

Chapter 102

Don't Be a Ghost Who Drops Grades in Blackboard: Findings From a Program Evaluation of an Online Doctoral Program in the United States

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the results of a program evaluation conducted to assess the effectiveness of an online doctoral program in educational leadership at a Research One University from the perspective of its students. Feedback was sought from over 80 currently enrolled students. The study focused on three aspects of the program, namely faculty social and cognitive presence. Recent changes to the program that address these areas include the creation of a thematic group model that clusters students based on academic interests over the last 2 years of the program, extensive revisions to coursework, the adoption of a problem-based dissertation model, and the use of social media and an online community portal to promote student engagement. The results indicate that although students had encountered positive experiences in all three areas, online doctoral students continue to need focused individual mentoring in order to experience success.

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INTRODUCTION AND PROGRAM CONTEXT

This chapter presents the results of an evaluation of program effectiveness of an online doctoral program within a large public university located in the southwestern part of the United States, particularly focusing on the relationships between the faculty and student participants in the program. This program, a doctorate of education (Ed.D) in curriculum and instruction, includes approximately 100 students resident in eight states and three countries, with most residing in various locations throughout the state in which the program is located. The eighth cohort of students was admitted in spring 2018. The authors are the current program director, assistant director, and a postdoctoral researcher in the department.

Statistics show that online learning is clearly poised to be a major part of the landscape of higher education for the foreseeable future (Allen & Seaman, 2017; Legon & Garrett, 2017). In the United States, 31.6% of university students now take at least one distance education course (Seaman, Allen & Seaman, 2018). Distance students are also fairly and evenly split between those who take both distance and non-distance courses, and those who take exclusively distance courses. Further, distance education enrollments are highly concentrated, with five percent of institutions accounting for almost half of all distance education students. Data indicates that in the United States, 52.8% of students who took at least one distance course also took a course on-campus, and 56.1% of those who took only distance courses reside in the same state as the institution at which they are enrolled (Seaman et al., 2018). But perhaps the most remarkable figure is that the number of students studying on a campus has dropped by over one million between 2012 and 2016 academic years (Legon & Garrett, 2017). Given this unprecedented growth of online programs, it is more important than ever that online education programs be built and evaluated in terms of the practices they adopt and the models they espouse.

Although the advantages of offering online programs has been well documented (Burns, 2013; Xu & Jagers, 2013), it is not always clear whether these programs effectively engage students and whether student experiences in these programs are comparable to those of their face-to-face counterparts. Lasater, Bengston, and Murphy-Lee (2016) point out that there are conflicting reports regarding the effectiveness of online programs, with some studies such as those by the US Department of Education (2010) suggesting that they perform quite well whereas others indicate a significant gap in quality between online and face-to-face programs (Horodyskyj et al., 2018). Additionally, students in online programs can experience issues that are unique to the structure of such programs including experiencing a sense of isolation as well as limited opportunities to interact with their instructors and to get to know their peers. Doctoral students enrolled in online programs also possess unique circumstances for their studies: many work full-time and consequently study part-time. For example, Gardner and Gopaul (2012) found that professional doctoral students often struggled to balance the demands of full-time employment and family with graduate school. Additionally, their part time status as doctoral students led to further struggles with a sense of isolation and non-belonging with the programs that they were affiliated with.

In Colleges of Education, driven by the demand from scholars and practitioners for a practical terminal education degree, many institutions have developed and now offer a degree specifically designed for educational leaders. This demand can be traced back to Shulman, Golde, Bueschel, and Garabedian. (2006) who spearheaded the movement that institutions create doctoral degrees that provide “rigorous, respectable, high-level academic experience to prepare students for service as leading practitioners in the field of education” (Storey & Richard 2013, p. 9). In essence, Shulman et al. (2006) called for colleges of education to either redefine their professional degrees or run the risk of becoming altogether irrelevant. The program described in this chapter represents one such effort to serve the needs of professional

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