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The intersection of stakeholder, educator, and community support for distance education doctoral education students

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As college enrollment declines, enrollment in distance education (DE) continues to increase (Seaman et al., 2018). During the COVID-19 pandemic, universities are relying on DE through online learning, perhaps more than ever (Mullen, 2020). For graduate students, particularly those who are established, working professionals, DE offers a convenient way to complete a degree that can be done flexibly around one's time at work or with family (Bolliger & Halupa, 2012). DE Is also an attractive option for institutions because it is typically cost-effective (Neely & Tucker, 2010).

In the field of education, specifically, DE offers students a way to complete a doctoral degree while simultaneously gaining experience and field testing newly acquired knowledge. Doctor of Education (EdD) degrees typically are practitioner-focused (Boyce, 2012; Perry, 2012; Santovec, 2008) and are often completed by those who are balancing a full-time job in the field and other personal responsibilities (Gardner, 2007, 2009; Pratt & Spaulding, 2014; West, 2014). Completing a doctorate at a distance allows EdD students to continue fulfilling these responsibilities while simultaneously furthering their education. Despite these advantages, DE Doctor of Education (EdD) programs are plagued with a high attrition risk. Attrition rates for doctoral programs are generally around 50% (Council of Graduate Schools, 2009; Gravois, 2007; Mullen, 2020), but for DE EdD programs, one of the highest rates of attrition are represented, at between 50% and 70% (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Nettles & Millet, 2006). One of the most prolonged time-to-degree completion rates is also represented for DE EdD students (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008; National Science Foundation, 2014; Nettles & Millet, 2006; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). These high rates of drop out and extended times to degree completion pose high costs to students, families, institutions, and even society (Council of Graduate Schools, 2009; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Malone et al., 2004; McAlpine & Norton, 2006; Smallwood, 2004; Tinto, 2017).

Researchers have shown the orientations can be an effective means of supporting persistence (Kumar & Dawson, 2012; Matheswaran, 2010; Tinto, 2012) and that doctoral students support the completion of an orientation to a doctoral program (Cho, 2012; Perrine & Spain, 2008; Pintz & Posey, 2013). However, a model for doctoral orientations did not exist.

Methods

To address this problem and in light of the exceptionally high rates of attrition for DE EdD programs specifically, a grounded theory study ($N = 56$) of doctoral students, alumni, non-persisting students, faculty, and a dean was conducted to determine the ideal components of orientation for DE EdD programs. The research questions were: (a) How do DE EdD students persist in each stage of the doctoral journey? (b) How do DE EdD students integrate (socially, academically, with their families, and financially) in their programs and universities? (c) What are the necessary components and delivery model for an orientation to DE EdD programs? (Motte, 2019).

After IRB approvals, participants were recruited from two universities in the southeastern United States to answer these questions. Student and alumni participants ($n = 47$) completed an integration and engagement survey, and follow-up interviews were completed with doctoral students ($n = 9$) who were working on their dissertations and alumni ($n = 3$). Non-persisters ($n = 2$) were recruited for interviews, though they did not participate in the initial survey. Two focus groups were also completed with doctoral faculty ($n = 6$) who work with DE EdD students in the dissertation phase. After the initial data from each institution were analyzed through open, axial, and selective coding, cross-case analysis was used to generalize the orientation components' themes. A delivery survey was constructed using these findings.

Previous participants and the deans of the sites were invited to complete the survey to determine when and how the orientation support components should be delivered to aid the persistence of DE EdD students (Motte, 2019).

Results

This study found that DE EdD students need various supports from five primary sources: their institution, department, faculty, peers, and family (Motte, 2019). While the idea of supporting doctoral students through these sources is not a new one, this study found that doctoral students, alumni, non-persisters, and faculty desired support for DE EdD students that reached beyond a bounded orientation course. Instead, ongoing support from these five sources was needed to address students' changing needs throughout the doctoral journey (Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2008; Storms et al., 2011).

As the interview and focus group data were analyzed, it became clear that there were three main stages where support was needed. This supports assertions in the literature regarding the various stages present in the doctoral journey (Gardner, 2007, 2009; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014) and how the support needed throughout the doctoral journey changes over time (Gardner, 2009; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014; Tinto, 2012). The three stages that emerged as significant times for support in this study were the entry stage, the coursework stage, and the candidacy stage (Motte, 2019).

Entry Stage

The doctoral journey's entry-stage includes program selection and acceptance, navigating the necessary changes personally, professionally, financially, and as a family for balance, remedying prerequisite needs, and beginning early coursework (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). During the entry stage, participants indicated a need for institutional support through a technology assessment as they navigated online learning demands (Motte, 2019). This type of assessment can help point students to resources to remedy any weaknesses and increase their self-efficacy regarding online degree completion (Hardy, 2014; Kelso, 2009; West, 2014). Participants also expressed a need for departmental support through a program fit assessment and an overview of program expectations and curriculum (Motte, 2019). Researchers have thoroughly discussed the importance of *fit*, or alignment between student goals and program outcomes (Bragg, 1976; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Tinto, 2012), and persistence as it helps students develop a sense of belonging (Bragg, 1976; Rovai, 2002; Tinto, 2017, 2018). In this study, non-persisters echoed the importance of fit and recounted their struggles because of a mismatch in goals (Motte, 2019). As participants discussed fit, they also desired to better understand the program's structure, expectations, and various milestones through an overview of expectations and curriculum.

Additionally, during the entry stage, participants expressed the need for support from their peers and faculty, and they began to integrate academically and socially (Tinto, 2012). Participants desired a sense of community and advice from alumni or peers further on in the program to aid with socialization (Gardner, 2007). Lastly, at this and every stage, an element of familial support was recommended through a familial orientation. Participants described the importance of their families, understanding what the program required and how they could support the student at each stage of the journey (Motte, 2019).

Coursework

While support through orientation materials during the entry stage is helpful, participants expressed that the support needed during the coursework stage is unique. The coursework stage occurs when the student is a few courses into the program and understands 'how the program works.' At this stage, participants echoed the desire for the same five support providers (e.g., institution, department, faculty, peer, family), but in more specific ways. From the institution, participants noted the importance of institutional supports for things like the library, advising services, and the writing center. They needed additional program support from the department, but more specifically, they did not understand a concept and needed remediation. They also wanted to know what courses paired well together and what to expect regarding workload. Faculty continue to play an essential role at this stage as doctoral students needed substantive feedback. However, they also indicated that they needed help in understanding how to receive and interpret that feedback (Motte, 2019).

As they continue coursework, participants reflected on needing to build relationships with faculty, collaborate on research, and be encouraged to take on their own research endeavors to help prepare them for the dissertation and choose a dissertation mentor/chair. From their peers, additional integration opportunities and support were desired. Even though students were online, they desired meaningful relationships and to know that they were not 'in it alone.' Again, a family orientation was needed, but this time, the family component was more about connecting family members to other students' families so that a support system could be built. This support would help families support each other if they were struggling and help family members of doctoral students understand what to expect throughout the doctoral journey (Motte, 2019).
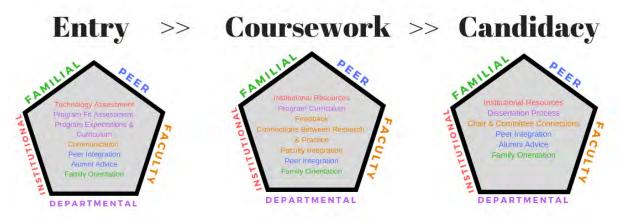
Candidacy

The final critical stage of support that emerged through this study's findings was the candidacy stage (Motte, 2019). This is where doctoral students become candidates, establishing that they are ready to begin the dissertation process (Holder, 2014). They do this by completing coursework as well as through institutional requirements like comprehensive exams or capstone projects. The candidacy stage represents a full shift to self-directed learning and entails a unique set of challenges (Motte, 2019; Ponton, 2014). The five support sources remained the same at this stage, but again, the type of support needed to be changed. Students needed a fresh look at institutional supports for dissertation completion and departmental details regarding the dissertation process. From faculty, they needed support so they could find a chair and a strong committee. While the dissertation process is very individualized, participants still desired peer integration and support to have other candidates who understood their experiences to keep them accountable and provide encouragement. Participants indicated that they also wanted to hear from alumni to understand better the dissertation process and 'what worked' from recent completers. Lastly, family support is still critical at this stage. Candidates desired a resource for their family members to understand the intensity of this stage better, what the candidate was experiencing, and how they could help (Motte, 2019).

To fully answer all three research questions for this study, a model of the ideal components of orientation for DE EdD programs was needed. As a result, the Motte's (2019) *Scaffolded Orientation for DE EdD Programs Model* was formed (see Figure 1) as well as a detailed handout for institutions (see Appendix A).

Discussion

Launching from the previously described *Scaffolded Orientation for DE EdD Programs Model* and research on the support DE EdD students need for persistence, it is time for institutions to take a closer look at an amalgamated or fully intersected, approach to DE doctoral student support. Higher education institutions often look at numerical data (e.g., graduation rates, attrition rates) to determine where the need for additional support exists (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Motte, 2019; Nettles & Millet, 2006). The institution typically passes the responsibility for that support on to faculty members. While faculty members may assume that responsibility reasonably, they classically only do this in the area of academic support, considering the student's final grade as the measuring stick of success primarily. This stops short of considering true persistence- all the way to the end of degree completion. Again, it only relies on numerical data as the primary source of information. While this type of support is valuable, and it does appease the institution, it is short-sighted. It does not consider if the student will make it to graduation by persisting through difficult seasons or other potential attrition factors.

Figure 1
Scaffolded Orientation for DE EdD Programs Model (Motte, 2019, p. 160)

Research is clear that doctoral students need various support and that the needed support changes over time (Motte, 2019; Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2008; Storms et al., 2011). Perhaps surprisingly, the sources of that support stretch beyond the institution and faculty. Despite this support coming from sources outside the institution's confines, institutions must take responsibility for ensuring students at least have access to these sources of support. They should also regularly check in regarding the student's social and emotional, not just academic, health. This perhaps even more critical now as doctoral students face unprecedented struggles in the face of a worldwide pandemic (Colpitts et al., 2020; Mullen 2020). While this may seem time-consuming or beyond the scope of institutional responsibility, this shift in collaborative thinking could directly impact DE doctoral students' persistence rates, resulting in positive ramifications not just for students but institutions and society as well. Increasing graduation rates can positively affect enrollment, making an institution's program even more attractive to potential students (Golde, 2005; Lobo, 2011). Those doctors, in turn, filter into society, impacting local public and private schools, community colleges, universities, and a wide variety of organizations (Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). The value of increased retention and persistence stretches far beyond the "walls" of the DE institution (Council of Graduate Schools, 2009; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Malone et al., 2004; McAlpine & Norton, 2006; Smallwood, 2004).

There truly is power and possibility for the public good when collaboration occurs among all of the parties involved in the DE EdD student's journey. It is time for multiple sources of support to intersect, if not primarily for the sake of the DE EdD student, then for the sake of society as a whole. Based on this qualitative grounded theory study of DE EdD students, alumni, non-persisters, faculty, and deans ($N = 56$), the support DE EdD students need for persistence throughout a DE EdD program is provided by the student's institution, department, faculty, peers, and family (Motte, 2019).

Institutional Support

Many institutional supports are beneficial to DE doctoral education students (Heyman, 2011; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011; West et al., 2011). As with other disciplines, these students need the support of well-versed advisors (Hardy, 2014) who can guide students through course enrollment decisions, degree planning, financial aid, and university services. While these services are typically robust in residential programs, they are often weaker in DE (Heyman, 2010). Institutional supports for DE EdD students also include academic supports regarding the library, research designs, statistics, remediation supports, a technology assessment, and writing (Motte, 2019). In addition to academic supports, institutions should also include emotional supports through counseling (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016; West et al., 2011) as pursuing a terminal degree can put a strain on not only the doctoral student but their families as well (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016).

Departmental Support

While institutional support is essential, the DE EdD student also needs departmental support. The department offers an extension of institutional supports that focuses on the student's degree's specific concentration. An often overlooked but vital component of departmental support is a program fit assessment that determines if there is a match between the institution's values, the program's outcomes, and the student's values and goals (Motte, 2019; Bragg, 1976; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Tinto, 2012). This allows students to determine if the institution is a good fit for them before they invest excessive amounts of time and money into the degree. Departments continue providing support by communicating their expectations for students and a timeline for the program's completion (Motte, 2019). Students need to understand when milestones should be met and how long they can realistically expect to be enrolled in their program. Motte (2019) also found that DE EdD students desired in-depth course guides to plan what courses they could pair together and which ones they should space out, based on workload and external commitments. Lastly, later in the degree, the department provides support through a detailed look at the dissertation process, its milestones, and an achievable timeline for completion (Motte, 2019). While faculty can provide a perspective on the dissertations they have chaired or committee, the department provides a broader look at processes beyond the scope and responsibility of the faculty member.

Faculty Support

However, faculty support is essential. Faculty are the day-to-day hands and feet of the institution and department as they interact personally with students, likely more than any other party (Motte, 2019). It was also found that DE EdD students desired significant student-to-faculty communication, but in DE, communication between students and faculty is limited (Motte, 2019; Terrell, Snyder, & Dringus, 2012). Frequent course-wide faculty communication establishes a social presence in the DE environment and provides students an opportunity to get to know their instructor. However, students also desire communication from faculty personally to help gauge their progress and develop their competency. Much

of this communication is possible through faculty feedback, an essential source of faculty support for EdD students (Motte, 2019). In DE, feedback can be delayed, misunderstood, or generally vague. Students may be less likely to follow up with instructors regarding feedback because it is not as easy as staying after class or swinging by during office hours. However, strong faculty support through feedback helps students beyond the scope of an individual course as doctoral courses scaffold and prepare students for their competency exams and dissertation. As students develop throughout the doctoral degree, faculty can further support students and their competency development by making connections between their research coursework and practice, which is a primary goal of the EdD degree (Townsend, 2002). This helps students understand why they are learning the material their degree requires and master it more thoroughly as they see it at work in their contexts. Faculty should aim to connect deeply with students, as students are building relationships with faculty members who may become their dissertation chairs or committee members (Motte, 2019).

Peer Support

As the full possibility of student support to graduation for the sake of public good is considered, the role of peer support, or other students, should also be considered by institutions. Research shows that peer support is critical for persistence among doctoral students (Kumar, Johnson, & Hardemon, 2013; West et al., 2011) and is often the first source of support to which they have access. However, in DE, students tend to have less opportunity for peer integration because they are not experiencing social events on campus or rubbing shoulders in the hallway. Institutions need to consider how to creatively foster peer integration and an awareness of the *need for* and *means of* peer support throughout the doctoral journey (Motte, 2019). Social media platforms can be useful (Rockinson-Szapkiw, Huevelman-Hutchinson, & Spaulding, 2014), but institutions should also consider incorporating recent alumni from their programs to help orient new DE students (Kumar & Coe, 2017; Motte, 2019). Critical times for alumni support may be at entry and candidacy (Motte, 2019).

Familial Support

One final source of support that institutions should consider integrating is the family of the doctoral candidate. The doctoral student's family member can offer practical and emotional support for the candidate that the institution would otherwise be unable to provide (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). While the DE doctoral student's family members are traditionally "out of reach," institutions should open the lines of communication and make partnering with families a priority. This can occur through social media, email, on-campus events, and family orientations (Motte, 2019; Rockinson-Szapki et al., 2018). Family orientations, which are recommended at all three stages highlighted by Motte (2019), allow institutions to support families while educating them on how to support the doctoral student (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016, 2018).

Motte's (2019) Scaffolded Orientation for DE EdD Programs Model precisely identifies what should be delivered along with when and by whom (see Figure 1); however, for this to occur, the lines of communication and collaboration must be opened between stakeholders, departments, faculty, students, and even families. While Motte's (2019) orientation model is linear from stage to stage, the supports within each stage are not. Unlike a relay race where a single runner carries the baton of support and then passes it off to the next key player, the five sources of support within each stage are often working simultaneously. Instead, supporters work together as a crew team, rowing together with precisely synchronized movements.

This is only possible when each support provider communicates and works together as a team, rather than as individualized, single members.

Terry and Ghosh (2015) found that multiple sources of mentorship supported success in EdD programs and recommended: "connecting the cohort, family, supervisor, colleague, and faculty members to support the doctoral students' progression and completion in their program" (p. 210). To accomplish this, Terry and Ghosh (2015) suggested "networking/information sessions" (p. 210) so that the different parties could coordinate their efforts. This is not easy in any setting since members are both within and outside of the institution; however, adding in the factor of distance makes this collaboration even more difficult.

Intersecting the communication and support of stakeholders (institution and department), faculty, and the student's community (peers and family), is vital to the success, persistence, and emotional health of the DE EdD student. Persistent and successful students can attract additional enrollment, benefitting the institution. Furthermore, this collaboration maximizes the potential for the public good through the dissemination of Doctors of Education into society. DE institutions have a massive task ahead as they consider approaching this challenge practically; however, the work should be worth it. No matter the reader's role in doctoral education, whether as a student, faculty member, department head, family member of a doctoral candidate, or researcher, it is time to take action. The doctoral student needs your support and the support of those around them. They may not know how to advocate for this help themselves or what type of support they need. Let us link arms with them and each other to help.

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Appendix

Orientation Handout for Institutions

Components for a Scaffolded Orientation to Distance Education EdD Programs

Entry Orientation

☐ **Technology Assessment**
* *University website*
* *LMS navigation & interaction*
* *Email*
* *Word processing*
* *Remediation resources*

☐ **Fit Assessment**
* *Blended or Synchronous Delivery*
* *Assess student and institution values/beliefs*
* *Assess program outcomes and student goals*
* *Identify program focus (research-scholar vs. practitioner-scholar)*

☐ **Program Timeline & Expectations**
* *Degree scope and sequence*
* *Expected timeline for program milestones (i.e., choosing a topic, choosing a chair, proposal defense) and completion*

☐ **Dissertation Overview**
* *Broad dissertation process & timeline overview*
* *Identifying a topic*
* *Dissertation examples*
* *Proposal and/or dissertation defense example*

☐ **Communication**
* *Blended Delivery*
* *How to communicate in DE*
* *Guidelines for respectful communication*
* *Guidelines for proactive communication (including late policies, extension requests, etc.)*
* *Phone or videoconference policies and request process*

☐ **Social Media**
* *Institution provided forums*
* *Safety & respect guidelines*
* *Using social media for socialization*
* *Cohorts*

☐ **Alumni Panel**
* *Blended Delivery*
* *Recent completer experiences*
* *Practical tips*
* *Q & A*

☐ **Family Orientation**
* *Program expectations & timeline*
* *Practical tips*
* *Discussion prompts*
* *Resources for families*

Coursework Orientation

☐ **Writing Support**
* *Grammar & APA*
* *Academic writing guidelines*
* *Institutional writing supports*
* *Peer writing groups/support*

☐ **Content remediation**
* *Institutional remediation supports*
* *Remediation support request process*
* *Statistics & research supports*
* *Education for non-education backgrounds*

☐ **Course Guides**
* *Detailed scope & sequence*
* *Individual course outcomes & anticipated workload by week*

☐ **Understanding Feedback**
* *Blended Delivery*
* *Purpose of feedback*
* *Accessing feedback*
* *Interpreting constructive feedback*
* *Respectful push back/continuing the conversation*

Contextual Applications
* *Blended or Online*
* *Sharing personal contexts*
* *How to apply learning to practice*
* *Integration of contextual application (course assignments or discussions)*

Faculty Connections
* *Faculty spotlight videos*
* *Faculty bios/CV*
* *Tips for continuing faculty relationships after course completion*
* *Collaboration opportunities*

Peer/Cohort Connection
* *Assistance forming peer groups if needed*
* *Social media or discussion forum for cohorts/peer groups*
* *Guided discussion prompts (throughout degree)*
* *DE institution facilitated connection opportunities ("ice cream social")*
* *Regional connection opportunities*
* *On campus connection opportunities*

Familial Support & Connection
* *Communication with families (blog, newsletter, email).*
* *Social media for families*
* *Family events (housing, meal, and activities)*
* *Support suggestions (throughout the degree)*
* *Family support resources*

Candidacy Orientation

☐ **Dissertation Process & Timeline**
* *Blended Delivery*
* *Detailed dissertation process (prospectus, defenses, IRB, etc.)*
* *Dissertation milestone timeline*
* *Proposal & dissertation defenses*
* *Example dissertations*

☐ **Institutional Dissertation Supports**
* *Detailed dissertation process (prospectus, defenses, IRB, etc.)*
* *Dissertation milestone timeline*
* *Proposal & dissertation defenses*
* *Example dissertations*
* *Library resources/orientation*
* *Research coaching*

* *Writing support*
* *Statistical support*

☐ **Chair & Committee Process**
* *Blended or Synchronous Delivery*
* *Choosing a chair*
* *Committee guidelines and selection*
* *Communication guidelines*
* *Faculty bios/CV*

☐ **Alumni Panel**
* *Blended Delivery*
* *Recent completer experiences*
* *Practical tips*
* *Q & A*

☐ **Late Stage Cohort**
* *Assistance forming if needed*
* *Social media or discussion forums for cohorts*
* *Guided discussion prompts*
* *On campus connection opportunities (i.e., writing retreats)*

☐ **Family Orientation**
* *Dissertation expectations & timeline*
* *Celebrating milestones*
* *Practical support tips*
* *Specific social media forums for families of candidates*
* *Resources for families*