



# Strategic Intervention For Doctoral Completion

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## Building Community and Social Support Among Doctoral Students

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### BACKGROUND

Human beings are social creatures who depend on their social system for interaction and validation. Few human beings could live without meaningful social contact. In fact, it is believed that social support promotes well-being and serves as a deterrent to the negative effects of stress. We make contact in different ways: through families, social groups, and in the community. Although some people need social support more than others do, we all benefit from social support, particularly when we are facing challenging or unfamiliar situations.

Doctoral study can be an exhilarating experience. It can also be a destabilizing experience. As the latter, many students experience doubts about their abilities and career paths; others struggle with bouts of anxiety and with balancing the demands of school and their lives outside the institution. Communities offer a way for students to interact, to dialogue with others, and in the process, receive feedback about self-worth and acceptability. In this respect, a program's community can do much to help students minimize these challenges and to make doctoral completion a rewarding, enjoyable experience.

This study was sponsored by the Council of Graduate Schools and funded by Pfizer and the Ford Foundation. It is part of a larger effort, by the Council of Graduate Studies, to study doctoral completion and noncompletion. The University of Florida, the University of Georgia, and North Carolina State University implemented the study.

We based the study on a conceptual model consisting of four main conditions, which our project team believes influence doctoral completion (see Table 1). The four conditions for optimal doctoral completion were compiled from the literature on the topic (CGS, 2003; Golde and Dore, 2001; Lovitts, 2001). In this particular study, we focused on Condition 4: Student experience social support from other students.

Table 1. Necessary Conditions For Optimal Doctoral Completion

Condition # 1: The right people apply for doctoral study
Condition # 2: The right applicants are admitted as doctoral students
Condition # 3: Students and faculty form productive working relationships
Condition # 4: Students experience social support from fellow students

### PURPOSE

The purpose of this particular study was to examine social support among students in doctoral programs. There were three research questions: what constitutes a sense of community among doctoral students? What are the benefits of students' social community? What can departments do to foster a sense of community among students?

### METHODS

#### Sample

Sixty participants, 30 faculty members and 30 doctoral students, from 15 programs in seven areas participated in this study. Each program nominated two faculty members and two students to serve as respondents in this study. In nominating participants, programs were asked to base their choice on the participants' familiarity with, and knowledge of, the individual programs.

Participating programs consisted mainly of the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) fields. However, other programs representing the humanities and social sciences were also included. The 15 programs identified are represented in the matrix presented as Table 2.

Table 2. Participating Programs

Programs	The University of Georgia	The University of Florida	North Carolina State University
Economics	X	X	X
History	X	X	
Sociology	X	X	X
Chemistry	X	X	X
Civil Engineering		X	X
Genetics	X		X

Two researchers from the University of Georgia conducted the interviews. We made several attempts by telephone and email to contact the participants. Of the 30 students nominated for the study, 27 students (90%) participated. Participation rate for the 30 faculty members was 28 or 93%.

#### *Instrumentation*

We collected the data using a semi-structured interview guide as the primary data collection tool. The questions focused on the four conditions in our conceptual model. The questionnaires were parallel, though some questions were slightly altered to fit each group. The faculty questionnaire consisted of six questions while the students' version had seven questions. The questions were designed to obtain the participants' perspectives on six distinct areas:

- Why some students complete doctoral studies and others do not;
- The type of program information given to students and its usefulness in helping students select the most appropriate program;
- Graduate admissions protocol and whether they (the participants) believe the process is an effective selection process;
- The relationship between doctoral students and their advisors;

- The different ways students support each other or do not support each other;
- Departmental practices and the ways departments could improve.

We conducted the interview via telephone at the convenience of the participants and asked the interview questions in the same sequence except in those situations that warranted deviations. Individual interviews lasted about 30 to 35 minutes. We audiotaped and later transcribed all interviews.

#### *Data analysis*

We collected the data over a period of two months (May 2005 to June 2005) and used qualitative content analysis to analyze the data. In this method, we categorized and coded units of data—words and sentences—to produce emergent themes, which were then compared for similarities, relationships and patterns

## FINDINGS

### **What constitutes a sense of community among doctoral students?**

The idea that students do experience social support from other doctoral students was unanimously corroborated, with some qualifications, by both faculty and students. Both groups had similar descriptions of what student community looks like and how to develop and sustain it. Four main themes (see Table 3) emerged from analyzing the data and represent key findings as to what constitutes a sense of community among doctoral students.

Table 3. Community and Social Support Themes

- Sharing of common experiences, successes, failures and goals characterize student community.
- Graduate school challenges student's self-image and community is a source of social affirmation and support.
- Culture, research team, and cohort often-times divide student community.
- Community diminishes after the student's third or fourth year due to competition for limited institutional resources and isolation from independent research.

To illuminate the themes, we have included excerpts from faculty and students' responses.

### **Sharing of common experiences, successes, failures and goals.**

This sense of sharing was the most prevalent of all findings. Both faculty members and students were unanimous in their agreement that students were magnanimous in their support of each other's goals, successes, in failures, and in sharing their knowledge. Even in instances where participants identified community as evident among students but contained within circles differentiated by culture, research following or by clique, they nevertheless all agreed that social support existed within those boundaries. The study also found the willingness among students to give and receive of each other's experiences was critical to the students' sense of well-being.

*"I think they are very open. They are very generous. They share notes with each other. They talk a lot. So right now, we have a very healthy community"* (faculty).

*"Generally I do. Graduate students support each other. During preliminaries, we get together and share notes...we usually have parties when people get jobs - faculty positions. Therefore, I think there is a supportive culture. When people fail prelims we gather around them and tell them...You know we're just supportive of one another"* (student).

*"Yes, I love my department. We have get-togethers a lot....we also have comprehensive examination study groups... it helps us feel like a community"* (student).

### **Graduate school presents a challenge to student's self-image**

People feel less alienated or isolated when they share common experiences with their peers; the study found that students in this study were not exempt from these feelings. The commonness in the experiences allowed students to identify with others and minimized the stigma associated with "othering". Insofar as doctoral students share many similarities in their experiences, student participants in the study were more prone to empathize with their peers and to build bonds that gave rise to understanding, friendships, social support and a sense of

camaraderie with other members of their group.

*"Anytime one's self image is challenged as it is for most people going into a graduate program, it's only natural for people to reach out to others and form bonds to help them through. There is a learning curve in graduate school and it can be challenging to people's self-images. In those contexts, people generally reach out for social affirmations that they are ok and they're doing all right. They can get feedback from fellow students, they can also get it from faculty, but I think the people who are most readily available are the students themselves"* (faculty).

*"I think graduate school is often an alienating experience and student bond in their sense of being victims to broader forces and that's both good and bad. It provides them with a community that sustains, it also feeds their anxieties and convinces them that conspiracies are at work ...so I think it's decidedly double edged but it's certainly better than nothing"* (faculty).

*"Sure, because we are all going through the same program, some of the same challenges, we are all in this together. It builds community between the students; [a] common bond, I guess"* (student).

### **Culture, research team, and cohort oftentimes divided this community**

While earlier findings suggest common experiences and shared goals are necessary ingredients for the bonding characteristic of communities, the findings also suggest bonding within groups, without bridging across groups, can be detrimental to that very community. In other words, cultural, research and ideological insularity may be beneficial to students within a particular group when they interact with students from an inward-looking, relational perspective but can become a challenge for building communities of support across groups. In presenting this finding, we are sensitive to the fact that despite the perceived benefits of student community, there may be other very legitimate reasons that some groups may

prefer to remain closed. We also feel obligated to note that the following comments and others like them, when compared to comments relating to other findings, were in the minority. Nevertheless, they underscore an important perspective that deserves attention from program developers, administrators and students.

*“I think there is a sense of community among individuals who originated from the same country. If you are Chinese, you have an extreme camaraderie among Chinese students. If you are Indian, there is an extreme sense of camaraderie among Indian students. If you are American there is a tremendous sense of camaraderie; whatever your life was outside of the laboratory before you came here” (faculty).*

*“Yeah, we are here together. Of course, we cannot have communication between all students, but in particular groups we share our knowledge and experiences in life” (student).*

### **The sense of community diminishes due to competition for limited resources and isolation from independent research.**

Given the high monetary costs of attaining the Ph.D. ; many students, especially full-time students, experience difficulties meeting their financial obligations. Their financial difficulties are compounded by the cutbacks in university funding streams and, as a result , students find themselves competing for the limited teaching and research assistantships. This competition, plus isolation from independent research, can sometimes strain the sense of community among some students.

*“There is initially a sense of community that breaks down, I think, overtime as people find themselves in competitive pressures for things like funding for research or funding for travel or desirable opportunities for whatever support the program and the university offers” (student).*

*“Independent research and writing scholarship is a pretty solitary pursuit and writing a dissertation is a solitary pursuit. So, there is not much that a sense*

*of community has to offer to people in a situation like that” (student).*

### **What are the benefits of student social community?**

Faculty and students cited three significant benefits of student social community. Social community:

#### **1. Provides student social support for the demands of graduate study**

*“I always try to show them the ropes as much as I can – to say I have been through this you can do it. I think it’s really important the support you get from one another. If you didn’t have it, it could be so alienating and isolating to be a graduate student” (student).*

#### **2. Through student-to-student exchange create friendships that continue after graduate school**

*“I would say we have a mentorship program where the new people get mentored by someone who has been here for a while . Those relationships seem to endure to lasting friendships” (student).*

*“I think it breeds some kind of bond that last longer than just graduate school” (student).*

#### **3. Teach students how to build collegiality, a critical skill for their future careers**

*“I think we anticipate being colleagues in the future and probably that our relationships with each other, experiences with each other, won’t end after graduation” (student).*

### **WHAT CONCLUSIONS DID WE REACH?**

The study’s findings reveal virtually all participants agreed community and social support existed among students. Some qualified their responses by limiting the extent of the students’ interactions by groups to which they are affiliated through culture, research interests, or program type. We therefore concluded:

1. Community can and do exist among students; however, efforts are needed

to sustain it.

2. Some groups bonded within their groups but were less likely to bond with other groups. We were not able to attribute the reason to ability, resistance or “know how”.
3. Opportunities for community building could be in the classroom or outside the classroom. It can take place in formal situations such as orientations or weekly gatherings for specific activities, seminars and symposiums or in informal get-together.
4. The study’s participants were overwhelmingly positive in favor of social support among students.
5. Given these findings, it behooves program administrators and faculty members to consider what they are doing to provide opportunities for social interaction among students.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

Based on the study’s findings, we offer the following recommendations on ways to create community among doctoral students. Department administrators, program directors, and faculty members should:

1. **Create a space for students to interact with each other.** For social, emotional and academic learning to succeed, students need opportunities to practice learning in a non-threatening, supportive environment. Program directors or others, responsible for creating such environments, should include input from students in the decision-making process. These “spaces” can take the form of student lounges where students can meet to socialize and or office spaces where they can work together. To minimize conflict associated with group dynamics and realize the full potential of student involvement in community building, issues such as who forms the groups and how groups are formed should be addressed.
2. **Encourage students to organize seminars, symposiums and discussion groups.** These activities should include discussion on topics related to student’s emotional and social well-being. Additionally, student and program organizers should use these opportunities to actively solicit suggestions on ways to build community and social support between and among students, faculty members, the institution, and the local community.
3. **Hold social events.** The old adage, “all work and no play...” could not be more applicable in the pursuit of the Ph.D. Social events provide a respite from the demands of graduate school, a stress-free gathering where students and faculty members can build collegiality outside of their disciplines, a way for busy students and faculty to network with other professionals, and a means for the institution to generate goodwill for itself.
4. **Encourage collaborative group advisement.** The concept of teamwork is not new; nevertheless, traditionally graduate programs tend to place the major responsibilities for student advisement on one or two individuals. This practice, while it may build social support between the advisor and advisee; it might not as it imposes on one individual the responsibility, at least by precept, to take “ownership” for providing social support (besides other resources) to that student. In this respect, it has its limitations. Instead of leaving the responsibility to one busy, sometimes overburdened faculty member, pooling the resources of the various interpersonal skills (mentoring and otherwise) and the wealth of knowledge that a group of faculty members and students could bring to the process, may produce a stronger more viable source of social support for students and faculty members, as well. Yes, faculty members; we will be remiss if we fail to remember that faculty members need social support also. There is much to be said about the effectiveness of social support when there is more than one individual providing it.
5. **Facilitate peer advisement and mentoring by actively bringing students together.** This can start as early as campus visits. Whenever possible, involve students in the planning, implementation and assessment

of these visits. For example, graduate students can host visiting students and accompany them to department-sponsored activities during the students' visits. From these initial contacts can emerge long-term, formal mentoring relationship between current or recent generation of students and first-year students not to mention much-needed recruitment help from involved, empowered students.

**6. Support students' involvement in community activities.** These activities have the potential to create kinship among students and to forge stronger ties between the institution and the local community. There is also the added benefit of exposing students to some of the real world issues they are likely to face as policymakers, educators, scientists, community activists or in whichever field their career would lead them.

**7. Minimize deterrents to community building.** By appointing a faculty member to take on the task as the program's social support coordinator, program organizers can ensure there is a mechanism in place to promote community building and social support. The day-to-day work activities of faculty, pulls them towards writing, research, and teaching and there could be little time left over for these considerations. Thus, a social support coordinator can be an important contributor in helping to provide students with support even when other busy faculty members cannot.

## USEFUL RESOURCES

### Book & Articles:

- Demaray, M., & Malecki, C. (2002). The relationship between perceived social support and maladjustment for students at risk. *Psychology in Schools*, 39, 305-316.
- Golde, C., & Dore, T. (2001). At Cross Purposes: What the experiences of doctoral students reveal about doctoral education. *Science*, 291, 5503, 408-409.
- Lovitts, B. (2001). *Leaving the ivory tower: The causes and consequences of departure from doctoral study*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Tinto, V. (1998). Colleges as communities: Taking research on student persistence seriously. *The Review of Higher Education*, 21, 167-177.

### Web sites

- Adkins-Hutchison, C. D. (1996). *Social support and adjustment among black psychology graduate students*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Rutgers. The State University of New Jersey, G.S.A.P.P. Retrieved October 17, 2005, from [http://www.analytictech.com/connections/v20\(1\)/dissert.htm](http://www.analytictech.com/connections/v20(1)/dissert.htm)
- Council of Graduate Schools. (2004). *Ph.D. Completion Project*. Retrieved October 15, 2005 from <http://www.phdcompletion.org/>
- Poyrazli, S. (2005). International students in the US. *Eye on Psi Chi* Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 18-19, Chattanooga, TN: The National Honor Society in Psychology. Retrieved October 17, 2005, from [http://www.psichi.org/pubs/articles/article\\_472.asp](http://www.psichi.org/pubs/articles/article_472.asp)

Rocha-Singh, I. (1992). Doctoral students' perceptions of stress and social support: Implications for the retention of targeted students of color. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 52, 3200A. Retrieved August 13, 2004, from <http://weber.ucsd.edu/~eparent/part1/paper1.html>

Smallwood, S. (2004). Doctor dropout. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved August 14, 2004, from <http://chronicle.com/free/v50/i19/19a01001.htm>

*Workshop on graduate student attrition*. (1997). Washington: National Science Foundation, Division of Science Resources Studies. Retrieved on August 15, 2004, from <http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/srs/nsf98322/qualit.htm>.

*Best practices in graduate education*. (2005). The University of Toledo Graduate Website.  
[http://www.gradschool.utoledo.edu/pages/Best\\_Practices.asp](http://www.gradschool.utoledo.edu/pages/Best_Practices.asp)

For useful information on best practices in student retention, see Florida Gulf Coast University website at:  
<http://www.fgcu.edu/info/retention/Index.html>

For information on resources on graduate completion and attrition see CGS website at:  
<http://www.phdcompletion.org/resources/index.asp>.

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