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Building Cultures of Completion in Ph.D. Programs

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A common misperception is that an academic life is an easy one. The reality is that in exchange for control over their time, students and faculty agree to work more. Due to the lack of precision in evaluating teaching, research, or other academic outcomes, work often goes into a deep abyss and it is hard to decide when investment (effort) is leading to diminishing returns. Of course, over time, we learn and get better at figuring out quality-effort tradeoffs. Doctoral students, however, have a particularly acute problem—as they need to manage projects, courses, comprehensive exams, and the dissertation—without the benefit of any significant experience.

In an earlier article (see "10 Mistakes Doctoral Students Make in Managing Their Program" *Decision Line*, May 2001), it was argued that while doctoral students might have intelligence and motivation, their ability to manage the program is critical for success. Many schools evaluate success based on the quality of placements; however, another metric for success is completion in a reasonable timeframe. Students that languish in doctoral programs for years dissipate valuable energy, and hurt themselves as well as their programs. These students linger on—watching their contemporaries move on to tenure-track positions, worried about resources to support themselves, and unable to push through the "barriers" to completion. Faculties lose substantial investments of time and emotion in these students. Therefore, it is essential that doctoral programs cultivate *a culture of completion* to avoid this dysfunctional consequence. By culture of completion, we are suggesting *building a value system that encourages completion of a Ph.D. and providing the infrastructure necessary to realize that goal.*

In the business disciplines, many Ph.D. programs are designed to be completed in four to five years. Students take two years of coursework, comprehensive exams after coursework, and then the dissertation stage. During their final years on campus, successful doctoral students transition from the rhythm and structure of coursework to the relatively unstructured, episodic dissertation experience (see "How Am I Doing? Checklist for Doctoral Students at Various Stages of Their Program," *Decision Line*, March 2006). The dissertation phase is often unproductively stretched out through the annual job market cycles until students cannot sustain themselves (e.g., due to funding issues). A culture of completion can go a long way in alleviating this problem.

Below, we describe our perspective on cultures of completion based on our extensive work in designing doctoral programs with a research culture and our mentoring of doctoral students. We are hopeful that these suggestions can foster an environment where a good doctoral product can be produced within a reasonable time frame.

Key Tenets of a Culture of Completion

For doctoral programs to succeed, we believe it is necessary for faculty and students to collaborate in building cultures of completion. Of course, this must be done within a broader institutional context that is supportive of such a culture. The key tenets of such a culture

that transcend specific relationships and interactions are:

- **Process Orientation**: Students and faculty have a general awareness of both formal and informal processes involved in doctoral education. For instance, dissertations are kept under control through ongoing communication between the advisor and student regarding dissertation structure, goals, and tracking of progress.

- **Forward Orientation**: There is a general emphasis on thinking ahead rather than evaluating the past. Students within such a culture are encouraged to plan. For instance, students can begin thinking about a dissertation topic early in the Ph.D. program, thereby creating synergies across various research projects.

- **Collegial Orientation:** There is a general "clan control" system where each person supports others in the program. In such culture, doctoral programs are not viewed as a competitive race—with one student reaping rewards when others fall to the wayside. Instead, at all stages of the doctoral program, students learn and practice collaboration and peer support.

- **Optimistic Orientation:** In a culture of completion, discourses are couched in a strong positive tone, encouraging a "can do" attitude. For instance, in providing feedback on student's research, a constructive tone can do a lot to build confidence and provide direction for further development. It is important that faculty and students share a sense of optimism that their hard work will be rewarded, students will find jobs, and that the field will flourish.

- **Urgency Orientation:** There is sensitivity to reducing temporal inefficiencies and discouraging too much down time. Four years may seem like a long time; however, it is not. Students need to understand the importance of "staying on track" and avoid long breaks in their research. For instance, doctoral students can be clearly discouraged from taking long breaks after finishing comprehensive exams.

Enabling a Culture of Completion

Cultures of completion need to be cultivated until they become part of the innate environment. These cultures might have characteristics and structures in place that facilitate progress (and quality) through program, faculty, and peer interactions. Some of these are described below.

Program-Student Interaction

Some programs pride themselves on giving students flexibility in their choice of coursework, committees, comprehensive exams, and other program elements. Others create rigid structures (more akin to undergraduate programs) or cohort structures that force students to move through the program in lock-step fashion. While the rigid program can be efficient, it might not provide the latitude necessary for creative research or for creating close alignment with student interests. In order to create a culture of completion, programs should do the following.

Advise and Commit to Offerings: Good programs provide a broad structure for coursework—but more importantly, assign course advisors that can help students plan the coursework out by semester. Institutions make a true commitment to doctoral education by ensuring the coursework is there when planned. If there are required courses that are offered on a two year schedule due to resource considerations, then failure to offer the course when committed can have devastating consequences for a student's ability to complete coursework on time. Students should meet with their advisor (or committee) to ensure that they are "on track," and advice and resolution of problems should be paramount. In sum, the institution should not allow students to flounder and "fill-in" coursework—without careful assessment of progress, direction, and anticipation of potential problems. Students can be encouraged to provide clear, unequivocal feedback on their experiences with courses offered in referent disciplines.

Flexibility to Adjust: Despite the best attempts, situations arise where students cannot get the coursework needed. In some cases sub-optimal solutions are provided. This might be fine, as long as the student and advisor carefully evaluate the tradeoffs involved. More importantly, the program should provide the flexibility to adjust—even go outside strict program requirements—if it is in the best interest of the students. For instance, if a seminar is not offered on schedule and the sub-optimal solution (fill-in course) is unacceptable given the student's needs and interests, then perhaps allowing the student to take comps and doing the coursework later might be a palatable solution. This might require turning a blind eye to the technical requirement that "all coursework must be completed prior to the comprehensive examination."

Realistic Expectations: In the pressure to create students that can compete effectively in the job market, many programs require students to create "publishable work" as part of their coursework. As a result, many courses (particularly seminars) result in "incomplete" grades. We have observed some students approaching comps with 6-7 incomplete grades—resulting in eventual delay in taking the exam. While the objective of cultivating publications through coursework is good, it gets unrealistic if every course mandates such requirements in an independent, uncoordinated fashion. This not only results in "incompletes" and delays, but might not even yield productive outcomes for the student. It is important that faculty members coordinate and determine the appropriate structure to accomplish the goal. A two-seminar sequence, for instance, could be earmarked for realistically accomplishing a publishable piece; independent studies could be another mechanism. Even a comprehensive exam designed to have a research paper requirement can be successful. However, it is important for both students to coordinate their projects around their research interests,

and faculty coordinate around a structure that gives students time to conduct publishable quality work. This requires a program that carefully considers its expectations, workability and student needs.

Minimal Teaching: At some institutions, Deans use doctoral students to "close the gap" between the number of tenure-track faculty and demands for courses. Although teaching is a necessary part of the academic life, programs should keep teaching requirements within reasonable limits and faculty should protect their students from excessive teaching loads. In strong doctoral programs, students will teach one, perhaps two, courses prior to graduation.

Faculty-Student Interactions

To build cultures of completion, faculty and students must collaborate—and build structures that translate values into action. While faculty need not be close friends with their students, it's important that they engage in a group sense-making process regarding what is reasonable for students to have the support necessary for success. For instance, by gently nudging students, offering to peer review their work, or informally discussing ideas, faculty create an environment that encourages students to gain the confidence to conduct independent, self-paced work.

Brown Bags: Faculty should consider using brown bag sessions to go beyond typical presentations of research work—and to impart advice on other aspects important for doctoral student success. For instance, sessions on critical issues in the field, the review process, the stages of doctoral study, extra class behavior, the job of a faculty member, conducting a job search, good presentation skills, and time management can be invaluable to communicate advice, expectations, and facilitate a common understanding and value system.

Collaborative Mentoring: Faculty need to develop informal structures to share information and mentor doctoral students. Although faculty may sit in offices next to each other, often they are loath to discuss concerns about a peer's student. Faculty need to develop cultures where they informally assess students' progress and share responsibility for developing strategies to mentor each student. Open communication among faculty can facilitate diagnosis of problems and discussion of solutions as they occur.

Managing Dissertations: Clearly, this is where students often flounder. While students have a responsibility to manage their time, and their advisor (see "Interaction between a Doctoral Student and Advisor: Making It Work!" *Decision Line*, January 2003), there are aspects of faculty-student interactions that need to be in place in order to cultivate a culture of completion. First, the advisor needs to clearly indicate that the dissertation is the student's responsibility. The students drive the process and they need to keep control of it by working with externally imposed deadlines and managing their own schedules. Second, students need to understand that pathological behavior, such as avoiding the advisor when work is not done on time, will only hurt the student. It tends to be self-reinforcing as delays get compounded and so does avoidance behavior. Continuous communication is key—and most advisors are responsive to genuine issues. Third, good advisors recognize that one of their responsibilities is to keep the project realistic—doable within the timeframe. So, careful assessment of costs and benefits of major changes needs to be explicitly discussed. Fourth, students need to be aware of the advisor's style and expectations. So, if short meetings are the norm, a focused document with key issues laid out can make far more productive use of time. And, finally, students (in collaboration with their advisor) need to continuously update their schedule based on progress. By considering this, students are aware of slippage and adjustments (e.g., in scope or data expectations) can be made to rectify this.

Open Solicitation: In cultures of completion, students should be willing to solicit help, and faculty should be able to point students toward help. For instance, during the dissertation, students often have their first experience working with real data—quite different from canned sets used in statistical courses. It is important that students are comfortable admitting they do not know how to run the analysis—even though they've completed coursework. This requires a culture and relationships that encourage open communication—rather than students feeling apprehensive and fearing embarrassment. When faculty socialize students during the initial stages of their program, students who get accustomed to open, frank discussions about research would be more willing to seek help.

Student-Student Interactions

To successfully nurture cultures of completion, doctoral students must develop faculty-independent norms and behaviors that provide the support and knowledge required to complete a Ph.D. In many doctoral programs, senior students informally mentor new students and build cultures characterized by trust and opportunities for positive interaction.

Trusting, Open Cultures: Each student has unique strengths—some are thinkers, some are writers, and some are statisticians. In cultures of completion, students leverage these strengths through discussing their work, helping solve difficult theoretical or empirical problems related to dissertations, and providing moral support necessary for completing a dissertation. For these behaviors to manifest themselves, students must establish a baseline sense of rapport and trust—such that they do not need to worry about "peers" stealing ideas or their inadequacies exposed to faculty. Formally, faculty help build such cultures by requiring students to collaborate on class projects. Informally, students build trusting relationships through simple behaviors such as sharing a cup of coffee or lunch. When students build open, trusting cultures as a group, they are more likely to move more quickly through their Ph.D. programs.

Channels for Interaction: Students must take the initiative to create enduring structures that enable knowledge transfers and provide other necessary support required to complete coursework and dissertations. In our experience, cultures of completion are characterized by these kinds of formal or informal groups. For instance, we have seen seminar study groups where students get together physically or virtually to discuss papers before the discussion in class. These groups constitute an opportunity to reflect on, not learn, course material and constitute a launching point for building "bonds" within cohorts of students. Similarly, we have seen student writing groups, where doctoral students peer-review papers for courses, conferences and journal submissions. Often, students can offer comments that would be devastating coming from a faculty advisor. Also, during post-comps, when coursework ends, students lose anchors that gave their daily lives rhythm and required them to interact. At this stage, informal meetings that allow students to exchange ideas on dissertations and other problems they might be facing can provide both cognitive and emotional support that is of a different flavor than what comes through faculty-student interactions.

Conclusion

Doctoral programs are difficult and many students falter. By fostering a culture of completion characterized by a general awareness of processes, forward-thinking orientation, high level of collegiality and clan control, optimism, and a constant sense of urgency, an environment that makes it difficult to flounder can be cultivated. However, to do this well, program elements must provide structure and allow for flexibility, while creating realistic expectations and limiting teaching responsibilities. Faculty must create structures that allow for open communication and clear demarcation of dissertation responsibilities in order to prevent slippage. Also, students themselves can create channels of interaction that can nurture successful outcomes. While these guidelines are not novel, it is their conscious fostering and institutionalization that yields outcomes that go beyond completion of doctoral degrees to instillation of values that lead to career success. ■

Institute's Executive Director Carol Latta, who also covers the 'In the News' column.

Articles in this Issue

This issue begins with the President's Letter, "Renewing DSI: Simplicity is a virtue," in which DSI President Ken Kendall of Rutgers University commends the virtues of simplicity as a value. While heeding Jim Horning's caution that nothing is as simple as we hope it to be, Ken suggests strategies for incorporating simplicity into the Institute's design, structure, and procedures.

There are various models of research administration around the worlds. Australia offers a dynamic and shifting environment for research administrators. In the Research Issues column, Feature Editor Miles Nicholls of RMIT University provides us with a fascinating glimpse of the challenges associated with managing academic research in the evolving academic scene in Australia. The Classroom column offers ideas for creating a cohesive classroom community in an article entitled, "Class Photo Album Using Office 2007," by Maurie Lockley of the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. Maurie calls on the instructors to make personal connections with the students and facilitate the process of networking through emerging technologies.

Sameer Verma, San Francisco State University, presents "The Law of Code" in the Ecommerce column. The essay is rich in ideas and implications, and covers a broad spectrum of highly relevant issues pertaining to the business of software. In the Deans' Perspective column, Sarah Bower visits us again with an essay on the challenge of balancing between publishing, teaching and service. She explores the dilemma as it is faced by those in the initial stages of their academic career and shares distilled insights filtered through broad experience and deep maturity. She tells it like it is: "Most people in the world are not as educated as we are, but that does not make them less than we. . . . Avoid absorbing poor culture habits. . . ."

Varun Grover and Jason Thatcher, both of Clemson University, discuss "Building Cultures of Completion in Ph.D. Programs" in the Doctoral Student Issues column. They suggest fostering a culture that is process-oriented, proactive, collegial, optimistic, and urgent. In The Bookshelf column, Craig Seal of Niagara University draws our attention to Gerd Gigerenzer's *Gut Feelings: The Intelligence of the Unconscious*, an exciting book on reason and decision-making. In the DSI Membership Issues column, Gary Hackbarth, Northern Kentucky University, reports on the recent survey of the Institute members, providing new insights and shattering many myths about who we are. Also, in this issue, Chetan Shankar of Auburn University, the new editor of the *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, shares his vision for the journal.

I look forward to feedback from our readers. Happy reading! ■