

# USING TECHNOLOGY TO REDUCE ATTRITION OF DOCTORAL STUDENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

There has been much literature published about concern over high attrition of students in doctoral programs. Denecke (2005) published that Pfizer, Inc., is sponsoring a \$2 million, three-year study to investigate how to reduce doctoral attrition and increase completion rates. Malmberg (2000) published that approximately 65, 400 doctoral candidates will be lost to attrition across the United States during 2000-2005. Low completion rates of doctoral students' results in tuition losses to the educational institution, and the doctoral dropouts may experience psychological pain of failure and reduced life time earnings (Smallwood, 2004). The nation also receives reduced contributions in the form of tax revenues when doctoral students fail to complete their programs. While some attrition is expected and needed in all educational programs, The Washington Post (2006) published the attrition of students in doctorate programs is estimated to be between 50-60%. Given the prerequisites required to meet admissions standards for acceptance into a doctoral program, this number is high.

Attrition of doctoral students at the rate of 50-60% of those who enter the program, suggests the need to examine alternative strategies within educational institutions in working with doctoral students. The purpose of this paper is to suggest how incorporating Internet technology might be one alternative in reducing attrition in doctoral programs.

### Using the Internet to reduce attrition within doctoral programs

The Dieringer Research Group (2004) reported that 18% of

the workforce in the United States operate in a virtual environment. That means, approximately 1 out of 5 individuals rely on technology, therefore; using this medium to reduce doctoral attrition might provide some benefits. Incorporating Internet technology can provide doctoral learners and educators' innovative ways to engage and expand learning paradigms as the learner prepares for the workforce and completes the doctoral program.

Some specific strategies to engage doctoral learners using the Internet include:

#### 1. Provide student orientations/seminars upon entry to the doctoral program to minimize early attrition.

Most doctoral students return to the school after a long absence from the classroom. By creating a doctoral web page that includes online seminars/orientations, success tips, links to information, and a doctoral chat room, the doctoral learners might be able to move faster from psychologically apprehensive and procrastination stages when they first commence their doctoral programs. Providing online interactive seminars between faculty and doctoral students for early engagement can be included in these programs. Lovitts (2000) published that doctoral student attrition often arises from the failure of programs to integrate students academically and socially. Online doctoral chat rooms can provide an avenue for socialization. Additionally, ensuring formal social activities are planned for residencies and at campus events. The doctoral students are to be keep engaged by providing opportunities for the students to participate in professional meetings/conferences/publishing opportunities.

## 2. Minimizing ABD attrition

To support the *all but dissertation* (ABD) groups, web hyperlinks for 24/7 information relating to the dissertation preparation can be provided, on how to conduct research, tips from graduates, links to the university librarians, counselors, academic advisors, and technology technicians. Creating a chat room for doctoral learners in the ABD status is also effective for the doctoral students.

## 3. Dissertation Chair

Dissertation Chair/student interactions can be increased by requiring them to log in and to be online at least once a week during the ABD writing stage. The requirements that the dissertation chair provided as written guidelines of expectations, is needed to be implemented by developing a contracted game plan with the doctoral learner. Lovitts suggested that the single, most important factor in a student decision is to continue or withdraw the relationship with a dissertation chair (2000). Literature, relating to the experiences of doctoral students, suggested that the role of dissertation chair with the student can aid/deter in the sustaining of student motivation. Upon completion of comprehensive exams and course work, doctoral students are reported to have a feeling of being alone after collaborative classroom relationships ends, and the ABD status commences. Using technology to implement a required online login between the Dissertation Chair and the student to exchange weekly dialogue relating to progress and/or problems helps to avoid inertia during the ABD phase. This will also address another complaint of learners of inability to have contact with his/her Dissertation Chair.

## 4. Selection of the Dissertation Committee.

A web page can be established to allow doctoral students to view biographies and research interests of available/trained dissertation chairs and committee members. The doctoral student must be able to contact

available committee members listed to solicit interest in being on their committee. Allowing doctoral students to select his/her own dissertation committee allows a better opportunity of compatibility of personalities and interests. If the relationship does not work, the student and the committee members should have the opportunity to remove themselves from the committee after notification of all involved parties. A committee that is assigned to the student by the university may result in the faculty with little time and least interest in the dissertation topic. The University should also provide additional compensation to the committee and include in the contract with the committee members that the feedback must be provided to the learner within 10 working days of the student submission. Providing compensation to the faculty is less costly than the attrition of a student.

## 5. Selection of the chair, dissertation topic during Year 1 for focus.

Doctoral students must have the freedom and self-dependence in selecting the dissertation topic/method of data collection during their first year of the doctoral program. The lack of focus of a dissertation topic is problematic for many learners, so that committee has to take some earlier steps to familiarise the learners to a specific topic/methodology. The topic should address a societal problem and this topic and methodology should be approved by the dissertation chair during Year 1 of their program. It should be ensured that the topic/methodology is achievable and adds to the scholarly body of knowledge. The dissertation must contribute knowledge beneficial to society and demonstrate the student's ability to carry out research in a scientific manner. Tips to help the learners in narrowing down a dissertation topic can be included in the doctoral webpage such as:

research in a scientific manner. Tips to help the learners in narrowing down a dissertation topic can be included in

the doctoral webpage such as:

- ? Whether the students can attend a seminar if it is related to the selected dissertation topic.
- ? Is the topic is of societal concern and/or interest? For example, the topic of "Community college presidents" may not be a suitable dissertation topic. However, an exploration into 'why community college presidents are not academically prepared to do their jobs', could provide information about the societal problems.

## Conclusion

Denecke (2005) published, "Research has shown that the majority of students, including minority students, who enter into doctoral programs have the academic ability to complete the degree." Students with academic ability to complete the program should not be lost due to attrition. The Pfizer team is to be commended on their social contributions in deeply researching all components of this problem. Incorporating technology to change the attrition culture can have some short term benefits towards reducing losses. High attrition losses are of no benefit to the students, the educational institution, or to the nation. So specific strategies to retain doctoral students should be formulated in the future.

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