online doctoral students; virtual communities of practice; social connectedness

A recurring theme in the literature on graduate education retention is the feeling of isolation students experience (Burrus et al., 2021; Terrell et al., 2009). Students in both limited and traditional residency programs report a common feeling of disconnection from other students especially in the dissertation writing phase (Beasey et al., 2020; Breitenbach, 2019; Shin et al., 2019; Steiner, 2017). A recent national survey revealed 84% of graduate students believe “online programs should provide opportunities to interact with other students socially” (Aslanian & Fischer, 2022, p. 68). This roundtable discussion will unpack findings from a virtual community of practice developed by a doctoral student in an accelerated leadership and higher education online program to address the isolation problem.

Rockinson-Szapkiw, Heuvelman-Hutchison, and Spaulding (2014) argue “online programs need to provide students with a place to find support, develop friendships, receive and give encouragement, and grow academically” (p.3). Moreover, the scholars contend that the implementation of these programs justifies research on the efficacy of computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools in fostering community. Several innovative approaches and models are showing positive results to foster connectedness and a sense of belonging among online doctoral students (Breitenbach (2019); Steiner (2017); Tuhkala & Kärkkäinen’s (2018).

This study seeks to build on key findings from Trespalacios et al.’s (2021) scoping study: 1) a low percentage of studies (18.1%) on social connectedness and community among doctoral students; 2) minimal (<5%) studies using the communities of practice framework; and 3) the high percentage (83.3%) of studies using a validated survey instrument to measure connectedness and community.

Roundtable Objectives

This roundtable session will report preliminary results about what worked for a doctoral student-led virtual community of practice, explore a sustainability model, invite comparison to other mechanisms (group advising (Chapman and Bartlett, 2018), and explore integration of CMC tools in learning management systems.

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