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Graduate Student Orientation through a Professional Seminar: A Case Study of Doctoral Students, 1997-2000

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Traditional new student orientation programming is focused on the duality of academic preparation and social integration. For graduate students, especially doctoral students, much of the academic preparation has already been accounted for and social integration is often seen as secondary. The current study follows a cohort of new doctoral students through an orientation course, collecting relevant demographic data, and tracking them through completion of their dissertations.

Student orientation programs sponsored by institutions are generally geared toward new incoming or transfer undergraduate students. Programming for these individuals generally focuses on, as Twale (1989) noted, an "espirit de corps" among the new peers. Additionally, much attention is devoted to providing new students the tools necessary to achieve academic success while enrolled in college. Even the Council for the Advancement of Standards "Standards for New Student Orientation" are geared toward developing relationships, skills, and personal behaviors related to primarily the undergraduate experience. A combination of research and practice, however, suggest that the graduate school experience is markedly different, particularly for students pursuing a doctoral degree.

Enrollment in doctoral education is unique in that less than 2% of the general adult population pursues advanced study at this level, and, in some disciplines attrition is as high as 70%. The experience is also filled with different kinds of challenges. Where the typical undergraduate may be away from parents or enrolled in postsecondary education for the first time, doctoral students are generally coming from the top of their respective undergraduate experiences, discriminatingly selecting their institutions based on academic reputation and national recognition, and already possessing the cognitive tools necessary for academic success. The result is a differing kind of student orientation, often coordinated by graduate schools or divisions of graduate studies. Although few efforts have been directed at cataloging and defining these graduate student orientations, a cursory review of them confirms that they tend to be procedural in nature, focusing on the processes and systems at the institution to provide for a smoother 'customer-focus' for the graduate student.

High attrition rates and continued reports of doctoral students unable to effectively handle the stress of graduate study, combined with the a noted lack of attention to

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building a sense of community among graduate students prompted the development of an orientation-style course for doctoral students studying Higher Education at the case study institution. The course, designed in a professional seminar format, was required as the first course to be taken by the entering cohort of students at this institution in this discipline, and the current study reports on both the experience of these students as well as suggesting that the experience did indeed have a positive impact on their graduate study experience.

The Orientation Course

The professional seminar course at the study institution was designed by Higher Education Administration Program faculty. The objectives and goals of the course were primarily designed to help the newly admitted doctoral student navigate the doctoral program while also helping them to gain a deeper understanding of the field of study they were pursuing. In general, objectives and goals of the course included: helping the doctoral student develop an understanding of higher education as a field of study; explore administrative and programmatic issues related to individual, personal, and professional development, skills needed for jobs, leadership approaches, and administrative responsibilities in higher education; develop an understanding of the graduate school experience, campus resources, and state and federal resources which support higher education; become familiar with the literature and current study of higher education as a field of study; and become familiar with the attitudes, beliefs, and values of academic culture, and the various aspects of the doctoral experience, including the purposes, nature, benefits, and stresses of the doctoral residency.

The course was designed to cover several key areas of the program from the time of admission into the program through graduation and graduate school procedures for doctoral students. One major component of the course included the Higher Education Administration Program "basics." This component covered topics such as the mission of the program, specific program objectives and goals, how to develop scholarly abilities, research, and practical administrative abilities. Another component included direction on vital tasks that must be accomplished during the first semester in the program. This topic included how to establish a doctoral program advisory committee, develop a program of study, required and optional course work, transfer hours, residency requirements, and procedures for appealing a grade.

A third component of the course included helping students gain a broad understanding of the field of Higher Education. A significant sampling of core knowledge and major ideas of the field of study was presented through the discussion of literature related to the field, including books and journal articles. Students were presented with a sample of possible readings related to history and philosophy of higher education, students, community and junior colleges, governance, policy, and finance, and teaching, learning, and curriculum issues. Students were further presented with a list of journals in the field that each should be familiar with based on areas of interest or concentration. Possible journals that were suggested related to the study of higher education, community college students, student affairs, and adult and continuing education.

Considerable time and in-depth discussions were centered around dissertation procedures. This component included how to select a topic, how to construct a dissertation, evaluation of the dissertation, the dissertation prospectus, proposal, and defense, selection of the dissertation committee, guidelines for the final oral defense of the dissertation, including student presentation, and responding to committee requests. Other areas of the discussion related to the dissertation included graduate school guidelines for submission and necessary forms. A dissertation panel was also used so that students could ask questions from recent graduates of the program on how to get started, what techniques they found useful when writing, how they selected a topic, etc. The use of the panel proved useful and helped students lay to rest many of the fears that they had about the dissertation process. Faculty members from the program were also introduced to the students and asked to share their research interests, answer questions, and generally provided information that would be helpful to the students.

Other areas of the course included discussions on comprehensive examinations, professional development, writing techniques, importance of developing an administrative philosophy, and career paths. The course was designed to provide an avenue for students to seek answers to the many questions that they may have regarding doctoral study and to provide them with a sense of direction and comfort.

Data Collection

As a component of the program's self-assessment, specifically related to the course, a survey instrument was developed to examine specific areas of relevance to doctoral student performance. The instrument made use of two standardized scales: McCroskey's Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA) and the Daly and Miller Writing Apprehension Test (WAT). These scales have consistently been reported to be reliable, and have a moderate (around .30) correlation to each other (Richmond & McCroskey, 1989). Two additional sets of data were collected through the survey instrument, including a rating of agreement (1-to-5 on Likert-type scale, with 1=Strong Disagreement and 5=Strong Agreement with the items) with academic integrity measures for higher education and a rating of four academic integrity reform measures. These components were adapted from Newman's (1994) work with student-athlete reform.

The survey instrument was pilot tested prior to administration, and comments were solicited from other graduate faculty at the host institution. Several changes were made to wording and presentation, and the survey had a .69 overall Cronbach alpha in two pilot tests with similar groups of doctoral students.

The PRCA has been in use since 1970 and has typically been viewed as the most reliable of at least three major scales reporting personal communication apprehension. The instrument has 24-items about self-perceptions and comfort in communication settings. The instrument has consistently had internal reliability ratings of .90 or greater (Daly, 1978). The overall communication apprehension (CA) score is made up of four sub-scales (group, meeting, dyadic, and public), and has a hypothetical mid-point of 75, where high communication is considered one standard deviation above this mid-point

(88 or higher), and low CA is one standard deviation below the mid-point (62 or lower).

Communication apprehension has been studied for over six decades, first appearing in study as "reticence" or "stage fright" (Clevenger, 1955). Phillips offered an early definition of CA as "a person for whom anxiety about participation in oral communication outweighs his projection of gain from the situation" (p. 40). A more recent definition of CA has been offered as "an anxiety syndrome associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person" (McCroskey, 1977, p. 78). High levels of CA have been positively correlated with academic performance, social and self perceptions, achievement, and occupational efforts and choice (Miller & Edmunds, 1995; McCroskey & Sheahan, 1978).

The WAT, developed by Daly and Miller was originally created to measure levels of fear or apprehension related to writing (Richmond & McCroskey, 1989). Frequently used with college students in writing-related courses, the instrument consists of 20 self-report questions about writing, and results in a score ranging between 20 and 100. Using the same reference of a hypothetical mid-point and one standard deviation in either direction of the mid-point to represent high and low apprehension, scores below 45 represent lower levels of writing apprehension and scores of 75 and higher represent higher writing apprehension.

Daly (1979) defined writing apprehension (WA) as "a general avoidance of writing and situations perceived by the individual to potentially require some amount of writing…the individual who is highly apprehensive finds the experience…more punishing than rewarding" (p. 37). WA has been described as a behavioral issue (Bloom, 1980) rather than a state or trait, and has been under increasing study with the advent, ease, and changes in writing due to technology (Neff, Bourret, & Nelson, 1992). Similar to CA, WA has an impact on vocational aspirations and academic performance (Neilsen, 1986).

The Newman components of the survey were derived from the initial National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) legislation on student-athlete reform. The NCAA has expressed concern about student-athlete performance and progress toward degree for the past 50 years, often struggling with association regulations and mandates for institutional control (Newman, 1994). In Newman's use of these components, he surveyed secondary school personnel about the agreement with the measures as likely to produce greater academic integrity. He achieved a Cronbach alpha .80 level of reliability with the instrument, and concluded that the measures were indeed a comprehensive first step in identifying how to better align the academic mission of courses, programs, and the institution with competing outside demands for performance. The faculty at the host institution in the graduate program of study similarly found that they were relevant to student performance and the competing demands of family, work, and outside interests.

For the purpose of this study, two cohorts of doctoral students entering the program in 1996 and 1997 were examined. Only in allowing enough time for their matriculation could the data be completely understood, hence the timing of the current analysis.

Results and Discussion

The doctoral program involved in the study competitively and selectively admitted 12 students in 1996 and 15 students in 1997. These enrolling students were a combined group of full- and part-time students, and no differentiation was made on the survey instrument to indicate such. Prior to 1996, the average student admitted to the program took 54 months, or four and one-half years to complete the degree. The doctoral degree, which totals 96 semester credit hours of completion beyond the bachelor's degree, involves a number of factors that can accelerate or slow down the process of matriculation. Issues such as personal matters (birth of a child, death of a loved one, job change, etc.) as well as academic matters (acquisition and processing of knowledge, execution of dissertation writing, passing comprehensive examinations, etc.) can have an extreme impact on time-to-degree, so enrollment in the orientation course was seen as only one of a variety of factors that can impact success in the program. Time to degree, however, was shorter for students enrolled in the orientation course; for those admitted in 1996, the average time to degree was 42 months, and for those admitted in 1997, 13 of the 15 completed their degree in an average of 36 months.

Although not a formal part of the current study, the reduction in time to degree was discussed among students as being due to the elimination of non-essential or degree-counting courses. Several students commented in the course that they appreciated learning the sequence of courses to take, and were able to discuss the rationale for sequencing courses to make the most efficient use of time possible, particularly in scheduling content-area core courses in such a manner as to be able to take comprehensive examinations early in the program (after the completion of the content core with remaining, for example, methodology courses). Additionally, students were able to meet with program faculty and select an advisor early in their programs, thus reducing the time it takes to find a faculty member with similar interests and expertise.

As shown in Table 1, the average Writing Apprehension Test (WAT) score for the class entering in 1996 was 58, with a slightly lower WAT score for the class entering in 1997, 44. Similarly, oral communication apprehension levels, as measured by the Personal Report on Communication Apprehension (PRCA) were identified as higher for the 1996 class (70) than for the 1997 class (68). Three of the four apprehension ratings were within one standard deviation of each instrument's hypothetical mid-point, indicating moderate or "normal" levels of apprehension. For the WAT score for the class entering in 1997, however, the score was determined to be low, thus these students felt more comfortable with the writing process. This finding may be entirely class related, but lays an important foundation for understanding what skills are necessary to succeed in a doctoral program. An interesting extension of this finding would be correlating time to degree by type of apprehension, contending that much of the graduate experience is focused on written communication, and subsequently, lower WA levels would correlate positively with a faster time to degree.

In terms of the academic integrity measures, as defined by the Newman scale and as presented in Table 2, both entering classes generally agreed with increasing required

entrance grade point averages, requiring enrollment in the regular academic term, and limiting the number of hours obtained in special or summer sessions. The finding is somewhat unique in that many of the entering students were full-time employees who might normally take advantage of summer or special sessions. This may speak somewhat, though, to the issue of programmatic subculture and the need for the program to have consistent rigor throughout. The finding may actually be a call greater regulation and a more traditional approach to offering doctoral study, perhaps a form of backlash against the rapid growth of internet and distance education offered doctoral programs.

Two significant differences were identified between the 1996 and 1997 entering classes in rating the Newman academic integrity measures. The 1996 cohort agreed significantly more strongly that admission and graduation rates of students by gender, race, and academic measure should be disclosed by the program. Independent two-tailed t-tests were used in the analysis at an alpha level of .05. The rationale for this could be in the demographic composition of the 1996 class as compared to the 1997 class, although demographic data were not collected. With more gender and racial differences, this could be more of a factor for the 1996 class, essentially saying disclose the performance and admissions of underrepresented populations. The 1997 class, however, could either be less diverse, or, could be more self-focused and determined, a concept supported by their relatively short time to degree. The collection of demographic data of entering classes is also urged, and would be helpful to the program for self-assessment.

In ranking the academic integrity measures, the two cohorts perceived satisfactory academic progress (SAP) as potentially the most effective for improving the integrity of the program. They followed this with the notion of a core curriculum (CC) where master's degree level courses are required for entering doctoral students. As shown in Table 3, both cohorts were similar in their rankings of these measures. The high ranking of the SAP is interesting in that it calls for completion of a certain percentage of courses and course requirements within set time limits. For a class combined with full- and part-time students, the notion of a structured number of classes to get through each term or year does not on face value seem consistent with the flexible nature of many programs serving non-traditional students. Also, the notion of a core curriculum required in the discipline of Higher Education required for master's and doctoral students is something that is only beginning to get critical attention. Students seemed to be indicating that they want structure in their graduate program, and they want it to look like other graduate programs in the social sciences.

Conclusion

The orientation course developed by the Higher Education program faculty was certainly well received, and students appeared to get a great deal of the interactions they encountered between themselves and with faculty. From one dimension, the course served as a collective group advising session for very serious students. From another perspective, it allowed social groups and networks to emerge to provide the support necessary to accomplish the daunting task of doctoral study.

The findings from this initial assessment activity are interesting for a variety of

reasons. Although there was a basic reinforcement of the literature base about communication apprehension and academic achievement, the new area of graduate student performance, albeit summative, and academic achievement is offered. If indeed lower WA levels can be correlated with graduate school performance, then the notion of writing examples and essays can certainly have a more prominent role in admissions decisions. There remains the more substantive issue of degree completion and communication apprehension and learning in the program. Those with lower apprehension levels may indeed move more quickly through their chosen programs, but there needs to be serious research about how programs measure learning what is gained from a doctoral program experience. The assumption exists that degree completion demonstrates knowledge acquisition, but in graduate programs that focus on areas of management, there also needs to be a serious examination about the long-term learning outcomes of a graduate school experience.

The survey instrument also revealed that students in the graduate program tended to want a more structured and less flexible experience. They may be indicating a desire to have a lock-step, cohort program with little space for electives. This, however, is not consistent with what other graduate programs seem to be experiencing; that is, the offering of courses on-line, in the evening or on weekends, etc. The orientation course seemed to be a good first step in addressing this issue, as it required all students to start their programs together before adjusting the pace of their programs to individual abilities.

Generally, the course was well received by students and the program's faculty, and at least this preliminary evidence suggests that it is making a difference. An interesting corollary study would be to look at how friendships are formed within programs and how subculture learning about expectations takes place. Orientation courses for graduate programs may indeed prove to be an outstanding step forward for making the graduate school experience more "user-friendly" while maintaining a high degree of integrity. This program, being relatively new, is but a first step in looking at how the professional orientation community can combine with the academic community to offer innovative programs to create meaningful graduate student transitions.

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TABLE 1

Apprehension Levels by Class Year

Measure	1996 n=12	1997 n=15
WAT	58	44
PRCA	70	68

WAT range: high 75+, low 45 or lower
PRCA range: high 88+, low 62 or lower

TABLE 2

Academic Integrity Statement Mean Ratings

Academic Integrity Statement	1996 Mean	1996 Range	1997 Mean	1997 Range	Combined Mean
Increase required academic Standards for satisfactory Progress toward graduation.	2.8	3	3.11	4	2.96
Increase undergraduate grade point average from 3.0 to 3.25 for admission.	3.2	2	3.44	4	3.30
Maintain required 1500 GRE minimal score for admission.	2.6	2	2.22	3	2.39
Maintain required 50 MAT minimal score for admission.	2.4	2	2.11	2	2.24
Require 25%, 50%, and 75% of the program course requirements for a specific doctoral degree in the 3rd, 4th, and 5th years of enrollment, respectively.	3.0	2	2.66	3	2.82
Require doctoral students to take 75% of their courses during the regular academic year.	3.6	2	3.77	4	3.69
Limit summer credits to no more than 25% of the credits used to meet satisfactory academic progress requirements.	3.4	2	3.66	4	3.53
Require program disclosure of admission rates of students by gender, race, and academic major.	3.2	2	2.55*	4	2.85
Require program disclosure of graduation rates of students by gender, race, and academic major.	3.2	2	2.44*	3	2.79

**Significantly different at the .05 level.*

TABLE 3

Academic Integrity Reform Measures

Measure	Mean Ranking 1996	1997	Combined
Core Curriculum	2.2	1.77	1.97
Initial Eligibility	2.4	2.44	2.42
Satisfactory Academic Progress	1.4	2.33	1.89
Admission and Graduation Rates	4.0	3.44	3.70