

Chapter 14

Reflections on Best Practices for a Successful Online Doctoral Program

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ABSTRACT

The popularity, convenience, and professional acceptance of attaining online degrees account for an increase in enrollment in online courses from undergraduate through doctoral levels. This chapter includes discussion of how the option of choosing a digital doctoral degree experience may enhance or diminish the progress of completing a terminal degree. Additionally, this chapter contains a brief description of the structure and organization of the Educational Technology Leadership doctoral program at New Jersey City University (NJCU), focusing on the challenges and best practices related to the classes and the coursework and how the professors interact with the students. The main thrust of the chapter will be a discussion of the best practices within this program as well as suggestions for improvement. Finally, the authors, members of this program's first cohort, provide recommendations for a successful online doctoral program that meets the needs of all students.

INTRODUCTION

The authors of this chapter hold doctoral degrees in education, having recently graduated from an online program at New Jersey City University (NJCU) in Educational Technology Leadership, one of the most diverse institutions of higher education in the country. In addition, NJCU ranks in the top 100 most diverse institutions with an undergraduate population that is 40% Hispanic, 21% African American, 21% Caucasian, 8% Asian, and 8% other (NJCU Fact Sheet, 2017).

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The mission at New Jersey City University (NJCU) is to provide a diverse population with an excellent education. The University is committed to the improvement of the educational, intellectual, cultural, socioeconomic, and physical environment of the surrounding urban region and beyond (NJCU Fact Sheet, 2017).

This chapter includes a brief description of the structure and organization of the Educational Technology Leadership doctoral program at NJCU, the classes and the coursework, and how the professors interact with students of diverse backgrounds and experiences. The main thrust of the discussion is on the best practices within this program as well as suggestions for improvement. Finally, the authors, from diverse backgrounds themselves and the first in their families to obtain higher education degrees: bachelor, master's, and doctorate, outline their recommendations for a successful online doctoral program that meets the needs of all students.

The desire to obtain a doctoral degree for the purposes of career advancement, academic recognition, or personal growth motivates students to continue their postsecondary studies. The expense, distance, and dedication of time as well as the possibility of travel have hindered some students from attaining that goal. The advent of online education and the acceptance of its validity in the research field have improved the prospects for completing a doctoral degree. Online degree programs which advance the “anywhere–anytime” learning style are growing in popularity and enrollments rates are increasing. The National Science Foundation Survey of Earned Degrees (2016) reported that near 55,000 individuals were granted doctoral degrees in 2015 by accredited universities, which is the largest number of recipients to date.

Many institutions of higher education offer a plethora of online degrees from which students can conveniently choose. There are many benefits of an online program. Online programs can be cost-effective, convenient, flexible, and promote autonomy. Students have the opportunity to set their own schedule and work at their own pace while increasing their knowledge base. Additionally, course materials can be easily accessible online, at any time, and from anywhere in the world as long as internet access is available. Students do not have to commute or travel to a facility or physical campus. Online programs allow students to balance their work and family life while also pursuing a degree (Yang, Baldwin, & Snelson, 2017). Students can communicate using various technologies, reflect on discussions and comments, and interact with professors and fellow classmates from all over the world while promoting continuous synergy and collaborative learning. Online programs tend to strengthen the essence of self-discipline, self-motivation, and effective time management skills (Holder, 2007).

Research indicates that convenience is a significant factor in enrollment in online doctoral programs. Requirements for the completion of a doctoral degree have evolved from the Middle Ages when research studies and apprenticeships in university teaching could result in seven or more years in the conference of a degree (Gray, 2017). The granting doctorates today in some online programs may require little or no research and some programs even forego a face-to-face dissertation defense (Ghessi, 2017). Is the quality of doctoral education being compromised for the sake of convenience in obtaining a degree from an online program? Asynchronous learning can be a time of reflection and analysis, but may lack the affordance of time needed to develop the apprenticeships that once produced skillful practitioners. Can the perceived rigor of doctoral studies be handled in an online environment?

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